

“The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us”

A quote of Herbert McCabe ‘s by his fellow Dominican preacher Timothy Radcliffe as he struggles to justify study as a way to God, and goes on to say

“what that means we shall never cease discovering and all those who struggle to understand the cost and beauty of love are our allies, regardless of whether they believe in God or not.”
(p 146, *Alive in God, a Christian imagination*”).

It’s not our failure to know God, or whether God exists or not, that is at issue but our failure to understand the nature of love, its cost and beauty. This is the greater dynamic which Jesus is trying to get ‘ the man in the crowd’, concerned only about his earthly inheritance, to see. His God is too small is perhaps another way to put it or his perception of life, in the face of death, is too small, too narrow, insufficient for the job in hand, the search for meaning. If I may return once more to Etty Hillesum’s *Interrupted Life* – the diaries and letters of an Amsterdam Jew detailing her life there from 1941- 1943. I’ve just finished revisiting it to make notes from all the places I’ve marked in the margins only to find that all the marvellous and courageous insights from the first part seem to come to an end once she experiences the full horror of the transit camp at Westerbork. This is salutary for anyone daring to preach on the subject of life in the face of death or of God as love. Vanity of vanities one might say. This isn’t because Etty has lost hope or is less courageous but rather I’m guessing that she’s too busy now with the fact of death, the time for words is slipping away. Her actions though are still significant, busy with the lives of others even as she struggles still to find meaning for her own. It’s no longer that the world of study has lost its value – she so loved to read the great poets, the philosophers, the Bible – but that now she is being taught or, better perhaps, having to find how to live these thoughts, in a situation which makes death, what it always was and is, inescapable. In the earlier part of her diary there’s something of a prophetic touch to her insight that.

“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...”

What we hand on to others is not a matter of physical wealth but a memory of good or not; our true wealth in this sense is our struggle to live well the good life of heaven, the witness of life beyond ourselves, or, better, beyond ourself.

To come back to Timothy Radcliffe and his own struggle, perhaps, to justify years of study

“ the discipline of Christian study breaks the gravitational pull of the self and let’s one be touched and changed by what is other. The sheer gritty difference of their being breaks open the bubble of the ego. This is true whether I am studying St Augustine, physics or the digestive system of a worm.”

I may well be saying this to justify my own great joy in study, the wonder of the world in all its beauty and truth – only to be acutely aware that such study cannot in itself or by itself teach love. We have to learn to live it in the face of death. Our hope then has to be in a Christ, or a God, who can live this for us – who is there for us in all our failures who alone can recreate us in his image or love.

“The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us.

There’s work enough there for a lifetime and hopefully to carry us through the time when all words fail and to carry others through also.

The life of love as a life of interruption, better learnt now than before it’s too late.