

## The Face of Doom

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*The Work of Love in the Face of Doom: May 2018*

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Iris Murdoch, the English philosopher and novelist, once said that in philosophy you can never be entirely sure of when you're tackling a general question, and when you're just working out your own personal demons and fears. I've felt the force of these words as I've prepared these talks – 'The Work of Love in the Face of Doom'.

On the one hand, I have no doubt we live in times that are critical for the future of life on earth – clearly an issue of universal concern! Scientists speak of our having entered a new geological epoch, 'the Anthropocene', where for the first time in evolutionary history human activity has the capacity not only to shape but to disrupt radically the Earth-system processes necessary to sustain life. It's well-known that we're exceeding planetary limits in a whole range of areas, from carbon emissions to ocean acidification to biodiversity loss,<sup>1</sup> and that (in the words of French scholar, Jean-Pierre Dupuy) humanity is currently on a 'suicidal course' towards a disaster comprised of 'a whole system of disruptions, discontinuities, and basic structural changes that are the consequences of exceeding critical thresholds'.<sup>2</sup>

This news of looming ecological and social catastrophe leaves me feeling a combination of fear, grief and helpless complicity. It's like being strapped to a juggernaut I cannot get off, and we cannot stop. I feel frustrated and enraged by the stubborn refusal of many of the 'powers that be' to take appropriate action (though the truth is that their capacity to 'act' decisively and effectively is also doubtless limited). Indeed, what makes this such a complex issue – a 'wicked'

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Economist* (London: Random House, 2017), pp.48-53.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.22.

problem – is that, although we (especially we in the West) are collectively responsible, no one person or group is simply to blame or in overall control.

The brilliant political philosopher Hannah Arendt noted, it's a defining feature of the human condition that we have the power to act in such a way that our actions acquire autonomy 'in relation to the intentions of actors'.<sup>3</sup> Whether by way of words or deeds, we set processes in motion or initiate a sequence of events whose outcome we do not control. This has always been the case – as the writers of tragedy knew so well. What's new is the scale on which we're now capable collectively of acting. 'The wholly novel character of modern societies founded on science and technology', Dupuy writes, 'derives from the fact that they are capable of unleashing irreversible processes in and on nature itself'.<sup>4</sup>

It's in this sense that, as well as being responsible, we're also victims of our own action.<sup>5</sup> And although we *are* awakening to the urgency of our situation and know at least some of what we need to do next, there are also real questions about whether we're waking up in time and can enact what we know effectively. Even now, some of the damage done is apparently irreversible.

And here's where I come to the personal bit – because what rises up in me in response to this terrifying state of affairs are not only questions like 'what should we do?' and 'what can I do?', but also 'how can I live in the face of all this?', 'how must I be towards it?'

Can I hope, for example? Indeed, is hope in some sense a duty if I'm not to be paralysed by despair, or is it – as some say – a form of denial or evasion?<sup>6</sup>

Can I be happy? Can I let myself delight in the beauty of the world and savour the joy of my own life? Or is being happy a sign that I haven't grasped sufficiently the gravity and grief of our condition? Etty Hillesum wrote in one of

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<sup>3</sup> Discussed in Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.22.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Wheatley speaks in a similar vein, noting that our contemporary 'global culture, with all its tragedies and injustices, is an emergent phenomenon ...[I]t came to be from the convergence of many forces and now possesses characteristics that weren't there until it emerged'. *So Far From Home: lost and found in our brave new world* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012), p.34.

<sup>6</sup> Wheatley, *So Far From Home*, p.35.

her letters from Westerbork concentration camp, after yet another train had left for Auschwitz: ‘There was a moment when I felt in all seriousness that after this night, it would be a sin ever to laugh again’. But then, she went on, ‘I reminded myself that some of those who had gone away had been laughing, even if only a handful of them this time ...’.<sup>7</sup> Can I be happy?

