

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The First Heartbeat

Eight days later, the disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. The eight days bridge an interval between two sacred moments. The observance of the Sabbath was the heartbeat of the Jewish community; for the Church, the return of this Sunday, the first day of the week, is the first beat of a heart whose life has only just begun. The pace of its life is measured, not in terms of days or years, but millennia. It is a heart great, and in human terms slow; but monumentally alive, consistent, and faithful. They were *in the house again*, because of this faithfulness, and it will be in their meeting faithfully week after week that they will come to feel the slow beating of this heart, the heart of a new humanity.

Keeping The Day Holy

There are currents about the idea of the Sabbath day which distort it in our minds. In the recent memory of our society, the Lord's Day was a dreary imposition which was there to impede life (i.e. *shopping*) and which was triumphantly swept away by a determinedly modern government. The fact that there would no longer be a day when families or friends could rely on being free together, the fact that there was an immediate loss of stillness and repose, went for nothing. What was important was the freedom to shop. This led many people at the time to say that shopping was obviously a straight substitution for the dead concept of worship; we had traded the one for the other, *replaced* the one with the other. Our place of worship, the shopping-mall, our ritual, a procession of Tesco trollies; we define ourselves by the things we buy, and we pray privately, between visits to the temple, by meditating on our past and future purchases, with the assistance of our spiritual reading (the Catalogues?).

The Jewish Sabbath

"Sunset and evening star - and one clear call for me..." - the evening of Friday is the glorious beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, the sunset when slavery gives way to royal freedom, a Day of Rest to echo the freedom of the Hebrew slave, the day he shook the dust of Egypt from his feet. The precept against work was a refusal to be defined by it, a reminder that to be a Jew is to be a guest of God in a land of promise. The Sabbath was a beautiful ritual message which made it true, one day per week. Special ordinances were necessary

for this to happen: first, the gathering of the family - no-one should be left out. Second, the clearing and cleaning of the home, so that it should look like a place of dignity and order. Then the laying of the cloth, the bringing-out of the china and crystal, the preparation of the best food we can afford. Then the rites and blessings for the lighting of candles, and the pouring of wine to greet the Sabbath, like the joyous greeting of a beloved returning guest. This weekly ceremony was a discipline - sure; but it was one which enshrined central values, which has helped ordinary Jewish people to survive the most extraordinary systematic dehumanisation ever devised against any people. The simpler, the poorer the resources, the more eloquently they spoke of faith, hope, and love. No wonder most Jewish babies are conceived on the Sabbath.

Meeting Christ

We may feel that for us the Sabbath is impossible because the world doesn't value it. *Let the Jews teach us.* Down the centuries this graceful presence has slipped into their homes week by week, healing and reviving respect and love. It can come to visit us all the more surely, if we will make the sacrifices needed to create its space, and keep its values alive. Because when the Eleven and their companions - the first Church - met, eight days after, a Presence came into their midst, who breathed an unearthly peace, pardon, and hope, and cancelled all the despair, all the defeat, all the damage that hatred had done. On Holy Thursday we returned to the roots of our liturgy at the Last Supper. On Good Friday we venerated the Cross, as people coming to lay beside the Crucified One our own wounds and our own wounded, to bond ourselves, to spend our free will in an act of consecration to the Way of the Cross that leads to life. In the Vigil we renewed our Baptismal faith, passing with Christ through the redemptive waters of his death and his rising. On this eighth day, the first Sunday, we enter once more the rhythm of a redeemed history.

Fr Philip

