

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Vine Revisited

There are things which can't be properly summoned up by the memory. This should reveal to us the limitations of the mind. We err when we imagine that there is such a thing as "perfect recall". We can only summon up ghosts, imprints left on a fading retina. Some say *Never go back*, in the knowledge that experience is irretrievable, unique; the attempt to return is a sad, even misconceived idea. It's over, let it go.

Returning Summer

But in this context I think of the words of two poets; first my dear friend Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote:

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things*

And secondly the illustrious TS Eliot, who speaks of April as *the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain.*

Because the return of summer, that gear-change surge of warmth, and the firework flowering of ridges and hedges, never fails to evoke what fell from memory in autumn: and how important the sense of smell is! Everyone "knows" what the scent of a rose is like, but the first gust of a real live rose in the early summer makes us think we had forgotten everything; in the same way that the sea can stun us into contemplation when we return to the shore. Intellectually we "know" it all. But knowledge, in the truest sense, isn't just in the brain, but in the blood, in each of the five senses, in the beating of the heart.

What The Vine Knows

Standing on the rough clods of red earth in a vineyard, beside the festoons of gold-green shoots of the noble plant that gives us wine, we feel we are on the edge of mystery that is immensely old. People have been friends with this plant for millennia, they new in every generation, the plant seemingly eternal. It's a cyclical flowering, as each year it is devastated for the winter, and becomes most small and bleak; but in the spring it puts forth its shoots again like the covenant of God; and indeed the ancient peoples around the Mediterranean have never felt far from their gods when they were near to their vines. In our lifetime we are constantly losing: losing our powers, our friends, our battles, our wealth and power. But in

the mystery of its death and rebirth the natural world shows us a law that is contrary; and this, not our cold and comfortless search for survival, is the pattern of Christ. Death and resurrection is the entry into the body of Christ, where, if at all, we must look for life.

Remain In Me

Perhaps we forget that these words are spoken by a man who is about to die. How do you *remain* in such a man? If we were pagans, we would invent some polite, silly formula about *keeping his memory* or *not letting his work die* or whatever: any secular memorial service will supply you with dozens of these bromides. They were once spoken over every forgotten grave, and only the fact that those who spoke them are also forgotten makes it possible for us to keep saying them. *Remaining in Christ* isn't like that. The point is that we remain in him on his pilgrimage through death: that we die with him and rise with him and ascend to the Father with him. We don't become part of Christ in order to escape death, but so that he can give us meaning while we die. It is therefore precisely as a dying man that we listen to him: not saying, *Come down from the Cross and we will believe in you*, but responding to his question: *Can you drink the cup that I must drink?* with the words of the apostles: *We can!* In the Passion story, the Twelve all leave him in their various ways. He goes on his Way by himself. The Easter mystery comes true for us when we break ranks with the crowd, and take up our cross to follow him. Fr Philip