

Meditation

at the Memorial Service at the 100 Years Schillebeeckx Conference
Nijmegen, Church of St. Dominic, 29 August 2014

Frankly, Edward could be a little tiresome. Not as a human being, in day to day contacts. In fact, then he could be so 'normal' that I as a student in the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties, found it even a little bit shocking. There was nothing of the 'look at me, I am an important theologian' attitude in him. But as he lectured, Edward gave the impression that everything he said was very, *very* important, and of the highest urgency. This *had to be said now, had to be understood*. And 'this' could very well be a rather abstruse detail of Biblical exegesis, or an abstract point in the theological debates in the past or the present.

As a result everyone was writing like crazy in his lectures and now we have in the archives rather detailed notes of everything he said there.

It was only much later that I saw where this came from. Yes, of course, coming from a Flemish background to a French-speaking Jesuit boarding school, he had learned to work very hard in order to make up for what he initially lacked in language skills. And yes, of course, he had a very hardworking father, as he himself stressed repeatedly in interviews. But the point is that spiritually he was convinced that God was still in the process of revealing himself to us. There were always new things he had to learn, to understand, to comprehend, in order to enable him to be the theologian he knew that he was called to be. As students he gave us the impression that you had to know everything, that you never knew enough, that even if you knew as much as he did, you still did not know enough. How tiresome is that?!

What we had to learn, of course, and what some of us did learn, was how liberating it was. What still can be learned from Schillebeeckx, by us, theologians, by us, believers, by us, human beings disturbed by what is happening in our world, is, I think, how liberating it is to know that the God of liberation, justice and truth, is still revealing himself to the world. Whatever abandonment we may feel or fear, even this very abandonment speaks of God presence to us in our desire for this freedom, justice and truth that is lacking.

It is not as if we have to hold on to God, fearing every new turn in our culture, every change in our *Zeitgeist*, every claim to philosophical insight, every alleged discovery of the sciences – fearing that they may estrange us from the traditions that give us security. God holds on to us and the only thing we have to do is to find out how. This may be intellectually challenging, existentially engaging and morally a burden, but ultimately it is not threatening.

We heard the radical way in which Schillebeeckx phrased it: 'In the moment of Jesus' death God was present, but silently. [...] So one can trust in God even at a time of supreme silence ... The absolute silence of God reveals his absolute presence' (*I am a happy theologian*, p. 56). The absolute silence of God reveals his absolute presence: there is an mystical core in Schillebeeckx' theology.

The nineteen seventies and eighties, the decennia during which Schillebeeckx wrote his mature work, were highly activist and, in the Netherlands, in a thoroughly moralistic way political. The general feeling was, with just a tiny bit of exaggeration, that we should and could change the world decisively. Discrimination, war and poverty could be eliminated if we really wanted to, the feeling was – a rather peculiar understanding, one could say, of the message that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Schillebeeckx participated in this climate of moralising activism – as he himself already had written in a rather early essay of his: 'Zeitgeist is irresistible' – but at the same time he tried to clarify that the activist drive itself, the will to change the world for the better, was effected by the

God who according to the Biblical traditions created heaven and earth and all that is in it in order to be 'very good', mirroring his own supreme goodness. As we are hoping for a better world and actively strive for it, we are not caught up in a fight that may be heroic, but is ultimately tragically in vain. We are in harmony with the *Deus salutaris* preached by the Christian tradition, the *Deus humanissimus* witnessed to by Jesus of Nazareth and still resounding in the lives of men and women today.

In the culture of the second decennium of the Twenty-first Century – if possible even more activist than the culture of the nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties, but at the same time no longer moralistic but cynical – it may be more than ever necessary to preach the kingdom of God as 'a reconciliation which abolishes all exclusiveness, and precisely for that reason becomes universal by seeking to raise up the oppressed', as I we heard Schillebeeckx phrase it (*God among us*, p. 74).

Theology, Schillebeeckx writes in the opening pages of *Mensen als verhaal van God*, with a typical Dutch expression at the time, 'opposes any kind of doom thinking, though theologians, like everyone else, are at the same time convinced that we live in a bewildering mixture of meaning and meaninglessness' (p. 24; *Church: The Human Story of God*, p. 4). Cynicism is not really an option for theology, for Christian faith, and ultimately probably for human nature.

There is, as always, a lot to be bewildered about, but as we can learn from Schillebeeckx, it is the task of us theologians, us preachers, us believers to keep reminding our contemporaries that we have never survived because we were capable of it. We have always survived through grace.

It may require a miracle to save the world, but counter to common belief miracles have happened all the time and are still happening. Even what happen through us does not necessary happens simply by us; as Schillebeeckx somewhere in *Mensen als verhaal van God*: 'we sometimes subsequently experience precisely the good that we ourselves do and provoke as human beings, as Christians and believers in the gospel, as the unmerited and surprising grace of God' (p. 252, *Church: The Human Story of God*, p. 234).

This is what gives us hope: that we can do much more than we see ourselves capable of. 'It shall be at the breaking dawn, as then': We will be living, to the full. – May be so.

Erik Borgman