

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

It's Enough

“Console my people.” The edict of God calls a halt to their punishment. Others say that the Persian Emperor decrees the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem; but Isaiah sees that it is God who is moving. Emperors, he knows, have their reasons for acting in one way or another. But earthly powers sometimes act in perfect concord with the will of God, and no prophet can let that pass as a coincidence.

Mind The Gap

That the way of the Lord should be *built in the wilderness* is in keeping with the tonality of Advent. God reaches across the (humanly unbridgeable) chasm between himself and the human race. Remember the parable where Abraham tells the rich man in his torment, “A great gulf has been fixed between us and you, to stop anyone crossing from our side to yours”? For the exiles the uncrossable distance was between themselves and the Jerusalem they longed for. But this distance was only a symbol of the estrangement they felt between themselves and the God of their fathers. That sense of separation in the heart was the mortal, incurable wound, whose significance continually deepened, most movingly in the hearts of the prophets. This aching regret is one of the notes sounded in the Advent liturgy. The exiled Hebrews were like bereaved people. When we have lost someone we love, there come great waves of emotion, of great complexity. It is as if we never loved them truly until now, when it seems too late. The truth has burst upon us, and we are filled with anger and frustration over the lost past, and all its opportunities, all we didn't say, all we failed to do. We go over and over our own behaviour, wondering if we contributed to their loss by our unawareness, or carelessness. Because they are not here, all else seems devoid of meaning or value. It seems to us that “the wine of life is drawn”, and there is nothing left to hope for. *It is never true.* Before he addresses our situation, God has something general to say to our despair: *Fear not!*

A New Road

Fear is a desert in which sounds of building are to be heard; God is calling for a new road across that wilderness. Although we cannot hope to make our own way to him, yet we can make a start to open our hearts to the God who comes to us. This is where the Advent liturgy begins to build certainty

again: *God is coming!* We can begin to align our lives on this hope. Little by little the darkness within us begins to yield, as our minds become more and more sure that a dawn is coming. We are building a road for God. But the notion of a *new* road introduces something special: it is an *untrodden* path, an *unaccustomed* way, that God will use to approach us. It is across the wilderness - that is, in the last place we would expect - that his Advent must be sought. In the bleakest quarter of our experience, in the most painful and least congenial area of our lives, we shall find the Lord coming: a shepherd gathering the lost, leading to rest, speaking of consolation, promising a glorious dawn.

Identify The Desert

If we are to respond, and prepare a way for his coming, we must identify this unlikely direction for ourselves. Where is my way into the wilderness? It is probable that, secretly, I already know it; it is the good I should do and can't, the people I ought to love and don't, the challenge I have refused to my shame. The more I ignore it, and try to make up my accounts without including it, the more it haunts me and dominates me. How terrible it is to be haunted by the fear of emptiness, of meaninglessness, symbolised by those thousandfold empty acres of barren space! For all its apparent emptiness, the desert is vast and dominant. It is where I make no sense, where I feel futureless, hopeless, vulnerable. I avoid it and deny its presence, because I have no intention of going there. But in this I mistake myself badly. In staying where I feel competent, wealthy, blessed, I am staying out of the land where God walks with his own. I will never hear the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob call to me from the heart of the fire: I shall never experience the thirst that taught my forefathers to pray, or the hunger that made them know that their life was lived by every word that comes from the mouth of God, unless I follow them by the new way across the gulf. I can't doubt that it is in those empty, unvisited tracts that the Saviour will meet me.
Fr Philip