

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

How Can I Bless You?

Quite a question from God to King Solomon – a man of voracious appetites, which got more ungovernable as he grew older. How would such a question sound in the world we inhabit? Immediately we see God as a cross between the finger in the National Lottery adverts, and the Genie of the Lamp: *your wish is my command....*

Ben

I used to live with Ben, who was a huge Airedale with (sorry, Ben) ridiculous donkey ears. He used sometimes to conceive a desire for a charcoal biscuit. He would go to the kitchen, and lean against the drawer where they were kept, patiently waiting for someone to notice. He never tried to open the drawer, which he could easily have done. But once the desire had become lodged in him, he was quite unable to think about anything else. Only a knock on the door or a peal of thunder would have supplanted his longing.

Just A Minute

The exact words of Solomon's vision are significant: God says: *Ask what you would like me to give you.* It doesn't say: *and I will.* In that sense, the question is like all of God's questions: not asking us for information, but asking us to commit ourselves. In the same way, God wants us to pray, not to inform him, but so that we can be formed, in our desiring, by our encounter with him. *Bring me your desires* means really: *submit your heart to me.* In that encounter, and unlike Ben, we won't remain unchanged. What makes Solomon ask for the right thing is precisely his awareness of the One who is speaking to him. Children are like that as they mature: they stop asking Mum and Dad for the crazy things they're sure to refuse.

Our Prayer Matures With Practice

In the same way, our regular coming to God in prayer and sacrament has to mean that our hearts are regularly guided towards desire for the right thing. If our hearts remain closed to the true God, then our prayer remains false and meaningless. But if our longings are all made known to him, if he visits our hearts to know them, then we will most surely be changed by it. This means real changes. It means the abandoning of cherished desires because they're incompatible with the will of God, and it means their replacement with new plans that may not match with what we had

previously devised. I'm sure God can inspire his chosen saints with huge desires, and accomplish great things through them. But I also know people who slap a holy label on their *selfish* desires, and fall flat on their faces – thus meeting quite properly their own earthliness.

The Longest Psalm

We use part of the longest Psalm at Mass today. I used to find Ps 119 (the Latin Bible calls it 118) a bit annoying. In 176 verses it contrives to say the same single thing at least 176 times. It really tests a translator to find enough English words to avoid direct repetition. What the Psalm asks for is the grace to fill our hearts with God's will. As I get older, I find its mighty rhythm as calming as the flow of waves on a beach, or the regularity of breathing, or the beating of a beloved heart. One cannot reproach the heart for the regularity of its beating. What can we learn from the regularity of this psalm? I think that its saying the same lesson in so many different ways may remind us that we need to learn it in new language for every day, in every new circumstance. We think we learn many lessons, that we are packed with different sorts of knowledge. For God, all truth is simple, single, and one, and expressed in one Word. Thus, as each new situation coagulates about us, beneath the variety and dazzle through which our lives hurtle, we can hear the beating of the verses: *keep me far from untruth, grant me the grace of your Law. Avert my eyes from pointless images, give me life by your word. In the way of your instructions lies my joy, a joy beyond all wealth....* and the heart responds gratefully, at peace whilst the kaleidoscope turns, its patterns endlessly changing, in the eternal hands of the one God. The passing world is a showering of gifts. It has beauty and variety to offer us, and if we can keep our freedom, and our purity of heart as we pass through it, the world will not ensnare us. The one treasure, hidden in the earthly field, is the one which must capture us; and to get it, we shall cheerfully give up the rest. *Fr Philip*