

Sunday 17C 27th July 2025

When Jesus teaches us how to pray he teaches us how to live. If we are left to our own devices the result is a cycle of conflict that never seems to end: it's always a case of 'them' and 'us', of setting ourselves against others in order to be ourselves, to have no identity of our own except what is defined for us by our enemy, or often 'imagined' enemy. What Jesus is teaching us is a way out of this forever war of one against another which is essentially a war against oneself, a failure to find one's place in this most amazing universe in which everything and everyone is linked.

Part of the challenge of reading the diaries of Etty Hillesum – detailing the experience of a Dutch Jewish girl in the camps of the Holocaust – is that she largely holds on to her faith in God and in humankind. She resists trading off one against the other. It's similar too with the protagonists in the story of the Jewish Israeli father and the Moslem Palestinian father in the novel *Apeirogon* – based closely on two true characters. The Moslem Bassam in particular describes in vivid detail what it's like to be constantly harassed and beaten up by members of the Israeli Defence Force but

“It struck him early on that people were afraid of the enemy because they were terrified that their lives might get diluted, that they might lose themselves in the tangle of knowing each other.”

Now isn't that similar with the journey into God? You see how closely our understanding of God and our understanding of one another are linked and how today's readings and especially Jesus' teaching on prayer highlight this,

“and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us.”

We then pray not to be put to the test, or not to be led into temptation, because the temptation is to hate and this is so hard to resist. Our preference is to store up resistance to the other person, to compile a whole list of their faults and failings in order to justify our inability to forgive – often in the hope that they will get their come-uppance in some way later. The challenge of such as Etty Hillesum and Bassam and Jesus is that they refuse this easy way out, this narrative of self-pity – they dare to try another way or, better, to trust in the larger agency of God or in Etty's own words

“if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge- from which new sorrows will be born for others- then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply. And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God.”

Forgiveness then as a pathway to God, as a way of understanding who God is to us and who we are to God – those in whom God delights to forgive. It's a process that brings us in to the life of God, is God's life at work in us. But it's not easy, it's a daily task. It's the first challenge Abraham has to face after his meeting with the three strangers – he responded well then but now he will have to respond again and again in like manner to the challenge of other people's sins. God has chosen him to become the spokesperson for his people, to dare to speak up on their behalf, to defend them even in their sin. And God responds in the gentle manner of the one who knows the gentle origins of our sorrows. That's hard, it's as if we would prefer violence instead.

Excuse me Lord, but will you be angry if there are no good people left in Sodom?

No, I will send my Son.

Br John Mayhead
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