

## Harvest Festival: St Thomas-on-The Bourne: September 2021

Sixteen years ago I was at a profoundly moving event in Parliament, in Westminster Hall. Above me was the great wooden roof created here in Farnham in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; around me were hundreds of Jewish people, survivors of the Holocaust. The event marked the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Concentration camps. There were so many people present that I was seated shoulder to shoulder with my Jewish neighbours and could feel their body heat radiating through my clothes. As part of the event, excerpts from the diary of Ann Frank were read aloud by Stephen Fry.

Ann Frank was not the only Jewish writer of diaries during the Nazi occupation. One of her Dutch Jewish compatriots, Etty Hillesum also kept a secret diary. In it she wrote this:

*What was it like this morning just before I woke up? An almost tangible feeling, just as if there were all sorts of spaces and distances locked up inside me which now wanted to break out to unfold into ever wider spaces and distances. As if the distances were tangible things I had to let out like stamping and pawing horses from a crowded stable...that special feeling within me is very strong...as if infinite steppes(fields) lay spread out inside me...I can see them and feel them and move over them...'*

It's a vivid picture of what we might call her 'inner world'.

Later, she was transported in a cattle truck by train from Westerbork to Auschwitz. Her last written words were on a post card which she threw from that truck. This is what she wrote: 'Opening my Bible at random I find this: 'The Lord is my High Tower'.

In the original Dutch it reads 'de Heere is mijn hoog vertrek'...'the Lord is my High Tower'; but in Dutch it's a pun, because 'vertrek' can mean 'high tower' or a 'living inner space', it can also refer to a 'point of departure'. The card was found by a local farmer. So: the Lord is my High Tower; the Lord is my living inner space; the Lord is my point of departure

I am deeply indebted to a friend, Stephen Prickett, alas! now dead, who began his fascinating book 'Secret Selves: a History of Our Inner Space', with Etty Hillesum's description of her inner and imaginative life.

All of us here will be able to empathise with her descriptions because all of us, without exception, also have inner lives, our deepest, secret selves, That place which is the source of our imaginations; imaginations which help us to navigate and make sense of our world. Our imaginations offer us ways of considering not only our existing lives but our *potential* lives, which we might, or might not, decide to follow...not least because our moral sense also comes into play to put boundaries around the power of our visualisations.

Our inner lives are profoundly and mysteriously rich, beautiful, and sometimes disturbing. But from the depths of our imaginations rise art and music, poetry, and literature. If you were here last night you would have heard a stunningly beautiful concert in which the

imaginations of the composers and the disciplined attention given to their compositions by Rob and the choir resulted in a programme that was rich with the beauty of eternity. It was simply wonderful.

Because of our imaginations, we are creative people...whether that be with an easel and a brush, with our voices in hymns and choirs, or in activities like gardening or cooking...this church is filled to the brim with creativity...though we might not always realise or acknowledge it.

Now let's take this to another level. Suppose for the moment, that we are the children of God. Might it not follow that our own creativity, bubbling up from our inner selves, derives from the creativity of God? Perhaps our inner selves have something of God within them?... It's as though the inner space which Ety Hillesum described so hauntingly is actually connected with, and is part of, the infinite and mysterious deep space of God's own being,

Two further thoughts: the first I have already hinted at...our inner selves can only reach their potential if they are disciplined by the moral laws which also seem to be built into our DNA and into the fabric of the Universe. Where human imagination is given absolutely free rein it can lead to chaos and destruction but held within a moral framework our imaginations can reach out into new and exciting territory.

Second thought: at funerals we hear the awesome words: 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. It's a solemn reminder that we are made from the dust of the Universe, we are star dust (literally) which, for a brief moment, sparks into life and then fades away.

'Creation-tide' gives us the opportunity to reflect on who we are in our inner selves, on our human potential, and on our destiny...and if our flesh, our moral selves, **and the very world we inhabit**,... are made of the stardust, the carbon atoms, which exist in all things... then we are not separate from creation, we are part of it.

And if our inner lives are somehow mysteriously part of the life of God, and if we, like all created things are made of stardust, should we not treat each other and our world with sensitivity and gratitude, recognising that our life and the life of creation are one, and in very truth are both hidden and discovered with Christ in God.

**The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.**