And what of the question of vocation? Given that I’m not a climate scientist or someone with particular political influence, do I just get on with life as faithfully as I can, trusting that others better placed to affect the big picture are doing their best? Or is ‘just getting on with it’ a form of culpable inattention – fiddling while Rome burns, when really we should be sitting at city gates covered in sackcloth and ashes? I sometimes experience a sense of psychic vertigo as we make plans for the long term vision of a particular work or community, wondering how much longer the conditions that support life on earth will be around.

At one level, questions like these might themselves seem an indulgence. Who cares how I orient and organise myself emotionally and spiritually, whether I’m despairing or hopeful, carefree or care-full? And yet, indulgent or not, they demand my attention. It feels as though my response matters. So, in preparing these reflections, I’m daring to believe they’re not mine alone but may resonate for you too, and that as we explore them together, they may lead us to discover more of what it could mean for all of us to live well in the face of doom.

### **A Closer Look at Doom**

But first, let me say a bit more about this notion, ‘doom’. When I first proposed my theme, I wondered if the word ‘doom’ sounded a little melodramatic – some others found it disconcerting too! It turns out, however, to have become a surprisingly rich resource. When I initially characterised my own sense of things in these terms, I was seeking to name the painful and debilitating mixture of dread and impotence I sometimes feel. Hearing the nightly news, reading some of the

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<sup>7</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.124.

literature, it sounds as though a devastating future is coming inexorably towards us and our precious planet, like a slow-moving tsunami we're powerless to avert or avoid. My sense of impotence is only increased by the heedlessness of some of those in power who seem oblivious to the magnitude of what's unfolding. In the Australian parliament last year, for example, our Treasurer brought a lump of coal to Question Time which he brandished as some kind of 'argument' for the continued economic necessity for coal-fired power and the unabated use of fossil fuels.<sup>8</sup> This at a time when Australia's carbon emissions continue to rise and it would take five planets for everyone to live like Australians do.<sup>9</sup> The barbarians are inside the gates – grounds for a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, a sense of doom.

What I've since learned, however, is that the modern conception of 'doom' as being intrinsically bound up with looming disaster only emerged fully in the early 1600s. In Old English, 'doom' meant simply law or judgement.<sup>10</sup> You might remember the 'Domesday' book commissioned by William the Conqueror and completed in 1086? That's an instance of the earlier usage of the term. The book was a great survey which recorded landholdings and assets held in England and Wales, so as to determine the taxes owed to the Crown. Originally, the manuscript had no title, but it came to be known as the 'Domesday Book' because it was considered the definitive judgement or reckoning of accounts.

How then did 'doom' come to have the connotations we associate with it? You can see its modern sense emerging as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the words of Richard FitzNeal, treasurer of England under Henry II. He was describing how the Domesday book came to have its name. Metaphorically, he wrote, it is:

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<sup>8</sup> Katharine Murphy, 'Scott Morrison brings coal to question time: what fresh idiocy is this?', *The Guardian* Australia edition, 9 February 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/09/scott-morrison-brings-coal-to-question-time-what-fresh-idiocy-is-this>, accessed 23 January 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*, p.255.

<sup>10</sup> Etymology Now: Etymology of Doom (<http://etymologynow.blogspot.com.au/2011/07/etymology-of-doom.html>, accessed 23 January 2018).

called by the native English, Domesday, i.e., the Day of Judgement. For as the sentence of that strict and terrible last account cannot be evaded by any skilful subterfuge, so when this book is appealed to on those matters which it contains, its sentence cannot be quashed or set aside with impunity. That is why we have called the book ‘the Book of Judgement’, ... because its decisions, like those of the Last Judgement, are unalterable.<sup>11</sup>

‘Doom’ here still means simply ‘judgement’, but if judgement is being associated with the end of days and the end of days with a ‘strict and terrible last account’, then it’s little surprise that the notion of ‘doom’ evolved to have the connotations it now does.<sup>12</sup>

Well, all this may be (more or less) interesting for those of a linguistic bent, but what relevance does it have for my theme? For our purposes, what I find significant about this etymological detour is that it enables us to bring the felt experience of impending doom into conversation with a theology of judgement. How that helps is the question I turn to next.

