

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Alexander, Herod, Leo, Gregory, Alfred...

An interesting series of names, all surnamed *the Great*. Three are Christian, two Popes; yet Jesus says: *anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant*. Excellence, for Christians, means excellent servitude; to excel in being last of all and servant of all.

### “What did your last servant die of?”

The above cynical question shows a certain resentment, but also something more. I once heard that the relation of *master and servant* is always insecure, as servants always resent their masters, which results in masters mistrusting their servants. So it has a natural tendency to degenerate into the relation of *owner and slave*, where the owner has power of possession, and can dictate; and thinly hidden behind that agenda is the sinister plot between *murderer and victim*; the unconscious purpose of the owner is to kill the slave, and *vice-versa*.

### The Way of Christ

This is very interesting. Jesus knew the term *servant* as an honourable title: the servant of God in the book of Isaiah is a figure not far short of the Messiah. God's servant suffers unjustly: and far from struggling for his dignity or freedom, he offers his life humbly and silently. In this he breaks the vicious circle of human cruelty, and accepts his own ugly death for the salvation of the human race. That is what “service” means in the mind of Jesus. In today's Gospel he couples this mysterious understanding with the mystery of all mysteries, the Cross itself. *But they did not understand what he said, and were afraid to ask him*. I'm sure their fear was not just the fear of looking stupid: they were afraid to understand his meaning, because it was a frightening one. Can we doubt that Jesus read the book of Isaiah with great attention, using it to interpret his own future? He knew his disciples' difficulties in accepting his prediction of the Cross, and he knew that they had the usual human ambitions: to be important, to be in charge. He knew that their difficulties as disciples and their ambitions were closely related, if not the same thing. Whatever prevents us from *servicing* prevents us from being saved.

### Servant of All

There is no limit on the degree of service God can ask of us. Jesus does not say that we should serve our friends, or our families, or any list we may

select as Deserving Cases. Instead he asks that we be servants *of all*. It is as if he puts us in debt to everyone, indiscriminately. We recall the words in the Sermon on the Mount: *love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you...in this way you will be children of your Father, whose sun rises on the just and unjust alike*. Here is the corresponding call to serve without selfish motives, simply at others' need. One of the ways we can do this is to regard the needs of others as being like the needs of children; no-one asks whether a baby *deserves* to be fed or consoled or cleaned. So we should not look for merits in people, hoping to see how they deserve our help. Whoever helps a person in Christ's name welcomes Christ, and whoever welcomes Christ welcomes the One who sends him – the Father.

### What We Are Always Thinking About

The Christian way of life is a disciplined one, which demands a constant steering of mind and heart in the way of Christ. Take your hand off the wheel, and the world locks you into its service, fills your mind with its motives, and has you doing its will. As paid-up citizens of the world, we can never fulfil the purposes of God. To use another analogy, if we let the bridle of the world into our mouth, we cannot be at the service of God too. *You cannot serve God and money*. We should pray for the grace to know this, to see clearly how to give to God what belongs to God, and not to allow our soul to be bought from us. It is the only gift we can offer to God.  
*Fr Philip*