

## ***Do I live as though I really believe what I say about God?***

During some holiday reading I came across the question: *Do you live as though you believe what you say about God?* The question stopped me short and had a profound impact on me, and still does. From time to time I find myself coming back to it. *Do I live as though I believe what I say about God?* And what does it really mean to live as though we believe what we say about God? So this week I thought it would be a most worthwhile and challenging thing to explore this, and I thought I would do this by looking at the life of an ordinary woman whose story was quite extraordinary, and then at a group of monks, likewise living extraordinary lives in faith, as portrayed in the movie, *of gods and men*. All these ordinary people, in rather extreme situations, lived as though they believed what they said about God. In doing that, they did something extraordinary and have much to say to us.

Etty Hillesum was a young Dutch Jewish woman who lived in Amsterdam during the *Shoah* (the Holocaust) and who was eventually taken to Auschwitz where she died in 1943 at the age of twenty-nine. Etty's remarkable and short life has come to us through her diary, published as *An Interrupted Life* and also as *The Diaries of Etty Hillesum*. In her reflections, which cover the period of the three years before her death, we find the story of her struggle to connect with, and live within, a profound sense of Mystery – an engagement with God, that gradually became her whole way of looking at life and living each moment.

Etty begins by describing herself as 'the girl who couldn't kneel'. She had a sense of something greater than herself, something that seemed to draw her, but she held back from being able to really enter into relationship with this 'Something'. And so we follow Etty's struggles: she struggled with her own moods, her ups and downs, her relationships, her desire to be what she really felt she was called to be, to give expression to herself, to live authentically, and of course, her struggles with what was happening around her, and ultimately to her, during that time of extreme fear and misery. In one entry Etty says, 'My heart is a floodgate for a never-ending tide of misery'. But gradually Etty learned to surrender, and what we have in her diaries is a story of remarkable spiritual growth.

The following entry was made not long before she was arrested:

"I was hurrying along at Ru's side, and after a very long conversation in which we broached all the 'ultimate questions' once again, I suddenly stopped beside him in the middle of narrow, dreary Govert Flinck Straat, and said, 'But you know, Ru, like a child I still feel that life is beautiful and that helps me bear everything'. Ru looked at me full of expectation and I said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world – and it really is, 'Yes, you see, I believe in God'. And I think he was rather taken aback, then, searching my face for some mysterious sign,

appeared to like what he found there. Perhaps that is why I felt so radiant and so strong for the rest of the day? Because it came out so spontaneously and so simply in the middle of that drab working-class district, 'Yes, you see, I believe in God'".

Towards the end of her life, while she was in Westerbork and just before being transported to Auschwitz, we find the 'girl who couldn't kneel', writing this:

"You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised towards Your Heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer. I have been terribly tired for several days, but that, too, will pass; things come and go in a deeper rhythm and people must be taught to listen to it, it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life. I am not challenging you, my God, my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would like to be, but I am already secure in you, God. Sometimes I try my hand at turning out small profundities and uncertain short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything and there is no need for anything more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with You; the beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were, all the time storing up inner riches".

What a journey and what an inspiration! While we can only begin to imagine the extremity of Etty's lot in life, there is so much we can take from her spiritual journey. We all have our own inner difficulties to deal with: fears, anxieties, sense of failure or inadequacy, sense of being unfulfilled, struggles with doubts, 'being unable to kneel'. How easy it is to go through an entire day with those words as our mantra: doubt, fear and so on. We live in a world that can so often make us feel sad, despondent, overwhelmed. How often do we let that become the lens through which we look at everything? But Etty lets us see that there is another way to live, no matter where we are or how we are. We can indeed live as though we believe what we say about God.

At the heart of a life lived this way is recognition and surrender. We are invited to recognize that we are part of something greater than ourselves. But this cannot remain merely at the intellectual level. Today our struggle with this recognition is on several levels. Often it's considered intellectual weakness or a 'cop-out' or seen as an earlier stage of humanity's development to acknowledge the Transcendent dimension, a 'pie in the sky' mentality and a childlike stance to take. Militant atheism, in Richard Dawkins' words, considers people who hold such a position as 'barking mad'. 'God' has long been increasingly pushed to the margins as Science 'explains' the origins of life. The human face of the church with all its messiness is

doing much to ensure that 'God' is given bad press too. Bad things writ large in our world leave many people disillusioned with the notion of a loving, life-affirming Reality informing all we are and do. Religious affiliation, particularly in the West, is declining and various forms of religious extremism are doing nothing to attract intelligent people to a recognition of a Divine underpinning to life, let alone a commitment to search, encounter and commit to this Reality on a day to day level. And yet ... in the midst of a world of horror a young woman could affirm that she was already secure, that although her own particular dreams would never take flesh, she herself and her life itself were more than that particular moment. *Things come and go in a deeper rhythm and we must learn to listen to it.*

And here's the rub! Learning to listen. We cannot listen, and we do not listen, when we clamour for things to be just as we want them to be. To live as though we believe what we say about God asks us to live in this Presence. When we look at the life and person of Jesus we don't see a man who speculated and theorized about the nature of God or who presented intellectual argument in favour of the existence of the Divine. *He simply lived in God's presence.* He let God in. He knelt and he surrendered. He listened. He let himself be moulded at the deepest level of his being. His life and person are the living expression of the cry of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah: "You have seduced me Lord, and I have let myself be seduced!" Etty, from within the horror of Westerbork, listened.

