

## **EASTER TRIDUUM reflections with Fr Matt Blake, OCD – Good Friday**

2nd April 2021 at the Carmelite Church, Kensington<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to begin this reflection with a few verses from the Passion narrative from John's gospel to help to set the scene for us, and it is part of the conversation between Jesus and Pilate. The conversation revolves around two ideas, kingship and power – what that means – and truth. What is truth?

*So Pilate went back into the Praetorium and called Jesus to him and asked 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus replied, 'Do you ask this of your own accord, or have others spoken to you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? It is your own people and the Chief Priests who have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus replied, 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews, but my kingdom is not of this kind.' Pilate said, 'So you are a king then?' Jesus answered, 'It is you who say it. Yes, I am a king, I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth, and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'. Pilate said, 'Truth – what is that?' And with that, he went out again.*

So we have here this conversation, this encounter, this wonderful drama between these two men, a conversation that in a sense brings to a climax the whole of St John's gospel. It's a confrontation between light and darkness, good and evil, life and death. We have these two standing for this. We have Jesus standing for truth - he is the truth, he has come, he tells us, to bear witness to it. He is the one who is the true king, but with a kingdom, a power that is not of this world and that is beyond the understanding of Pilate. Pilate, we could say here, stands for all of us who are limited in our understanding, who cannot get beyond the boundaries that we find ourselves hemmed in by. Pilate is hemmed in, bound by the boundaries of human power, of the human understanding of things – or, as John's gospel often puts it – of the world. It's the values of the world, the power of the world – it's Rome, the greatest empire the world has ever known. But he's clearly powerless here. Pilate represents human power, but what this dialogue shows us is that he is powerless. Pilate is powerless here and he feels it and he knows it and he experiences it, but he cannot face up to it, he cannot admit to it. Fear grips him, and weakness is there in everything he says and in everything that he does. So worldly power, human power is shown in this wonderful conversation as being weakness, as being worthless, but Jesus, he's in control, Jesus comes across as free, Jesus knows who he is, knows why he is here, knows what he is doing. He is at peace, unperturbed by what is taking place.

So this great drama that we have got, that plays out in all of our lives. We've all been where Pilate is, we all come before Jesus as Pilate, we come before him in our weakness, in our vulnerability. The presence of Jesus takes us beyond what is known, what is safe, takes us to the place where we are powerless, where our weakness is so manifest. Jesus stands before us as the true king of a kingdom that is not of this world and he stands before us as truth, so everything in us that is not truth, everything in us that is a compromising of truth or a distortion of truth, anything in us that is a lie, is brought out here, is shown up for what it really is.

To explore a little bit further what truth is, what it might mean, I want to look at a passage from St Teresa of Avila. At the very end of the account of the *Book of her*

*Life*, chapter 40, she is writing about a particular experience that she has in prayer, a particular insight or understanding that she has received, but in reality what she is expressing is something much more than that. What she really is expressing is where her relationship with Jesus Christ has brought her to. She is, we could say, in the same place as Pilate, but what she sees is something very different to what Pilate sees. She, in a sense, is standing before Jesus, just like Pilate is. Truth is there in front of Teresa just as it is standing in front of Pilate, but Teresa is not afraid of the truth. Teresa is willing to give herself to the truth, to acknowledge it.

I would like to read a little of what she says to us because it helps us to understand the opportunity that Jesus is giving to Pilate and is giving to everybody who meets him, because Pilate is truly meeting with Jesus and Jesus is revealing to Pilate the truth of who he is, but there's a great obstacle, Pilate cannot get beyond his fears, his weakness, that darkness, that false and misleading thinking that he has become trapped by. But Teresa, through a life of prayer, a life of spiritual growth and maturity, has no fear of truth, not only has no fear of truth but is truly speaking as a person who is set free by truth. Here's a little of what Teresa says.

*With this reflection my soul began to grow enkindled and there came upon me a spiritual rapture that I don't know how to describe. It seems I was carried into and filled with that majesty I at other times understood. Within this majesty I was given knowledge of a truth that is the fulfilment of all truths. I don't know how to explain this because I didn't see anything. I was told without seeing anything, but I clearly understood that it was Truth itself telling me:*

And this is what Truth is telling her, Truth, that of course is Jesus Christ. It's there in John's Gospel: he says, 'I am the way, the truth....' He is Truth, he is Truth itself and here are the words she puts onto Truth itself:

*This is no small thing I do for you because it is one of the things for which you owe me a great deal, for all the harm that comes to us in the world comes from us not knowing the truths of scripture in clarity and truth. Do you know what it is to love me truthfully? It is to understand that everything that is displeasing to me is a lie.*

