

Over the last several months I worked through Timothy Radcliffe's ALIVE IN GOD: A CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION. It's a big book –382 pages of text and an additional 42 pages of footnotes and bibliography. Radcliffe was the Master General of the Dominican Order for 2 terms. He has had a vast experience of the worldwide reality of the church. So the book contains lots of stories about various customs and practices he observed in his extensive travels as head of the order. Radcliffe is also a prodigious writer and a man of formidable intellect. He obviously reads widely, as he draws on many, many sources – theological as well as poetic, artistic and secular. He loves film and theatre. I've read a number of his books through the years, and have found each of them to be quite engaging.

Two things I share with you today. First, he talks about the concept of praise, and references C.S. Lewis. Lewis came to see that we must praise God not because God is vain and longs to be told how fantastic He is, but because what we say in praise is true and the truth must out. Our joy in a truth needs to be voiced. And here's what struck me in particular – WHY WE NEED TO COMPLIMENT ONE ANOTHER: "It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with." (REFLECTIONS, p. 97) I really like that image that "the delight is incomplete till it is expressed." When we hear beautiful music, see wonderful art, admire nature's handiwork, we want to share it with someone – especially anyone who had a hand in its creation. THEN we enjoy it a second time! In a world where we often don't seem to do this very often with each other, it is a good reminder.

As the particular chapter from which this reflection comes is on the liturgical imagination, Radcliffe continues by reflecting that the 24 elders belt out their song of praise for the pure delight in its truth (see Revelation 19:3-4). Our praise of God in the liturgy is just the foretaste of that joy, even though it is not a joy that we always feel at the prospect at every Sunday Mass!

But appropriate for our current pandemic moment, Radcliffe continues: "In dark times such as our own it is hard to praise, but all the more important that we do so. As Etty Hillesum left Westerbork camp for Auschwitz, she managed to toss out a postcard for a friend. It said, "We left the camp singing." The Coptic Christians sang the praises of Jesus when they were lined up to be murdered on the beaches of Egypt. Mystics, poets, painters, musicians help unblock the flow of praise when it is hard and the world is grim. Rilke believes it is the vocation of the poet, indeed of all artists. I would say of all CHRISTIANS!

Tell us poet, what is your task?

I praise.

But the murderous things, the monstrous things,

How can you endure them, how can you bear them?

I praise.

But the mysteries which are anonymous and nameless,

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How, poet, can you still invoke them?

I praise.

By what right can you presume, in all your disguises?

And in every kind of mask, to remain true?

I praise.

And how is that both stillness and turbulence

Know you like star and storm?

I praise. (Jurg Schmidt and Paul Murray, O.P.)

Even with our masks on, we are still praising! Doing the best we can to remind ourselves of our hope that God is with us – always. Thanks for all that you are doing to encourage one another! IN ALL THINGS (EVEN PANDEMIC!) LET US PRAISE THE LORD. AND GIVE HIM THANKS! AMEN!