

Discovering the spirit of Christ within so that we might be there for others.

John 14:15-21

The meaning of Inner Peace

What do you understand by the term ‘inner peace’? At times we may talk about inner peace but rarely express what is meant. I found myself drawn to the term by this morning’s Gospel reading.

It is Thursday evening – just hours before Jesus’ arrest and death – and he is sitting round a table with his friends trying to prepare them for life without him, and Jesus says to them:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

*I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever,
the Spirit of truth whom the world can never accept since it neither sees him nor knows him,
but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.”*

It is almost as if Jesus is able to see into the hearts and minds of his friends and their secret yearning for understanding- to make sense of their lives – their longing for coherence and purpose, to feel that their lives and relationships are significant,

that in the midst of all the demands that life throws up, amidst the competing demands on their time and loyalties, that there is some ultimate meaning and purpose to their existence.

And in response to that deep longing Jesus gently guides them to an understanding that such peace or purpose is found through the journey inward;

to go in to our inmost selves and there discover the Spirit of Christ:

...but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.

This journey inward is also captured in those wonderful words of Bianco da Siena (written in 15th C and now set to music as Hymn 398 in TiS) expressing this longing for inner peace or purpose:

*And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace till we become the place
in which the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.*

Jesus is leading his friends – and us – into an understanding that peace and happiness – a sense of coherence and purpose in our lives – are not finally found through personal achievement, the exercise of power over others, or even proving ourselves worthy of love in the eyes of others,

but rather through the journey inward where we discover in some indefinable way that we are in relationship with a deeper reality we cannot fully comprehend or know, yet is so real to us - the Spirit of Christ within.

A story of the journey inward: Etty Hillesum

Let me share with you one such journey toward inner peace which comes out of the tragedy of WWII.

Etty Hillesum was just 29 years old when she died.

Esther Hillesum, a Jew, was born in Holland on 15 January 1914;

she died on 30 November 1943 in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, aged 29.

Etty’s diary during the war years has since been published and reviewed in the SMH by Elaine Lindsay.

The diary begins in March 1941. Etty is 27, holds a law degree, teaches Russian, is a self described accomplished lover, and is interested in psychology.

But Etty is dissatisfied with life and its lack of purpose, (something is missing despite her apparent success) and she becomes a patient of psychologist Julius Speir who helps bring some order to her inner chaos and teaches Etty how to overcome her exaggerated self-consciousness.

But then, as the diary unfolds, even though war clouds gather, something changes in Etty and she begins to exult in a joyful love of everyone with whom she shares life, Jew or German alike.

In her review of the diary in the SMH Elaine Lindsay observes:

“Despite the sorrows which surround her, Etty can affirm, in faith and action, that God and the world are one, so beautiful and so rich.

In July 1942 the dreadful reality dawns and Etty faces the possibility of her own destruction.

Despite that Etty leaves her relatively safe position as an employee of the Jewish Council to join the Jews who are being rounded up for transportation to Poland.

And so Etty’s journey becomes a journey inward, but also outward, as she writes those wonderful words printed in our order of service for this morning:

“Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves – more and more peace – and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace will also be in our troubled world.”

(And Jesus said: *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments .I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth whom the world can never accept since it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.”*)

Indeed, Etty’s own path now leads straight to God.

In reviewing the last pages of the diary Elaine Lindsay observes:

“In the last luminous pages, Etty’s writing transcends art... We are in the presence of mystery. Amid cruelty there is forgiveness and understanding; in death there is triumph”

Etty’s last words in the diary, written on the transport of 7 September 1943, burn into the memory:

“We have left the camp singing”

Etty was not Christian but, I sense, did discover the Spirit of truth within, that inner peace that gave coherence, purpose and meaning to her own existence and her world even in the face of meaningless destructive forces.

The journey inward for Etty – for us - is not an escape from the world but the courage to believe in a reality that transcends the forces that seek to diminish the human spirit, the truth that gives ultimate meaning and purpose to all life.

Responding through the Spirit within

Let us then, risk the journey inward; let us dare to believe that we may discover within ourselves – in the very depths of our being – the spirit of truth, the Spirit of Christ. For as Etty reminds us:

“Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves – more and more peace – and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace will also be in our troubled world.”

Elaine Lindsay is right when she observes: *“What seems a very private act, the moulding of one’s inner life, is a radical deed that can change history”*

And Jesus said, he would send his Spirit of truth which we would know, *“because he is with you, he is in you.”*

Let us dare to believe the Spirit within. Amen