### **The Little Apocalypse**

In the apocalyptic imagination of the Bible, disruptions of the natural world – earthquakes, floods, solar eclipses – are understood to be cosmic reflections of social crisis. In mythical terms, natural disasters are markers of human disorder and the ‘feedback’ loop of divine displeasure. We’re used to thinking of this as a kind of primitive cosmology, but it’s actually not so far from what we’ve managed to produce in reality. I’ve already spoken of the extent to which our ecological crisis is (at least from the point of view of the West) not simply an arbitrary fate befalling us from without. It’s something we’re bringing upon ourselves and others. And this means the crisis reveals something about us. In particular it makes visible the planetary unsustainability of our form of life. It is, if you like, a

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Domesday Book’, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domesday\\_Book](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domesday_Book), accessed 23 January 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Etymology Now: Etymology of Doom (<http://etymologynow.blogspot.com.au/2011/07/etymology-of-doom.html>, accessed 23 January 2018).

*judgement* upon our culture's lack of care and integrity in relation to the web of life, the myriad 'interactions, mutual givings and receivings, that makes up the world we inhabit'.<sup>13</sup> And the *form* this judgement will take, the consequences we will suffer, look likely to be dire, even apocalyptic to at least some significant degree.

Jesus, as it turns out, had something to say about how to live in such times, times when human alienation and violence bring about the collapse of the known world.<sup>14</sup> Could his teaching have something to offer our situation? I want to explore this possibility, drawing in the first instance on chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, the text known as the 'Little Apocalypse'.

This passage begins with Jesus coming out of the Temple. That act already seems theologically freighted. In the Jerusalem of Jesus' day, the Temple must have dominated everything. 'Not merely', as James Alison has written, 'because of its size, or the economic importance of the market in sacrificial beasts ... More important than that, the Temple was the centre of mimetic fascination'. That is, it was a focus for people's sense of belonging in terms of their national identity, career, wealth and reputation as well as being the authorised source of divine legitimation. We can imagine how mesmerising the goings on in the Temple would have been, how necessary it may have felt to be perpetually monitoring (a bit like Facebook or Westminster or the Stock Exchange) 'what was going on, who was in, who was out ... which faction was coming out on top ... and so on',<sup>15</sup> for the Temple appeared to be at the centre of what mattered. Yet Jesus is *leaving* the building.

Meanwhile, his disciples are still admiring its edifice, its seemingly unshakeable structuring of their world. The text of the gospel reads: 'As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, teacher, what large

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<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.196.

<sup>14</sup> This line of thought was suggested to me by Dupuy. *The Mark of the Sacred*, pp.31ff.

<sup>15</sup> James Alison, 'The Importance of Being Indifferent' in *On Being Liked* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2003), p.122.

stones and what large buildings!” Jesus is unimpressed: ‘Do you see these great buildings?’, he asks. ‘Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’ (Mark 13: 1-2). He then proceeds to catalogue a whole series of disasters to come: ‘wars and rumours of wars’, nation rising against nation, earthquakes and famines, and yet – strikingly – he warns his disciples not to make any of this mean too much. Don’t be alarmed, he says, and don’t think these catastrophes are signs of the end. As Dupuy remarks: ‘Jesus refuses to let himself be carried away by millenarian fervour. He desacralizes both the Temple and the event of its destruction, denying that this moment has any divine significance’.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of the theology of the New Testament, as James Alison has brilliantly argued, the import of Jesus’ teaching here is twofold.<sup>17</sup> First – he is uncoupling our image of God from violence and mayhem. He’s subverting our human tendency to attribute divine meaning to disaster and so to become morbidly fascinated by it. In this passage, Jesus describes events that likely refer to the fall of Jerusalem, which was indeed a terrible thing for those who suffered it. ‘But not even that, for all its horror, is to be read in a theological key’,<sup>18</sup> for Jesus insists ‘if anyone says to you at that time, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “Look! There he is!” – do not believe it’ (Mark 13:21). In Alison’s words, the disciples must ‘learn to distance themselves from attributing theological importance to the violent events of this world. They have no such importance’.<sup>19</sup>

It follows, then, that what Jesus is really interested in is teaching the disciples how to dwell in a new way amidst the violent cataclysms of history and the doom we bring upon ourselves. This new possibility for inhabiting life differently is one he speaks of before his death, but it’s fully inaugurated and made available by the resurrection. It seems to me to have two main elements. On the one hand, it’s about no longer being run by death and the fear of death. This

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<sup>16</sup> Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.31.

