

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Milk And Honey

Reading some parts of the book of Deuteronomy might make you think that belief in God is very good business. Today we hear that, if you keep the commandments, you will have a long life, you, your son and your grandson. The Law of God is defined as *what will make you prosper and give you great increase*.

Promises, promises

Now, Moses goes back a long way (3,300 years) but Deuteronomy is only 2,500 years old; its author had seen the downfall of the monarchy and the Exile in Babylon. Surely he knew that good people get swept away and traduced, that good things get destroyed, that fair promises are dashed to pieces in the course of history. How was he able, then, to write such simple equations between holiness and length of life and depth of prosperity?

The Sufferings of Saints

There is something more than coincidental in the fact that good people suffer. This had been known for centuries before the coming of Jesus: the prophets wrote about it in great depth. But Jesus' fate makes us certain that there is a hidden necessity between the suffering and the holiness, which Jesus expressed by saying: *The servant is not greater than the master; if they hated me, they will hate you too* and *Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must take up his cross*. These predictions seem a lot more likely than the promises of Deuteronomy. It may strike us, as it struck the Psalmist, that the wicked find lots of ways to prosperity which are closed to the just; the world seems to require a measure of violence and injustice in those who would master it. This means that earthly prosperity comes more to the violent and the unscrupulous than to the saints. Then comes the regrettable tendency of saints to bear witness against, or even denounce, violence and injustice, which makes them a problem to the victoriously violent and unjust; they don't even have to *intend* to be a problem; their very way of life can be, as Jeremiah said, *a reproach to the Godless*. Holiness has its own impact on society. So the saints seem to attract the evil of the world like a dry sponge in a puddle, or a poultice on a pustule (pardon me). Saints don't just diagnose evil. They mop it up with, *into*, their real lives. This is no fable. Think of all your mother had to

forgive, to keep loving you. It really does make things hard, if you happen to want holiness.

More Pie, Vicar?

Of course, we could revert to celestial mode here, and say that, *in the long run*, the milk and honey will begin to flow, and that long and prosperous life for me (and my grandson) will happen in the Kingdom of Heaven. To the accusation that this is Pie in the Sky when you Die, we can say *Yes please*. But is that all we can say? I hope not. I'm sure Deuteronomy didn't think like that; his idea was that the promises of God refer to the life we live *now*, and that just as the Commandments need to be truly obeyed here, we can look for the milk and honey to flow here too.

The Taste Of Holiness

The loving ministry of holy people is realer than the evil they encounter. Their truth overturns the *apparent* realism of sin and despair -what cynics and rotters call "the real world" - exposing it to the light, which at once condemns it. It may not *feel* like honey to the good, because they have to pour it out into the oceanic vinegar of the world's woe. But ask those who have lived beside a saint, and who have tasted the flavour of sanctity in the bitterness of grief or pain, especially where it has been caused by sheer evil, and you will hear stories about the desert blooming which only the language of the Gospel can express. Experiencing the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven may be a *rare* occurrence: but that doesn't mean it is *unreal*. Further, when we do encounter it, it seems *more* real than the much commoner experience of its absence. Joy, I regret to admit, may be rare for many people: but the power of *hope* for joy fuels their endurance nonetheless. Our ongoing lives become a live witness to the power of God's promise. So I guess it is our duty to look for joy, to expect fruitfulness, and to seek out everything we meet which has about it the smack of sanctity and of promise; not because we are shouting in the dark, but because we truly believe that dawn is on its way.

Fr Philip