

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Are You Serious?

In today's Gospel a man comes to Jesus and asks to be led into a deeper search for *eternal life*. The response of Jesus is twofold: one, a stirring of the heart in love, is very spiritual. The other, a call for complete renunciation (*sell everything you own, and follow me*) is very practical. We may, I think, infer that it was the latter response which dismayed the inquirer and sent him away sad. Perhaps we ought, for shame, to say that we sympathize with him - we, who are so often content with words and ideas, rather than the execution of the commandments in real fact.

### The Cost of Discipleship

The demands of Christ which dismay his followers are not waiting to be expressed. They already stand revealed in the New Testament. We already know their terms: *love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you; turn the other cheek; forgive seventy times seven times; give up all your possessions; if your eye cause you to sin, tear it out; if your hand, cut it off; be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect; love one another as I have loved you, feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked*, and the rest. Jesus has put us all into debt for the whole of our possessions. There is not one of us who has discharged our debt.

### What if I can't make it?

The question of what happened to the rich man in the Gospel arises. Was this meeting his only chance, this refusal his final choice? Or was he offered another way? We can never know. But I wonder whether for many people the heroic sanctity of the kingdom of heaven may not be formed in them less by a freely-accepted following, of which our rich man proved incapable, and more by an unwilling entry of the impossible into our life. A string of accidents, which together reduce our options to a very few, can produce in us a decision for sanctity we might never have volunteered. The steady contemplation of a life of selflessness might disarm the strongest mind: but in the resolve not to desert a sick or disabled wife or husband, to care for a handicapped child, to take on the needs even of a relative stranger, and make them our own, can form in us day by day the true lineaments of a life laid down in the greatest kind of love. I never think of this mystery without remembering the heroic calm of a lady called

Heather, who was deserted by her husband when her multiple sclerosis was diagnosed. Day by day she lived with the wretched progress of her disease, and I knew that she was refusing to let a single trace of bitterness develop in her mind or heart, and she greeted me in the hospital with the same clear gaze each time I brought her the bread of life. No-one could have chosen this horrid path for their own life, let alone for anyone so brave and selfless as she was. But no-one could be unaware of the amazing humanity which she preserved under that fire, though few perhaps recognized her growing likeness to Christ, as she held to her faith and renounced the deformation of spirit to which the disease whispered its invitation. The disease was involuntary; but the humanity and fidelity was a constant free choice, which sanctified something deplorable, with all the unlikely splendour of the carrying of the Cross.

### The Loss of Riches

Can we contemplate the loss of our riches, in the name of the promise of the Kingdom? The very question sets us at odds with our world, so obsessed with the securing of its possessions. We should encourage ourselves to give them away, to enjoy giving them, to exult in declaring our freedom from them. We should fetch out the promises of God, and by crossing the boundaries of our fear and earthly prudence, test the truth of Jesus' assurance that the Father cares for our needs. God is not outdone in generosity.  
*Fr Philip*