

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Holy Week

It is on the threshold of Holy Week that I most wish I lived in a monastery. Can you imagine a religious community where everyone shares a single mind and heart, where the movement of the individual members and the movement of the liturgical year are one thing, and where *nothing ever needs to be said*? I suppose that was one of the inspirations of St Bruno and the others who came together to found *La Grand Chartreuse* - the first Charterhouse - silent in the fastnesses of the Savoyard Alps. This, however, is sheer cowardice on my part before the most challenging task of the year for a parish priest. I have to speak of the Paschal Mystery, which is beyond human power to express. Any man could –should - feel challenged before this task.

The Busy World

I remember the first time I sat with a dying person through the night in a hospital. She died at dawn, and, in that line from St Alphonsus' Stations of the Cross, "All came sorrowfully away". When I emerged into the brash atmosphere of a bright, cold morning, I found people - at bus-stops looking bored and frozen, queuing in cars looking bad-tempered, and yawning as they opened the shops. I felt a distance between the awesome departure at which I'd just been present, and the humdrum routine unfolding in "the real world". I felt as if the hospital walls were keeping a secret from these people, and that I wanted to find the way *to tell them*. (I'm sure a new father feels the same on his way home from a delivery-ward - an experience I am not expecting to come my way!)

Jesus' Affliction Is Ours

The dereliction Jesus experiences on the Cross is a tremendous horror. I believe he is deprived of everything we now say of him: shorn of his human dignity, deprived of the love of others, his bodily life wracked with fear and pain. Jesus' words even bear witness to his loss of the sense of the Father. It's true that he uses the words of a Psalm to express it, but that says more about his own determination to love *despite* all the pain, than about any sense of religious consolation. Somehow, we have to deal with our blindness to the Cross: its ugliness, its ridiculousness, the inhumanity of it! What a thing to do to a man! What a message to give to the human being you nail to it! *What a sign to build a religion around - what a sign to put on your own head, shoulders,*

and heart! And this is the familiar holy image, the respectable ornament of a quiet home, the jewellery on a gold chain. Tell me: what can a priest say on Good Friday, to bring home to his people in all its power, the way God chose for our saving? This isn't a matter of creating physical shock in people, like some recent films of the Crucifixion. It is much more religious than that. The ones who will best hear will be those who are ravaged in their humanity, the ones whose capacity to understand is gone, whose elasticity before pain, loss or hurt has snapped. For them, if they can still think straight enough to see it, God has come close, down from his eternal throne, down from his divine authority, down from his holy heaven, to be slaughtered as human rubbish, to be "confused among thieves and bandits", to become too low to be named as a human. If we could *all* feel that about God, the liturgy would work in a new way. It must dawn on us that the Cross is an act of communication, it is a wordless message for us, written together by the One who sends the victim, and the ones who drive in the nails.

Blessed Are You!

Why does this happen to Jesus? Not by accident. It is so that he can come to our side, can share our rejection and poverty. He becomes rejected humanity. *To love us from the Cross* is Christ's vocation: its fulfilment is a divine miracle. And what is the Resurrection? It's something so full of power, that we can say that those who find themselves on the Cross are more blessed than those who appear to escape it - because they are in the place where God may work his miracle in them, and make them sharers with his Son in the work that redeems the world. Our faith is in no splendid achievement, historical movement, or human power, but in this Cross which denies all three. Blessedness - in the Gospel's way of understanding it - is for those who can accept what this week teaches, and acknowledge the Way of the Cross as the only path to life. *Fr*

Philip