

Old And New

"No-one who has drunk old wine wants new wine, because he says: The *old is good...* And often, of course, he is right. There's a lot that is old and good, for instance art, language, friends, jokes, and folks at home. But we can get into the way of thinking that everything old is automatically better than anything new; and that leads to a sad life that disparages the future. It isn't a Christian attitude in the least. We live, not in the shade of a glorious past, but in the promise of a glorious future; for which we must work with untiring effort. So our faces are turned east - towards the dawn - and not towards the setting sun.

Our Promise Of Inheritance

I suppose the adoption of a crusty and dismissive attitude about the future could actually be evidence of a lack of Christian faith. Everything about the faith says that "the best is yet to be!" "What makes the present, or the past, worthwhile is the degree to which it beats witness to our hope for the future. There is endless cause for us to meditate on time, and our travelling through it, and what it does to us. It seems to distort our view, speaking to us of everything passing, changing, shifting -and this impedes us from knowing what is eternal. But the fact of time and change is also our only hope of moving out of ignorance into knowledge. Augustine calls God "Beauty so old and so new" -not because God ages or changes, but because our discovery of him is a progress in time. There are rather crusty passages in the Pauline Letters to Timothy, warning the young bishop that people are not content with sound doctrine, but go running after any new doctrine that comes along. The point is well made; but the beauty of God is "ever new", and it is properly apprehended by those who find it so, and are astonished by 'it. If we should come to God without the sense of wonder, there would be plenty to worry about. After all, the knowledge of God is the most tremendous experience possible. To find the prospect banal or boring is the ultimate in misapprehension.

Old, or New?

So we are left with a strange mixture of feelings by today's Gospel. It is true that our faith is handed down from our past: from the patriarchs and prophets, from the apostles, from the Church of all ages. To tamper with it under the itch for modernity isn't the point. Yet the living encounter with Christ demands total newness, a readiness to put aside the slow halfmeasures of running repairs with which we try to patch up our lives. The imagery here is rather that of a wedding, the transfiguring moment where the bride and bridegroom receive one another; it is a time of new vintage, alive and fizzing with the energy of conversion, as sugar changes to alcohol, and the pretty taste of grape juice deepens and darkens into wine. The urge to seek for old wine mustn't interfere with the making of the new; that attitude would contradict itself, and result in the awful disaster of *an empty cellar!* Jesus among the Pharisees finds himself warning them that they stand at a crossroads, and that they must read the signs before deciding which way to go. The *Bridegroom is with them*, he says, *they could never think of fasting!*

A Nuptial Faith

The attitude we need to come to God - a readiness for wonder, and Jar joy - we also need as we enter into our own lives. We get exhausted by the routine and duty that make such great demands on us. If we aren't careful, we exchange the jay of bride and groom for the sadness of servitude to time. However much we have achieved in our journey to God so far, there is an infinite further pilgrimage ahead of us, which can only be accomplished by the active grace of God. It is for this we need a wedding! *Fr Philip*