

Luke 21:33 *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Advent again, and I must preach to you about all this imagery of the powers of the heavens being shaken, signs in the sun and moon and stars, and heaven and earth passing away and so on..... What do we make of it?

Well, I am not fully sure that I can unravel all of that Gospel. But I can say a little bit about what is going on. The idea of Advent comes from the practice of great generals and emperors in the ancient world. Whenever they visited a city or a town, they sent their outriders to announce that they were on their way – their Advent, their coming. Imagine you are the inhabitant of a town or city, and you suddenly see a small force of soldiers approaching over the horizon. Before too long they are at the gate, demanding an entrance, and then the city is filled with the sound of trumpets, and horses clattering over the pavements, and shouts and marching feet. Everyone is summoned out onto the streets or into the town centre to wait the arrival of the great man – and no doubt with quaking hearts too because the arrival of great men and armies in the ancient world brought no good to anyone.

Jesus' contemporaries thought that the end of the world would be a bit like that. God would come and wrap the earth up as once he had created it. But before the end there would be these heart stopping set of preliminaries – signs of the end. Which might at least – if they lasted long enough – give people time to sort their lives and hearts out, and be ready for the great judgement day.

That's Advent. God coming. The early church thought that it would not be too long before it happened. Perhaps even Jesus did. We know, of course, it did not happen like that. So these ideas were pushed further and further forward into the future – but never lost. As you know they are there on almost every page of the NT.

All this leads to what always seems to me to be a troubling contradiction in the message of Jesus. Advent type sayings ask us to think about the future – God coming in judgement. But Jesus also asks us to think about the presence of God in the here and now – the Kingdom of God is at hand

he says. Right here. And he also teaches that God is unchanging – the same yesterday, and today and for ever. So, how is it that he can give us a picture of the God of compassion in, say, the parable of the lost sheep or the prodigal son? And then give us all this terrifying stuff about God coming as a judge in the future – the weeping and the wailing and the gnashing of teeth? I wrestle with that contradiction. And have never found an easy answer – though that the world is God's and God might be responsible for its end seems to me to be exactly what is true of a sovereign God. And I find the idea of God coming and not the other way around, of us going to God, a very powerful one, and absolutely true to human experience.

So this is not a fully worked out sermon! But I'd like to share with you something that deeply impressed me when I read it, and which – for me anyway – has begun to point to an answer to those problems.

The book I read was the life of someone called Etty Hillesum. She was Jewish, living in Holland in the late 1930's and the start of the war, when of course Holland was occupied and Jews were gradually rounded up to be deported to the camps. She was not religious in any way – she was actually very political. One day she began to read the gospels. She had been encouraged to do so by her therapist – who was also, complicatedly, her lover. He was not Christian, but he found the gospels thought provoking. Not long after, she recorded in her diary that she thought she would like to see what the experience of God actually was. So she opened herself to God – sitting on the bins in the family back yard, under the apple tree, in the sun. And soon she began to discover she could not hate. She saw Jews being ill treated – even by fellow Jews – but she could not hate those who did it as she once did, and as all her political friends continued to do. Rather, she began to see how sad these people who did the mistreating were, how vulnerable and wounded. And so it went on, as if a whole new view of life began to take over. One day she felt an absolute compulsion to kneel. She had never knelt in her life before (and I don't think she ever entered a church). But she felt that God's presence had to be made clear by her – it was like making a space for God because so few acknowledged him. So she knelt, wherever she was, just making room for God in this world.

For a while she poured her life into welfare work for her fellow Jews. But inevitably she was taken to the transit camp to await deportation. In the camp all the evidence is that an extraordinary care and compassion flowed from her. The days were given over to sustaining people, just being alongside them in love. Each afternoon her job was to help the

families and the old people and children onto the trucks that would take them to Auschwitz and the gas chambers. Harrowing work, which drained her. And yet, she still looked on the guards with compassion, and her sense of the presence of God never changed – indeed it deepened. God was utterly real and true. One diary entry reads:

The misery here is quite terrible. But when the day has slunk away.... I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And time and again it soars straight from my heart, like some elemental force, the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and one day we shall be building a whole new world.

And.....My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised towards Your heaven, tears run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude.

And the last words we have from her are on a small scrap of paper, fluttering from the bars of the cattle truck as it took her and others down the line to Auschwitz. It said: "I have opened my bible at random and found "The Lord is my high tower," and then..... "We all left the camp singing."

I think I learned from that how it is that God comes to us (and note that the initiative is always with God). God comes with the power utterly to change our lives and transform us – when we open ourselves to that. And God's coming is in everything – in ourselves, in those around us, in creation, in scripture, in the church, even in the depths of darkness. There is no absence of God. And I begin to see in that situation, how the presence of God is always both utterly here and now, and also in some way, an end-time. Etty, and so many others like her, was fully alive. And those who ran the camps had, as it were, had the end-time judgement passed on them already. They might survive, go on living, but they were already condemned to shadowy half lives, and the visitation of nightmares. The light makes clear the surrounding darkness. Love and judgement are not two separate things, but one thing in God. God's coming in the here and now slices open every moment, every event of our lives, revealing exactly where everyone stands. Advent reminds us to turn our eyes towards that, looking for the God who changes everything by his coming - the God who is the same yesterday, today, at the end of time, and beyond the end of time.

As Jesus said, Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away

I read: Etty Hillesum, A Life Transformed by Patrick Woodhouse.
Continuum.

Etty's Diaries are also published as ETTY: the letters and diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43, Complete and Unabridged, Edited by K Smelik, and translated by A Pomerans. Pub: Eerdmans and Novalis.

Interesting also is Rowan Williams' Romanes Lecture of 2004 which can be found on his website under that year.

Micheal O'Siadhail has two fine Poems about Etty in his Collection "Double Time", Bloodaxe Books.

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