



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*1st November 2020
All Saints' Day*

Reflection

It is somehow symbolic of this year that our Patronal Festival should fall on the first Sunday after lockdown. We would normally be in church, with representatives of our three congregations and guests, a shared lunch, conviviality and celebration. But once again we are separated, unable to meet for an indefinite time, while the Covid-19 pandemic rages across Europe with the all too familiar sight of hospitals full to capacity and beyond. And yesterday's murderous attack of two worshippers and a sacristan in the Basilique of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption in Nice seems to threaten even the simple practice of a faith in these times. What a backdrop to All Saints' Day.

Would the saints themselves be surprised? There is sometimes a disconnect between the joyful triumphalism of the hymns we sing on this day and the lives of the saints themselves. There is also sometimes a disconnect between the church's emphasis on the holiness of the saints and their actual circumstances. (A former clergy colleague sent me a text on Friday to commiserate about the attack in Nice and ended with the words: 'All the best for your sermon on the saints - some of them were anything but!')

In keeping All Saints' Day, we are celebrating the heroes and heroines of our faith, some well-known, some almost unknown. We give thanks for what they did and we reflect on how it impacts our own lives. Yet perhaps we are too apt to focus on the vision of heavenly rest and thereby lose sight of the grim reality underneath. I would like to suggest that, in these times, it's the grim reality of what happened, and how they dealt with it, that can be of most help to us.

That's the message of the Beatitudes, the improbable recipe for blessedness set out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, which we heard in our Gospel reading this morning. It's hard reading, but it speaks deep truth. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' How will that be heard and felt in Nice this morning?

It can be instructive for us to think of the saints of the modern era, whose circumstances are closer to our own than those of their medieval forerunners, and to reflect on how they responded to the times they found themselves living through. Some are commemorated in the church's calendar. For example, on 12th October we remembered Edith Cavell, the British nurse in German-occupied Belgium during the First World War. Her Christian faith inspired her to save the lives of soldiers from both sides of the conflict without discrimination. She was arrested for helping Allied soldiers escape, tried by court-martial and shot by a firing squad. The night before her execution she said: 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'

In our own time we think of the healthcare staff going to work each day at present, knowing they might become infected by Covid-19. Some of them will literally be laying down their lives for others. That's humbling.

Perhaps the person who has most often been thought of as a living saint in recent decades was Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted her life to serving the poorest of the poor with what looked from the outside like a joyful simplicity of heart and an unshakeable faith in God. Wrong. When her notebooks were published after the death, it emerged that much of the time she had been racked with doubt and a sense of the absence of God. Some commentators suggested that the authorities in the Roman Catholic Church, who were in the process of having her recognised as a saint, should stop the process on the grounds that her faith had been so uncertain. The authorities simply nodded, knowing that doubt and despair are not a negation of faith but at times a necessary part of it.

In the hymn we will hear for our anthem today, 'Give us the wings of faith', there's a verse which hasn't made it into the particular setting we will be listening to, but which says of the saints: 'Once they were mourning here below, / and wet their couch with tears; / they wrestled hard, as we do now, / with sins and doubts and fears.' (I don't know about you, but I find that very comforting.) When we reflect on the saints, we should never be tempted to think they found it easy to do what they did, or that they found faith itself easy. Often they lost their lives in the course of a struggle of which they would not see the end. Yet they found courage in the midst of hardship, trust in God despite times when God seemed absent. When Jesus recited Psalm 22 from the cross – 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' – he knew that from within. As followers of Christ, we draw our inspiration from a God who has known the absence of God.

I would like to tell you about one person who I think would meet any test of what a saint is, though her story is relatively unknown. She was called Etty Hillesum, a young Dutchwoman who died at Auschwitz at the age of 29. Her diary and letters, written in 1941-43, were only published in English in 2002 with the title *An Interrupted Life*. Etty Hillesum was everything you might think a saint is not. She grew up in a dysfunctional home where her parents were unhappily married and fought frequently. Both her brothers had severe mental health problems and she was afraid she might develop them too. Her biographer writes: 'The early pages of [her] diary reveal an insecure, emotionally disturbed and sexually chaotic young woman struggling with a turbulent inner life which she cannot understand and which from time to time pitches her into deep depression.' Yet her diary and letters 'tell the story of a life, which, in just two and a half years, was entirely transformed.'¹

With the help of Dr Julius Spier, a therapist who had been a pupil of Carl Jung, Etty began to explore her inner life, and before long this led her to explore the deeper truths to which her gradual recovery of an inner stillness brought her. Encouraged by Spier to read the Bible and St Augustine, though without any formal religious instruction, she reached a profound understanding of the nature of God and of how suffering can be redemptive rather than destructive, all against the backdrop of the ever-increasing threat to the Jewish population of which her family were members. Her engagement with the suffering around her caused her to apply to help at Westerbork, a transit camp for Dutch Jews being deported to concentration camps in the east. Her diary chronicles the horror of the conditions at Westerbork, yet from its pages beats her persistent sense of the goodness and beauty of life as she sought to make life more bearable for those in the camp. She wrote in one of her letters: 'Despite everything, life is full of beauty and meaning.'

From an insecure youth she discovered a more integrated self, and began to write more and more of her sense of God and to pray. Her spiritual life increasingly sustained her as the persecution around her intensified. Her relationship with her parents, never easy, was transformed by the time they arrived at the camp in Westerbork, where she cared for them lovingly and attentively until they were all made to board a train to Auschwitz, from which they never returned.

One of the remarkable things about Etty Hillesum was her refusal to hate, a conviction that she held to the end: 'Each of us must turn inward and destroy in themselves all that they think they ought to destroy in others.' In that sense she stands alongside Edith Cavell, from another generation and another war. Through Etty's writing we see her battle to continue living with hope and integrity as the world around her collapsed. As the death which she knew was inevitable approached, she held courageously to the faith which by now meant everything to her – albeit that she was not a religious person in the conventional sense, with no affiliation to either Jewish or Christian practice. Her route to God was individual, direct and clear-sighted. As Patrick Woodhouse, her biographer, puts it: 'Etty speaks across the

¹ Patrick Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum – A Life Transformed* (2009).

boundaries of religions, pointing to a way of being human that transcends such divisions and overcomes the evils of violence and hatred. Her story rekindles confidence that the way of faith is not, as many sceptical voices would suggest today, an absurd and misguided delusion.'

I came across this quotation from her: 'Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors: it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole and begin to grasp it better if only for myself, without being able to explain to anyone else how it all hangs together. I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that is why 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. Isn't that doing something for future generations?'

It is indeed. It's what the saints have always done, which is why we celebrate them today.

The last piece of writing we have from Etty Hillesum is a postcard to a friend, which she threw from the train on her way to Auschwitz. It said this: 'Opening the Bible at random I find this: 'The Lord is my high tower.' I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother and [my brother] Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague. We left the camp singing. ... Thank you for all your kindness and care. ... Goodbye for now.'

Contemplating that sort of sainthood can only end in prayer. The one that comes to mind is the prayer of the Order of St Michael and St George:

Grant us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness and the serenity which comes of living close to thee. Daily renew in us the sense of joy and let thy eternal Spirit dwell in our souls and bodies, filling every corner of our hearts with light and gladness: so that, bearing about us the infection of a good courage, we may be diffusers of life, and meet all that comes, of good or ill, even death itself with gallant and high-hearted happiness: giving thee thanks always for all things.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Amen.

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