

ETTY HILLESUM: AN INTRODUCTION 2

The 30th of November marked the 68th anniversary of the murder of Etty Hillesum by the Nazi's in Auschwitz. The fellowship group has been studying some of her writings which have been described as 'St Augustine's *Confessions* for our age by the Archbishop. Others have described her posthumous book *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, (Eerdmans ET 2002), as the most important spiritual work of the Twentieth Century.

“It doesn't matter whether my untrained body will be able to carry on, that is really of secondary importance; the main thing is that even as we die a terrible death we are able to feel right up to the very last moment that life has meaning and beauty.”

(*Etty* p. 474)

When contemplating her desire to compose “a general formula [about life which] transcends all the details it contains” the fifteen-year-old Etty Hillesum hit upon this: “The world must surely have collapsed at least once in the life time of every individual, yet strangely enough it still exists” (p. 76) This was no callous disregard for an individual's moment of existential defeat but a recognition that life goes on around us in such circumstances and that our responses contribute to life's ongoing processes such that every individual can make a difference, for good or ill, to the society in which they have the good fortune to live. Etty records this event from her teenage years early in the diary which she began writing when she was 27 and it marks out a theme on the meaningfulness and beauty of life to which she often returns.

In October 1941, she notes that she had allowed herself an hour to be depressed about a new Nazi decree segregating Jews from non-Jews in both public places and employment in the home. But then, returning to her concern of the previous day about her brother, she proceeds to reflect on what it means to be attached to one's own life in such a way that one can declare: 'life is meaningful and beautiful'. This is easy, she reflects, if your life is comfortable (and she suspects that her own life is all too comfortable) but what about times when life hits you in the raw? Etty, lacks the arrogance to assume that she can know in advance whether she would maintain her faith in life's meaning and beauty but she does offer her future self this piece of wisdom:

Whether you spend your life laughing or crying, it is still your life. (*Etty* p. 138)

However bad things might get, your habitual disposition to respond in a particular way are your own. To have as such a response an affirmation of the meaning and beauty of life one has to recognise that “the caves and caverns into which one has to descend every so often are also part of life” (*Etty* p. 172).

Once we learn this, and this is not a matter of simply learning via the intellect but via the heart – instructed by the practice of prayer and meditative reflection (*Etty* p. 178) – we might be able to begin to say with Etty, and at a time when she was experiencing life in the raw, that:

Life is beautiful and meaningful too. It is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided one makes room in one's life for everything, and accept life as one indivisible whole, for then one becomes whole in oneself. (*Etty* p. 466)

Through prayer and meditation Etty increasingly finds that she can repose serenely in herself or in poetry (*Etty* p. 184) despite the Nazi persecution that invaded her every moment. When she reposes in this way, what she reposes in is God. She writes:

That probably best expresses my love of life: 'I repose in myself'. And that part of my self: that deepest and richest part in which I repose is what I call 'God'. ... Even if one's body aches, the spirit can continue to do its work, can it not? It can love and ... 'hearken unto' – itself and unto others and unto what binds us to life. ... Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto my self and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in others: God to God. (*Etty* p.519)

An idea that emerges in the diary is that learning to repose in one self is not a task done for its own sake but as a prerequisite for reposing in God and, in particular, God in other people. Yielding herself “up to God or to a poem” (*Etty* p.188) meant being true to her inner self. (*Etty* p. 197) This allowed her to understand the inner lives of her fellow sufferers in the concentration camp and to help them spiritually.

By yielding herself up to God, that which is deepest and best in her, (p. 83, 494) she consciously takes on two awesome responsibilities; first the spiritual wellbeing of others and second a responsibility for God. (*Etty* pp. 484-5) In her situation it was ultimately only the second responsibility that made the first possible. She writes:

“And if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God. – ... I don’t fool myself about the real state of affairs, and I have even dropped the pretence that I’m out to help others. I shall try to help God as best I can, and if I succeed in doing that, then I shall be of use to others as well. But I mustn’t have heroic illusions about that either.” (*Etty* pp. 484-485)

The task she set herself: to maintain a love of mankind without bitterness, hatred or despair, to celebrate life as beautiful and meaningful despite the systematic attempt to destroy love and value that confronted her and her fellow sufferers, was a task she understood as keeping safe the name of God. “If we just care enough,” she writes in a letter from the concentration camp, “God is in safe hands with us despite everything.” (*Etty* p. 657) Earlier, in her diary she had famously written:

I shall try to help You, God to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps, in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. (*Etty* pp. 488-489)

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