<sup>17</sup> See Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.146.

<sup>19</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.145.

starts to become possible when, in the resurrection, Jesus returns to his disciples alive on the other side of death, and they glimpse in him a life that's no longer bound or threatened by death. It's not that his death is simply cancelled – the risen Jesus bears the scars of his crucifixion – but he exists now in a somehow larger life – a life over which death has no more dominion. 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again' (Rom. 6:9), writes St Paul. Slowly, even painfully, through their encounters with Christ, the disciples come to trust that for them too death is no longer 'the end', no longer the ultimate horizon of life. Because of him, there emerges for them the possibility of what Rowan Williams has called a 'decisive transition to that new level of existence where God is the only ultimate horizon – not death, or nothingness'.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, it's a revelation about the nature of God. Indeed, what makes the resurrection really good news for the disciples is what the manner of Jesus' return reveals about God. If the resurrection had been merely God's vindication of Jesus, God's overturning of the judgement against him, it would have been (as in fact it seemed initially) simply terrifying. After all, they've failed him, been in various ways complicit with the system that crucified him. But Jesus returns not condemning but restoring. He comes to renew their vocation and breathe out his Spirit upon them, so they may become again participants with him in God's redeeming work. He is with his disciples, Alison says, as the presence of forgiveness. So not only does the resurrection reveal that Jesus' life could not be annihilated by death and the violence of the world; it shows also that the nature of life's ultimate horizon is inexhaustibly inviting and hospitable. The risen Christ reveals the Father to be neither punishing judge nor indifferent fate, but active, re-creating and reconciling love.

And for this reason it's in the light of the resurrection that we can better appreciate Jesus' teaching about living in violent and troubled times. For he insists

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<sup>20</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.

that what matters most in times of tribulation is being able to recognise and keep your attention on the real dynamic of creation and of history. The violent collapse of the world's order signifies nothing about God, so do not become obsessed with or confused by such events.<sup>21</sup> Instead, look for the presence and pattern of the One who seeks to transform and heal the life of the world from within, through self-giving, suffering love. 'Therefore', Jesus tells his disciples – watch, be alert, keep awake – 'for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn'. And note, here, the temporal references are to the events of Jesus' Passion, when he lets himself be handed over at evening in the Last Supper, at midnight in Gethsemane, at cockcrow by Peter and at dawn to the Romans.<sup>22</sup> This is how the master comes, this is how God acts – by entering into the destructive and hateful dynamics of the world as the presence of steadfast and merciful love, to liberate life from within. To be a disciple, Jesus says, is to participate in this same way of being, this same transforming mission.

How do you live well in the face of doom? In this passage, the Little Apocalypse, Jesus appears to say: don't focus on the drama, the fire and fury – all the collapsing structures – and do not be alarmed. God has entered time and wills to liberate and heal. So look out for *that* reality, be ready to participate in it.

### **Apocalypse Now**

We too live in a time of the collapsing Temple, as our economic and political institutions totter; and for us, (as we've already noted) disorder in the natural world is not only metaphorically but literally manifesting. Is it possible that Jesus would tell us also not to get too alarmed about all this? Would he have us simply keep awake and look out for the coming of the master, the action of God in the

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<sup>21</sup> 'Until the end comes, those who await it can do only one thing: be vigilant, alert to what is going on around them, while being careful to avoid getting caught up in the fascination exerted by the great catastrophes of the age'. Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.33.

