

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Several Times A Day

I asked myself last Friday, *Where do the great realizations dawn on us, where do our souls get formed?* Instinctively - being a bit of a cynic sometimes - I thought, not of the things that are most spiritual, or the things that are the most rare, but of the things that are most *frequent* in our lives, as the places that are most influential. There's quite a variety of things that are so basic to our being alive that we do them several times every day. Jesus used some of these things to teach us in his parables and the similes of the Fourth Gospel - bread, light, and so on. Some of the patterns don't hit us so squarely today: shepherds, vines, and fishing-nets have become items of specialized interest. But *no-one* has moved far away from the theme of water; and in Lent, there is water.

The Travelling Element

Of all the things in the world I inhabit, I think of water as the most mobile (air, of course, is equally on the go; but I don't see it). Wherever water is, there's a tendency to move. Even in our modern world we only become more conscious of this: the roaring of the water-pipes wakes most of us up, ticking in the heating-system, rushing into the bath, and being the W in WC. It is never long before we are in physical contact with water, standing under the shower, cleaning our teeth, and making that most recognizable sound of filling the first kettle. It is the vehicle in the orange-juice and the fruit and veg: and the body I wash, dress, and schlepp into the street each day is, they tell me, hugely composed of water (I half believe it). In nature, gravity seems to make itself known principally through water, as it constantly descends in weather and irrigation, carving its way through our picnics and our mountain-ranges with total authority. It leaks everywhere, it penetrates everything, it dictates the way we dress, the way we build, and where we go; the need for it, or the need to deal with it, is a constant daily preoccupation. That alone, it seems to me, makes it a perfect place for the making of our soul. The worst sort of unbelief isn't concerned with high principles of theology, but with the way you treat experiences like the drawing of water - things that *really* make up your life. I've got good authority for this. Jesus said that the servant who says he's waiting for his Master's return, but starts dossing, wasting, and beating up the staff has missed the point. Saint David of Wales used to say: *Take care of the little things!* I'd say a twentieth-century British resident who pours out a bowl of water *with indifference* has already been strangled by

the luxury of his environment. No Arab would be so casual!

Think Deeper - It's Lent

There's a story of a sheik visiting Switzerland many years ago, staring in wonder at a huge cascade hurtling from a high cliff. "Isn't it beautiful?" he was asked. "But", said the sheik, "who's catching it and saving it? What a terrible waste of water..." Water for us is inconvenient when it rains, or bars our way in rivers, it's devastating in floods; but mostly - when it is most intimately and generously part of our lives - we're just indifferent. Only if we turn on the tap, and it gives an evil belch and nothing else, do we advert to it at all. I call that an irreligious attitude to something that is at the heart of our lives, and no-one who is careless about such things can really hear the Gospel in its mood today.

Life Can Be A Weary Load

Jesus talks about water (to a tired woman who has got to carry it) at first in simple and everyday fashion, but eventually in the most mystical and lyrical terms. *Here is a simple reality*, he says: *your knowledge of it must become a deep thirsting, and then it can lead you to God. And this is true of all your longings, even the ones you are used to satisfying most thoughtlessly.* I wonder if, sometime, you could take him up? Let yourself get thirsty, and then *look* at a glass of clear water, or get into a hot bath of it, or go for a swim - not thoughtlessly or trivially, but in some way ready to wonder, ready to be put in touch with your life, and the lives of others, which can hardly survive a single day without this gift. Here is an area where fasting, prayer, and almsgiving can all come together, in a simple Lenten meditation. In water, and the searching desire for it, you can meet the Lord of life who, in the words of today's Preface, *thirsts for your faith.* This intimate transference of our desire into the heart of Christ is there in today's Gospel: they meet at the well, and Jesus is thirsty; the woman also must be thirsty, or she wouldn't be there in the heat of the day. But who will give whom a drink? Which of these two has a deeper thirst? As the bucket descends into the depths, so Jesus leads this woman into the depth of her soul, where he will find her faith.

Fr Philip

