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## **Daring Enlightenment (Matthew 5. 13-16)**

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‘There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?’ These are words written by Etty Hillesum in a transit camp on her way to death in Auschwitz. Many of you know Etty’s writing, and I’ve quoted her before, for she is one of the most remarkable 20<sup>th</sup> century witnesses to the reality she slowly becomes able to name ‘God’. From the maelstrom of murderous persecution, acutely exposed to the suffering and despair of her family, friends and community, Etty somehow lives her way into a peace that passes all understanding. She discovers the abiding and unkillable presence of mercy, love, hope and joy. And leaning into that reality, making it real for others ... this becomes her life’s work and her gift to future generations: ‘I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath’, she wrote, ‘so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties’.<sup>1</sup>

‘You are the salt of the earth’, Jesus tells his newly minted disciples. ‘You are the light of the world’. You are called to be in the midst of things in such a way that the whole flavour of life is transformed, life’s way is illumined and the truth of God is glorified, which is to say – made known. As with Etty, so with us. ‘There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times’.

And yet ... how difficult this is to say, how dangerous it sounds. Even in Etty’s voice, these words seem to teeter on the edge of self-aggrandisement. Who dares claim such a significance of and for themselves? Isn’t this precisely the problem with religious people, with church – this perennial tendency to think that we *are* specially

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<sup>1</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Etty: A Diary 1941-43*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1985), p.173.

endowed, that *we* are the solution to the world's need? Doesn't this way of speaking tend inevitably to the arrogance and self-importance that's done so much damage in the name of God?

It seems to me that our gospel reading today raises a key tension in the life of discipleship, the life of faith – a tension it's good to explore as we reflect on the significance of our life together in and as community.

The whole premise of the biblical tradition is that life's deepest truth and possibility isn't just immediately and automatically available to us. In the same way that we must learn how to perceive and know the fuller truth of the physical universe by developing special tools like telescopes, microscopes, and magnetic imaging, so in relation to the truth of being we must learn how to see and hear in deeper ways. The reality we call God is always there, in principle accessible to all. But our capacity to know it and be transformed by it may need refining. The contemplative tradition speaks of the necessity of activating and attuning our spiritual senses – awakening 'the eye of the heart', growing ears to hear, slowly coming to the 'knowledge that is beyond knowledge' through the renewing of our minds.

The good news is that, since God desires us to become receptive to the fullness of truth, God commissions teachers and guides to help us tune in at this deeper level. Thus the calling and equipping of prophets and priests; thus the election of a whole people – Israel – whose faithfulness to the law they were given was designed to make God's way of justice and mercy visible to the nations of the earth. And thus, in Christian understanding, the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit, the calling of the disciples and the ongoing significance of the body of Christ, the church, as a community in and through which all are invited to make themselves at home and embark on their own journeys of deepening encounter and growth.

The danger lies, of course, in God's decision to entrust the 'treasure' of God's self-communication to us – to the clay jars of particular people, particular cultural

forms and traditions. We are given words, practices, symbols and forms of life that are designed to mediate God, to make God known. But there's always a risk that we will appropriate these gifts as our own possession, and then develop structures and rules to police other people's access and engagement with the Real. Religious forms can become falsifying and demeaning rather than enlightening and liberating, which is why the temple, the church is always needing to be reformed, and God's people are always needing to repent. Given this risk, it's not surprising many of us are wary of claiming too much for our personal or communal capacity to bear witness to God. Salt of the earth? Light of the world? Who the hell do we think we are?

And yet, I wonder ... Because if that's *not* what we're becoming, if God's transforming reality is *not* what our lives are communicating, then what are we here for? There's a story told of one of the third century desert monastics who went to seek a word of wisdom from an elder. 'Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame"'.

By contrast with Abba Lot's modest, unambitious, even stingy approach to God – note how he speaks of 'my little office', of fasting a little, and of praying and purifying thoughts in a limited way, as 'far as I can' – Abba Joseph points to the possibility of a much more dangerous, self-involving prayer. He embodies the total self-giving that renders a person wholly available to how God will be in and through them.

We have many good reasons not to go here. Like Abba Lot, with his tidy religious observances, I'd often prefer to keep my encounter with God contained, manageable, respectable, without risk. I do want to know God and to do good, but being consumed – yeah, not so much. It is, as the Scriptures say, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. So we come up with our rationalisations. In the name of humility, conscious of our limits, failings and doubts and danger of

fanaticism, we settle for spiritual mediocrity. We tell ourselves we're not the kind of person who has these sorts of experience. But here's the thing – this radical transfiguration is nothing to do with having experiences. It's to do with the fundamental issue of how generously we're willing to offer ourselves to know God and so to bear God.

I spoke earlier of a tension in the life of faith for a community such as ours. On the one hand, we are rightly wary of the dangers of spiritual self-importance and of that self-conscious chasing after 'holiness', which so often becomes 'holier than thou-ness', that distorts Christian life and does damage in the world. We're right not to imagine ourselves better than, separate from everyone else. But religious humility is not the same as playing it spiritually safe, being lukewarm in our self-offering, holding back from being exposed to and transformed by the power of God. For unless we are willing to give ourselves in this kind of way, what really will we have to offer others?

On the outside, nothing much may change – most of us will not become, literally, 'all flame'. Like Ety, we will remain subject to the vicissitudes of circumstance, vulnerable, fallible, sometimes frightened and sad. And yet mysteriously, in us and through us the love, peace and joy of God will begin to shine through more brightly – such that others may experience themselves welcomed, seen and loved, allowed more space to be. How do we practice this fuller, more generous self-offering? It isn't about suddenly becoming perfect, or even very dedicated, meditators. It's simpler than that. It's about whole-heartedness, open-heartedness, and the intensity of our longing for the real – bringing that to God in prayer. The rest is given.

Traditionally, this 'Set Pools of Silence' service marks the regathering of our Benedictus community for the coming year. And traditionally, I try to say something a little inspiring about our vocation as persons in community, our vocation as a community, to set us on our way! So here's the take home. John Main wrote: 'A community that knows the mystery of being silent together, [and] holds their hearts

in readiness and attentiveness, becomes an embodiment of the light of reality that fills all hearts. This is what church means'.<sup>2</sup> The light we are to shine before others is not self-generated, but is the clarity and warmth and presence of God shining in and through us, as we learn to let it in – whatever our struggle, whatever our failing or hurt. After all, there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I, why should we, not be that witness?

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<sup>2</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), pp.104-105.