<sup>22</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.148.

midst? At first glance, this recommendation sounds horribly close to certain fundamentalist views – we don't need to worry about the state of the planet because the second coming is imminent; we don't need to take responsibility for future generations, because we're only passing through and 'this world' is passing away. Well, if that's where our reflection has led, I think we've been led astray.

So it it doesn't mean this, what *could* Jesus' teaching mean in practice? How might it change our approach and our experience of life now? I've already mentioned the writing of Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jew who died in Auschwitz in 1943 and who, for the two years before her deportation and death, kept a journal – an extraordinary chronicle of life lived squarely in the face of doom.<sup>23</sup> From her, I think we can pick out essential contours of what living well amounts to, in such times.

For one thing (and contrary to the fundamentalist picture) refusing to be fascinated or obsessively preoccupied with the 'great catastrophes of the age' is not the same thing as ignoring what's happening or refusing to suffer its horror and grief. On 29 April 1942, Jews in Amsterdam were forced to wear the star of David. In early May, Etty wrote: the 'threat grows ever greater, and terror increases from day to day'. She spoke of 'drawing prayer around her like a dark protective wall'.<sup>24</sup> Yet a few days later, her journal entry reads: 'It is sometimes hard to take in and comprehend, oh God, what those created in Your likeness do to each other in these disjointed days. But I no longer shut myself away in my room, God. I try to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked human being amidst the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds'.<sup>25</sup>

Two weeks later, restrictions on Jews were drastically increased – they could no longer visit the greengrocers, or travel by tram and would soon have to hand in their bicycles – and she wrote on June 9 of feeling depressed about these

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<sup>23</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Etty: A Diary 1941-43*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, p.151.

<sup>25</sup> Hillesum, *Etty*, p.152.

measures: ‘this morning they weighed on me like a menacing lead mass ...’.<sup>26</sup> By the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July she could clearly see that ‘what is at stake is our impending destruction and annihilation, we can have no more illusions about that ... Today I was filled with terrible despair, and I shall have to come to terms with that as well ...’. But then she went on: ‘Very well then, this new certainty, that what they are after is our total destruction, I accept it. I know it now and I shall not burden others with my fears. I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction and I find life meaningful – yes, meaningful – although I hardly dare say so in company these days’.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, she continued to endure periods of intense grief and despair, but what’s was emerging in Etty was an extraordinary capacity neither to avoid, minimise nor deny what was happening, while at the same time not to be trapped by it or allow herself to be wholly determined by events. ‘Something has crystallised’, she says. ‘I have looked our destruction, our miserable end which has already begun in so many small ways in our daily life, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished’.<sup>28</sup> And the importance of this, she felt, was twofold – that she herself would continue to grow and continue to savour the gift of life through it all, and that being towards her doom in this way would offer (in some mysterious way) something for future generations. ‘I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties’.<sup>29</sup>

It’s as if, we might say, she’s entered into the essential dynamic of resurrection life. She’s discovered an experience of goodness whose reality transcends the suffering of this present time, and lives no longer under the

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<sup>26</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.157.

<sup>27</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.172.

<sup>28</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.173.

<sup>29</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.173.

dominion of death. She wrote that ‘the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, ... by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability’.<sup>30</sup>

Now I’m conscious some might think that Etty’s example, inspiring as it is, is not directly analogous with ours. She and her fellow Jews really were doomed for destruction, whereas we still have the time to avert the worst. And if that’s so, isn’t there a danger that premature capitulation to or acceptance of ‘doom’ might prevent us from proper protest and urgent action? Some would contend that rumours of the ‘end of the world’ have come and gone many times and tend always to be exaggerated. That view may smack of denial, but from this perspective my talk of doom might seem paralysing and needlessly catastrophizing.