The film, *of gods and men*, was screened in Australia some years ago. It is based on the story of a small community of French Cistercian monks living in Algeria. During the nineties, with the rise of Islamic extremism, and as the threat to foreigners as well as local people judged to be 'un-Islamic' by these extremists grew, these monks were faced with the choice of whether to leave or stay. The monks had become a presence of stability, safety and comfort to the local people who described themselves as 'the birds' and the monks as 'the branch'. They provided basic medical treatment for them and assisted them with whatever material help they could give as well as any other assistance they needed. They were loved and respected by the locals and shared in their celebrations and their struggles and pain.

As the killings and the brutality and fear grow, the monks, in their stillness, their prayer, become a powerful place of love, a witness to love. But as the threat to their safety increases and the possibility of death becomes more of a reality, each monk has to make his own choice: whether to stay or leave. Questions about what it means to be faithful are raised, questions about identity and belonging as well as service and love of the people they minister to. Each monk is face to face with God in the nakedness of the choice he has to make. Each is forced to look within and face God's voice and God's silence. Each monk, alone and in community, comes face to face with the utter self-giving of God through Christ and the call to each one to do the same; to give himself to this great Love to the end. Each monk reveals his own fear and

struggle. There is a very gentle yet powerful scene where Brother Christian, the leader of the community, is in conversation with one of the monks who is struggling with it all: he says that he has left everything to follow Christ, but he listens and hears nothing. Christian says to him that “we are martyrs out of love and fidelity ... remember that love is eternal hope ... love endures everything”. Finally, the monks, gathered around a table as they have so often done, with a single candle burning in the centre, all agree to stay, and when they turn to Christian for his decision, he says: “Wildflowers don’t move to find the sun’s rays ... God makes them fecund wherever they are”.

Faced with a life and death situation, these men respond in fidelity to Love and to the call to embody that Love. What they had celebrated daily in the Eucharist, the promises they had affirmed in song each day in the Divine Office, the Love which had first called to them and led them to where they were, now invites them to another level of trust and faithfulness. They are invited to a new depth of stillness and silence. Each one, in order to stay, has to let the clamorous voices within, fall silent. To use Christian’s image of fecundity, each one has to let God come to life in him, become fecund, and give birth to life and love in a way he has not hitherto done. And the only way to do that is to remain where he is, to let go of all else.

And we are called to do the same. We don’t live in the extremity of Etty’s situation in the Holocaust, nor do we live with the life and death choice facing those monks in Algeria, but we do live with the call of God to love, to become Christ-like, wherever we are and however we are. To let God make us fecund means we must let God have God’s way with us. Simply put, it is about surrender: an exchange of my resentment, my grudges, my bitterness for forgiveness; an exchange of self-centredness and self-interest for concern for others; an exchange of suspicion and hostility towards the other who is different for welcome and hospitality ... and we can go on and on. It is about living the Gospel, those teachings we are so familiar with and yet which invite us to surrender so many times in a day. And as we are surely all too well aware, that surrender is often the fruit of struggle. When we surrender, we become quiet, we become fecund.

Our Christian celebration of Easter is the great affirmation that the centre does indeed hold, things do not fall apart. Easter is a quietly reassuring voice that nothing is ultimately destructive of life. But as always in this faith journey there are other voices which speak more loudly and those voices are both outside us and within us. Living as though we believe what we say about God is, to use the prophet Jeremiah’s image, letting ourselves be seduced by God’s ‘voice’. But that can be a lonely place at times. It is nothing less than the loneliness of the cross. Always, before us, is the paradox of the cross, the paradox of Easter. As is so powerfully affirmed in one of the old Eucharistic prayers, “He opened his arms on the cross and revealed the resurrection”. This is the great dynamic of the Christian worldview. But it cannot remain at

an intellectual level. If we do that we can all too easily rationalise it away. We need to move from knowing about this, what is referred to as the Paschal Mystery, to knowing it from within our lived experience, living this Mystery. Those monks were put to the test in a way none of us would ever want. They moved from the head and plunged right in. And Etty Hillesum moved from her head to, as she says, an uninterrupted dialogue with God.

Day by day, little by little, a step forward, a step back, a choice made again and again, slowly we will be transformed. Attention to the little things each day presents to us in the ordinariness of our lives, choosing to bring God into it all, is the way to an extraordinary life of surrender. Let God make us fecund.



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