

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Judgement

If you were a runner, and you met the World and Olympic Champion in your event, you would know that you were in the presence of the standard by which *your* running must be judged. Similarly a person who meets Christ knows he has met the power that will judge him as a person.

Christianity Is Not Optional

We are so keen to preserve our individual freedoms today, that we forget there are things about which we can exercise no choice. It's vital that we make a free choice to belong to God, and truly God has worked assiduously to ensure our freedom in this. But we can't choose what sort of God we want God to be, and we can't choose what his way of saving us will be. In that sense, Christianity is not a matter of choice, and there is only one way we can go if we want to be saved. This does not mean that those who are not Christian cannot be saved; but if they are saved, it will be through and in Christ; all other paths to God will fall short. This is why the Church calls the Cross "our sole hope".

The Liturgy Is Not Optional

In some ways, therefore, it is very good that we have things in our religion that we simply *obey*. For instance, I'm always grateful for the liturgy; it prevents me from presenting Christ the way *I* think of him, and forces me to proclaim him the Church's way. At the same time, it means that, unlike my fellow-ministers in other churches, I'm not burning the midnight oil on Wednesday night, trying to decide what the Mass will be like on Thursday morning. I just open the Lectionary, and there, I'm grateful to say, are my readings for the day. You should also be grateful for this, because it means that you will never be limited to the thoughts and beliefs that happen to appeal to your priest, but will receive the whole tradition of the Church unedited by the local preacher.

The Cross Is Not Optional

We don't exercise much choice when the Cross comes to us. We are confronted by that blind, apparently senseless business of suffering and failure; the only choice is between dying believing, and dying into the dark. Jesus says this to the disciples in today's Gospel: *if you want to follow me, you must renounce yourself and take up your cross*. In the Fourth Gospel he says: *I have come to do not my own will, but the will of*

the one who sent me. Amen; the will of God for us is what Christians choose. But when it comes, it may be far from what we would have chosen as free individuals. So in one sense we have chosen (to say *thy will be done*) but in another sense we have surrendered our choice (*not my will*).

The Prophet Must Speak

There are some forms of suffering that are chosen by people, and to which they cling like limpets for some internal reason of their own. This is always evil at work. No-one should choose unnecessary suffering; there's too much of it that we can't choose but suffer! I think it is in this way that we should understand the words of Jeremiah in the first reading. He has been obediently speaking the word of God, and because of this great value and purpose, he has suffered rejection and derision and ridicule. At last he decides to try to exercise a little freedom of choice, and ignore the message of God, let the world go to hell its own way, and bury his head in the sand. But this path leads to no relief. *It doesn't work*. Once the word has taken hold of you, *keeping quiet is no longer an option*. I believe that this is an essential part of being a Christian; and if I meet someone - perhaps belonging to a church community, perhaps a minister - who is constantly talking about self-expression, fulfilment, and wholeness, I wonder where these stories have gone which speak of the uncomprehending disciples, the reluctant prophet, and that dark figure of the Son of God himself, lying on the earth and begging the Father to take the cup away. These images are not comforting ones, but I need them to be there, so that my own apprehension and struggle can make sense, and find their place on the map of the faith. To be saved, I must sacrifice my own choices in favour of the greater value that is God's and not mine. The hidden truth is that this is actually the long path to happiness and the joy of God: and if we don't forget that, then we can keep our hearts whole in the presence of evil and hardship, hoping to do what is perfect for God.

Fr Philip