Let us pause here for a moment. Teresa is given this insight, or she is really telling us that her whole life of prayer, her relationship with Jesus have given her the insight, to know, to see what truth is, and everything that is opposed or contrary to it is a lie. In other words, everything that Pilate stands for or represents is a lie, is false; everything that Jesus stands for and represents is the truth and that truth is only known through love. Love is the key to understanding that truth. This is what Teresa has come to understand, she's telling us. Let's go on a little bit further. She tells us:

*This divine Truth – it's Jesus Christ, the Divine Truth, that's who Jesus Christ is – which showed itself to me there was engraved upon me, without I knowing how or what, a truth that gives me a new reverence towards God, for it gives knowledge of his majesty and power in an indescribable way. I know that this majesty and power are something great. There was left in me a keen desire to speak only those things that are very true, that reach beyond what is dealt with here in this world.*

So there are the two things that Truth itself – Jesus Christ – has given to Teresa: a great reverence towards God, a knowledge of God’s power and majesty, she said, *in an indescribable way*. There are no words she can put on this, but she knows God, knows God’s power and majesty, a complete contrast to Pilate who doesn’t know, who has no concept of this. And therefore the consequence of this for Teresa is not just a knowledge of God, but the desire to only speak Truth – in other words Truth that comes from this knowledge of God, and this is a Truth, she said, that reaches beyond what is dealt with here in this world. Pilate, of course, can’t do that, Pilate can’t get beyond how things are seen and dealt with in this world, but Teresa now can see that Truth itself, Jesus Christ, has brought her beyond it, therefore she is seeing things in a different way, seeing things in a truthful way, in a real way.

*Thus, she said, I understood that the Lord gave me understanding of what Truth itself is.* The response, of course, to Pilate’s famous question, *Truth, what is that?* Pilate then walks out, he cannot stay there, he cannot face the answer. Fear drives him away from the answer, or a distorted and limited way of thinking and seeing things does not permit him to face the answer that is there in front of him. But here, Teresa, the true Christian, the disciple of Jesus Christ can say this, *I understood that the Lord gave me understanding of what Truth itself is.* Note the way she expresses that; she has come to an understanding, an insight, a knowledge, that the Lord has given her understanding. She doesn’t say *I arrived at this*, or *I achieved this*, or *this is the reward for all that I have done*. She doesn’t speak in that way at all, because she knows that this is beyond her, this is gift of God. It is the Lord who has given her the understanding and now she understands that He gave it her and it is the understanding of what Truth itself is, which is the understanding of who He is and how everything else is understood in the light of that. When somebody knows what Truth is, knows who Jesus Christ is, then that person has an understanding of everything else through the light that is given by Jesus Christ. And that’s what we see that Pilate does not have, if Pilate had that he would never have crucified Jesus Christ, he would have been able to speak up for the truth there because he knows the truth, he knows that Jesus is an innocent man, he knows that there’s absolutely no reason why Jesus should be killed and he knows that to agree to what that mob out there is speaking about is actually failure on his part. He can see that, he knows that, but to acknowledge it would be catastrophic.

Just one little bit more from Teresa, who tells us here *I understood extraordinary truths about this Truth, about Jesus Christ. No learned men could ever have taught me* – no learning, no theology, no books, no human way of understanding anything could have given this – only He does. *This truth, which I say was given to my understanding* – so the truth was given to her so that she is able to express it. If it had not been given to her understanding she would not have been able to express it, but she is able to, so she lived to put it in human terms because it was given to her. *This truth, which I say was given to my understanding, is in itself Truth.* So it’s not something that’s simply being described, but rather it’s being expressed – it’s in itself Truth, which is without beginning or end. It is eternal, infinite. All other truths depend upon this Truth; just as all other loves depend upon this love and all other grandeurs upon this grandeur. Everything depends on this; everything that she knows comes from Jesus Christ. Truth stands before Pilate. Truth is there, the light is shining, but Pilate does not have the capacity to see that light and therefore, just like Judas, earlier on in the story, he goes into darkness. He walks out, he cannot stay

there. So here Teresa helps us to understand something of this truth that Jesus tells us he came into this world to bear witness to. And he bears witness not only to its existence, but that we can know it – that we, as human beings can know it.