Well, the truth is, we don’t know for certain what the future holds. And neither, actually, did Etty. At the time she wrote her diary, it was possible (and she hoped it was possible) that she might be spared. Facing the possibility of the worst does not mean giving in to it, hastening it or ceasing to engage in meaningful action. In fact, I would argue, quite the opposite – it’s the precondition of meaningful action, action responsive to the clearest available perception of reality, free, powerful and undistorted by the temptation to grasp at false consolation. Dupuy calls it ‘enlightened doom-saying’.<sup>31</sup>

And here it matters to remember that ‘doom’ is not simply about a feared end, but is also about judgement. Facing doom involves facing up to our way of being, confronting the consequences of our alienation and inattention, how we have contributed to where we are now. Without this kind of awakening and honesty, without repentance – *metanoia* – a change of mind and heart, how can the future become different? For Etty too, this was part of it. The diary reveals her

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<sup>30</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.174.

<sup>31</sup> Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.32.

ever-deepening commitment to truth-telling and her growing capacity to detect the pockets of falsehood in her life – her tendencies to be self-dramatising or romanticising – which were getting in the way of being really present, really true to the task before her.

Similarly, in our time, confronting doom in both senses (facing up to the possibility of disaster and facing up to judgement) is the precondition of meaningful action. And this means looking squarely at the devastation of natural systems already in evidence – the death of coral reefs, the extinction of species, the collapse of fish stocks and forests. It means not just admitting these as facts, but allowing ourselves to be truly present to the calamity this signifies and how we have contributed to the suffering of our fellow creatures and the blighting of the world's beauty – our plastic bags and bottles choking the oceans, our wastage of food and fuel, our chemical pollution of air and soil, and how little (really) we're willing to give up. This sometimes feels unbearable. It's true that our degree of exposure makes a difference here – if we're not Pacific islanders or subsistence farmers or dedicated oceanographers, our sense of all this may be less immediately frightening, painful and debilitating. But even for those of us still relatively unaffected by the impact of these losses, don't we find it almost impossible really to look? Don't we want to deny it really is this bad?

How then is Etty able to 'look' (as she says) straight in the eye of the coming destruction and (without bitterness) at those who are perpetrating or complicit in it? It's no accident, I think, that her capacity to do this grows as her prayer life deepens. Often she wrote of her conversations with God, her desire to fall to her knees. On July 20, she remarked: 'They are merciless, totally without pity. And we must be all the more merciful ourselves. That's why I prayed early this morning'.<sup>32</sup> And she reflected on the change in herself: 'Had all of this happened to me only a year ago, I should certainly have collapsed within three days, committed suicide or pretended to a false kind of cheerfulness. But now I

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<sup>32</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.205.

am filled with such equanimity, endurance and calmness that I can see things very clearly and have an inkling of how they fit together'.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus says to his disciples 'keep awake' and from Etty we learn that this is about neither evading the truth of things, nor being overwhelmed by cynicism, rage, fear and despair. It involves coming to a certain interior stillness and spaciousness. Etty spoke of safeguarding 'that little piece of You, God, in ourselves',<sup>34</sup> and of being able to rest simply in God's arms.<sup>35</sup> It takes something to come to this place. Contemplative prayer, meditation, is a way we can journey.

In times of meditation, we focus as simply as we can on the breath or mantra, facing towards God. Gradually we become less invested in and less attached to ourselves, our anxieties, plans, alarms. At times we may still be overwhelmed by them or aware of them hovering, seeking our attention, but more and more we're able to avoid getting 'caught' by them. The more this happens during the dedicated time of meditation, as many of you will know, the more we know the difference in life between serious, non-dramatising attention to the truth of things and agitated reactivity which may give us the illusion of engaging reality, but is ultimately futile.

It seems to me that if we seek to live well in the face of doom, it's this capacity truly to be and bear with what's happening that's a necessary first step. This is what transforms the experience of helpless and terrified impotence into poverty of spirit. Etty describes this as a place of 'acceptance' which, she says, 'is not at all the same as defeatism'.<sup>36</sup> And this (as we'll explore in the next talk) is the ground of fruitful action and authentic hope.

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<sup>33</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.209.

<sup>34</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.197.

<sup>35</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.198.

<sup>36</sup> Hillesum, Etty, p.207.