

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## When They Reached The Place

Climbing up mountains is perhaps the clearest possible way of journeying with a purpose. If there's a clear summit, visible for miles, there can't be too much argument about the moment of arrival. Abraham and Isaac are given such a destination, and so is Jesus. There is a growing sense, as the Gospel unfolds, of a steepening of the path, an ever more demanding gradient, and the friends get less and less until the end, where Jesus will be lifted up alone: *Where I am going, you cannot come*. In some way, this sense of a *destination* is integral to Jesus' story; and as he is the heart of our religion, it must be integral to us. What is, in the end, the purpose of our living this life?

### Why Did You Come So Far?

We tend to answer this question of our purpose in wordless ways, as soldiers used to sing, *We're here because we're here because we're here!* We answer it by doing our work, getting food onto the table, changing the straw in our children's bedrooms, trying to keep ourselves warm and rested. If we try to reflect, and drag up the truth into the level where words are spoken, we feel that we're passing judgment on our life (an uncomfortable thought). Usually, at this point, we say: *the story isn't finished yet; there will be time for judgment later on*. For now, there's the next job to be done. It is, I think, partly this sequence that favours the business of religion being shelved, deferred, relegated to the future (which never comes).

### Reaching The Summit

In my stories of mountain-climbing, the summit is an inescapable *terminus*. When you've reached it, there is no further; the earth has tapered to a point, and there is nowhere to left or right, or straight on: there is only this one high place, and a huge view in all directions. There's also a tremendous feeling of freedom, as if *flight* were the only right way to proceed further. This perhaps is why holy things seem to happen on mountain-summits. In today's Scripture the heights are much more than topography. Abraham climbs towards the horror of his sacrifice (bearing in his hands the sharpest knife he can find, and a flame which will survive the ascent) with a determination which costs him every grain of his fatherly love for the boy who struggles beside him (carrying the wood on which he will be burnt). It is all for God, and not in the

least for himself; *this*, and not the horror of the story, is the point. So when *our* story is horrific - and even the most simple, ordinary life can become so quite quickly - we know we have not run off the end of our religious map, that the love of the Father is not absent from what is unfolding for us. I think the story can only truly be understood when we have seen Jesus climbing Calvary (with more wood) and recalled the voice of the dead John ("Here is the Lamb of God, carrying the sins of the world"). It's as if the sacrifice of Abraham - gratefully interrupted as it is - remains a sign of business unfinished in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New. Calvary is a higher summit than Moriah - it is the summit of the whole world, of every human ascent: *when I am lifted up, I shall draw all people to myself*.

### Taking With Him Peter, James and John

You might think every life is its own story of ascent, as if we all have our own mountain to climb. Jesus never spoke of such an isolating experience. *I Did It My Way* is the ultimate anti-christian anthem. The Gospel says: *Take up your cross - that's personal - and follow me!*- that's community: that's the Church. This bright appearing of the transfigured Lord is given as a gift to the three disciples *together*; and our calling is to come at last to Calvary, as Thomas says: *Let us go too, and die with him*. We are to ascend the same hill as Jesus, and be with him in his exodus, the Passover to freedom of the children of God.  
*Fr Philip*