I want to take this reflection a little bit further forward and I want to turn to another Carmelite, to Edith Stein. Edith Stein is so influenced by Teresa's writings and particularly Teresa's book of her *Life*. The text I want to look at is a little reflection that Edith wrote about the Epiphany, about the Magi, or in her language, the Kings. Often translations in the Bible say that they were kings, so she is reflecting on what we have here in this gospel about *are you a king? Is Jesus a king?* Pilate asks *are you a king? – Yes I'm a king, but my kingdom is not of this world*, and now she is reflecting on these kings from the East who turn up at the manger:

*The kings at the manger represent seekers from all lands and peoples. Grace led them before they ever belonged to the external church; there lived in them a pure longing for truth that did not stop at the boundaries of native doctrines and traditions, because God is Truth and because he wants to be found by those who seek Him with their whole hearts. Sooner or later the star has to appear and show these wise men the way to Truth. So they now stand before the incarnate Truth, bow down and worship it and place their crowns at His feet, because all the treasures of the world are but a little dust, compared to it.*

What a wonderful statement, and Edith herself has come from atheism to Christianity, to Truth. She says these kings, these wise men, these Magi represent seekers from all lands and peoples, they represent the whole human race; grace led them before they ever belonged, the grace of God. She's telling us these people represent everybody; the grace of God is already in them, they're born with it, it's there. She said *there lived in them a pure longing for truth that did not stop at the boundaries of native doctrines and traditions* – this longing for Truth that is there in every person. Elsewhere in her writings, in one of her letters in which she is writing about her Professor Husserl, when he was dying, did he convert or did he not? The question was there. She said she had no worries about him whatsoever: during his whole life he was seeking truth and *whoever is seeking truth is seeking God, whether they know it or not, whoever is seeking truth is praying, whether they know it or not. To seek truth – whoever seeks it, for whatever motive or however, is always seeking God because God is truth.* As St Teresa said, and I quoted earlier, *All other truths depend upon this Truth; all truths depend on the Truth, which is Jesus Christ.*

So these Magi represent all of humanity and deep within every human being is this longing for Truth, God has put it there, it's part of what it means to be human, it's part of human nature to long for Truth. And so Pilate is also longing for Truth – *what is Truth?* Of course Pilate is longing for Truth, he can't acknowledge it, but he's longing for it. And Edith puts so well here what is blocking Pilate and hinders all of us in some way or other. In these Magi *there lived in them a pure longing for truth that did not stop at the boundaries of native doctrines and traditions.* Of course that's the problem that Pilate has, he stops at the boundaries of what he knows, he stops at the boundaries of Roman power, of earthly power, of military power, of force, of coercion, he stops at the boundaries of his own self-interest, of his own position as the representative of Rome, he stops at the boundaries of his own fears, he cannot get beyond them. So native doctrines and traditions, whatever we have learned, whatever

is in our minds, whatever traditions we follow, whatever ideas – Truth, the pure longing for Truth is going to take us beyond it, that's the courage that's required to go beyond it, and that's of course what these visitors from the East have achieved, they've gone beyond it, and it's the grace of God, Edith tells us, not something in themselves. To go back to St Teresa again, she understood that she was given the understanding – it didn't come from herself, it was given to her. So, to apply Teresa's words to these Magi, they were given the understanding by God's grace, by Truth itself, and they were given the understanding that enabled them to go beyond the traditions and the understanding that they had learned and had grown up with and that their culture and peoples around them had given them and the limit-setting boundaries and borders set up for them. It's the grace of God that enables them to go beyond these.

Then Edith takes us further: *God is Truth and because he wants to be found* – God wants to be found – God wants them to get to his nature. He wants to be found by those who seek him with their whole being. Sooner or later a star appears, a light comes and of course they have to choose to follow the star. The star was there in front of Pilate, but he walks in the other direction, he's not going to follow, but the star comes and when the star comes to them, then they can follow. And what they follow, she tells us, is the way of Truth. And so now they stand before the incarnate truth, they are standing in the same place as Pilate is standing – he's standing before the incarnate Truth, Truth that has become flesh, that lives among us, the Word that has become flesh, as John's gospel says. *They bowed down and worshipped*, that's what they told Herod, *we have come to do him homage*. They know that the right attitude toward Truth is homage, worship. Pilate of course couldn't do that. Could we imagine Pilate getting down and worshipping the Jesus that stood before him? Yet we could almost sense that there is something within Pilate that is driving him to that, that is pulling him to that – he simply can't stay in the presence of Jesus, he's torn, he's pulled, because there is an attraction in Jesus, there's a power in Jesus, there's a life coming from Jesus that is affecting Pilate, no doubt about that. But these kings who come to the manger bow down and worship and place their crowns at his feet. Could we imagine Pilate placing the power of Rome at the feet of Jesus? Because as Edith tells us, *all the treasures of the world are but a little bit of dust compared with this*. So everything Pilate stands for is nothing more than a little bit of dust compared with Truth, standing there in front of him. It gives us a sense of what was taking place that day in that encounter between Jesus and Pilate. So we get a sense of what Truth is, what the answer to Pilate's question might be, an answer that Christians and so many others have always been searching for and always will be. All people of sincerity and truth, all people of love are seeking what Truth is, and this Truth, as Teresa tells us, that all other truths depend upon.

