

A Word Of Thanks

Thank-you for a lovely party last week, on the occasion of my twenty-fifth year as a priest. You are kinder to me than I deserve

Keeping A Low Profile

Priests tend to keep their heads down, because being a priest means becoming Christ-like in whatever way the Church needs you to, and we all make a rotten job of it. You have to live with the certainty of falling infinitely short! That's one big reason why people turn their backs on religion; why adopt a way of life which sets you standards you can't reach? The answer is that *ideals are what make us human*; if our ideals are based in reality -truth's real, justice is real, love is real -there's hope, even when we fail to be perfect. Failure is human, but so is hope. We need big hopes to carry us through massive failures.

What's It Been Like?

The priesthood isn't an *ordinary* way of life. We stand out somewhat, and the Church does its best to make sure that we don't mistake our lives for ordinary ones. The decision (and it has to be made *personally*, despite being part of the rules) not to have a family to live for and come home to, is enough to remind us, several times per day, that we aren't ordinary. A lot of other things drive home the point, not least the expectations people have of us. If other people often get it wrong, it is Christ himself who gets it right. I've always felt that there is a special relationship between a priest and Christ. We all get cheated off with life from time to time. But if you find yourself suffering *because you're a priest*, then something astounding happens to your closeness to Christ. What is *he* expecting of me? He teaches me, very lovingly and intimately, in the toughest places, and this is hugely consoling. The gift he holds out to me is irreplaceable, but I need empty hands to accept it. If I'm loaded with other hopes and other possessions, I can't receive it. I think that the people we look after can tell if we are failing here. They know if we are divided in

mind or heart, and there is nothing so sad as that rich man who came to Jesus and asked *to enter into life*; Jesus *looked at him and loved him*, and called him to leave everything to follow him. But the man was very rich, and could not *leave everything* in the way Jesus wanted. To do this you have to return his gaze, and to think the love of Christ the most precious of all gifts. You can't earn it or deserve it. I sometimes feel you've either got it or you haven't, and there isn't a lot to be done if you haven't. Even praying for it is a sign that it's already there; if it weren't there, you wouldn't pray anyway. It is the work of grace, not of any human agency.

The Pearl Of Great Price

I can think of so many ways in which the Lord has met me and accompanied me in the life we have passed together. Strange blessings make themselves known to you in the strangest places. I notice that, even when I have been feeling "out of my depth" -a frequent experience, I am quite happy to say -I've very seldom felt that I was in the wrong place. I've always been sure I was in the right place, for instance, when holding the hand of a dying person. I'm totally out of my depth, as you would be, but I'm the right person to be there and to do that, and the dying person and I both know: not because of any quality of mine, but because I'm a priest. The sacraments have taken me to many such awesome places, places some people have never been. I have spoken with countless people in the most intimate way, I have been trusted by total strangers with the most complete confidence. I have been allowed into the most private and the most extreme circumstances of joy and of sorrow. Being a priest isn't ordinary. But it is being alive in a dimension some have never visited, in whose existence many do not believe. For this gift of life, I offer humble and inadequate thanks. *Fr Philip*