

## Melting The Mountains

Today is the Church's new year. We change our Gospel from last year's Matthew to this year's Mark; and the first reading is one of the most dramatic cries of the third Isaiah the prophet who wrote for the returned exiles, after their eighty years in Babylon.

### **So Here We Are, Then**

The problem with reaching times of longed for fulfillment is that they are so seldom what we hoped they would be; and for the exiles it was no different. In Babylon they had dreamed of Jerusalem, idealized it, gilded it with nostalgia. When they arrived at the City of God they found a pile of ruins inhabited by an embittered scattering of the descendants of the people the Babylonians couldn't be bothered to take away. It was like the emigrant Irishman arriving in America who discovered (a) the streets were not paved with gold (b) the streets were not even paved and (c) he had to pave them. There was much enthusiastic hype about rebuilding the Temple, but no-one seemed able to get the show on the road. The exile had been like the experience of rape; it had entered their soul, and they were flat broke spiritually. It was a time to face tough facts, and admit their real state.

### **"Tear The Heavens Open!"**

The sense that *the heavens are closed* is what was afflicting them. They could no longer sense that they were in the presence of God. Everything was smeared and spoiled with the invader's damage and desecration. They could not think of anything which had survived in them, the violation had been so deep and comprehensive. They no longer knew who their God was, or what his promises meant, or what could possibly happen to give them back their faith. And the prophet? What could he find to say to them? *Come on, folks -let's have a millennium!* No. The prophet knew that the solution to their frozen condition could not be drawn out from within. This was the moment of total emptiness, the deepest poverty. It was time for God to act; and the prophet himself cries out for a divine deed, which would

transform the wretchedness of the people as the Exodus from Egypt had. *Open this closed heaven*, he says, *Tear it apart and come down.*

### **And What Happened?**

Insofar as we can read the intentions of God, it is clear to us that he always intended to come to us. Down the ages of human experience, our Maker has, with the most scrupulous care for our weakness, made approaches to us. For most of us, perhaps, there have been no tearings-open of the heavens or melting of mountains. The coming of God has been gentler than that, more respectful of our condition. But the story, for all that, rings with the timbre of more-than-human power. And if people have sensed the divine, there have been those who have been lifted out of their own littleness, and shown the power of God in their human lives. It is the prophets who will guide us into Advent, men who are taken over by the fire of God, like Elijah: or overwhelmed by the holiness of God, like Isaiah, or obsessed with the transcendence of God, like Ezekiel, or moved to their depths by the love of God, like Hosea. These are the watchmen of Israel, faithfully keeping awake, hunched on the battlements in the dark of the night, listening and longing for the dawn. Mark's gospel is very clear: there will be nothing to warn us that the Day of the Lord is about to happen, until its sudden appearing. The only policy is to live expecting it today. So let this new Advent steal over us, not with the anxieties of the inadequate people we are muffling our power to hope, but aware, like Isaiah, that it belongs to God to work the miracle we need. It has always been true that *God loved us first*, without our deserving or knowing it. Our hope lies in breaking the habit of looking for our own salvation, and letting the Lord enter, with his gentle, but certain, power to heal. . *Fr Philip*