I want to step forward a little bit further and take this reflection to another step. Again, I am drawing from Edith Stein's reflections on St John of the Cross as she reflects upon this great Carmelite that she has come to know. And this is from her introduction to her book *The Science of the Cross*, which is a commentary that she wrote on the teachings of St John of the Cross, but here in the Introduction she is saying something about John himself and what in particular she is reflecting upon is that John, when he became a Discalced Carmelite, when he became a disciple of St Teresa, when he changed his life as a result of the famous conversation with Teresa, decides also to change his name. When he entered the Carmelite Order he was John

of St Matthias, but now, as a result of joining Teresa's reform, becoming Teresa's disciple, he chooses to change to John of the Cross, and Edith is reflecting upon this and what this might mean and what it might mean to us today in the context of the day of the Cross, Good Friday, that we are celebrating. So to take a few thoughts from Edith, she entitles all of this *The Science of the Cross*. It doesn't mean science in the usual sense of the word, as some kind of a theory or as some kind of a learning, but she tells us that it is a theology of the Cross and theology is a way of knowing God. Theology is not so much the study of God, but rather the study of what we know about God, what we can intellectually say about God, or write about God, or explain about God, but the Cross is the greatest of all theology, because the Cross is the place where we come closest to the mystery of God, the Cross is the greatest theology book ever written and Edith knows this. She said, *We're dealing with a well-recognised truth, a theology of the Cross - that's what John of the Cross meant when he added of the Cross to his name. She goes on, it's a living, real and effective truth, it's living, it's real and it's effective and John himself is the proof, the demonstration of that effectiveness. It changed John's life – not only changed his life, but enabled him to become the great interpreter in understanding the ways of God and the ways of human beings.*

So Edith said, *this truth, where is it to be found? It is buried in the soul like a seed that takes root there and grows.* So this theology of the Cross, this science of the Cross, is buried already deep within. It is the truth she refers to in the previous passage, the truth that's there within every human being. The truth of the Cross is a seed that is buried in every human being. What an idea that is. That's the knowledge of God, the wisdom of God that the Cross reveals. And she goes on, *when this comes alive, when this starts to grow in a person, it makes a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits and by shining outwardly is recognised in this very doing and omitting.* In other words, every decision that person takes comes from that place within, every decision, everything they do or do not do, everything they say and do not say, everything they choose or omit comes from that seed that has taken root within, that seed of the wisdom of the Cross, of the theology of the Cross. Edith goes on to say, *In this sense, one speaks of the science of the saints and we speak about the science of the Cross. From this living form and strength in one's innermost depths, a perspective of life arises, the image one has of God and of the world, and therefore one can find expression for it in a mode of thinking, in a theory.* Only a philosopher like Edith Stein could have written that, somebody who spends her life searching for truth, but now recognises it's not out there somewhere, but it is in here, and when what is in here is touched by the truth that we celebrate today, the truth of the Cross, something extraordinary takes place, the whole person is changed. She said, *this living form, a whole new way of living, an inner strength, a strength that comes from the innermost depths of a person, a perspective of life coming from there, the whole way that the person sees life, the whole way the person sees the reality of everything around them, the image one has of God and of the world – how one sees God and how one sees the world and therefore one can find expression for it in a whole way of thinking.*

She goes on to speak about John of the Cross as an artist. Many of you are familiar with his drawing of the Cross. John drew the Cross, drew this tiny little picture, but from a perspective that nobody else had used before – from above, looking down. In other words, we're looking at Jesus upon the Cross, not from the perspective of the



people standing around below, or the perspective that every artist that had ever painted him or sculpted him over the centuries had used looking up at Jesus on the Cross. He draws him from above looking down, God's perspective of it, and that is what Edith is talking about here. We get God's perspective on Jesus, on the Cross, on the wisdom of God, but of course, if we are looking down from above, we are also looking at the whole world from this same perspective. So John has depicted his teaching here, the teaching so well understood and expressed by Edith Stein, in his art. With his pencil and paper he has already depicted this. This is how he sees it, and of course it's seen from within, because John could only have drawn that when he was seeing it from within, from his spiritual experience, his mystical experience, the truth and the wisdom that's given to him through constant meditation, reflection upon the Cross, through spending hours and hours at the foot of the Cross in prayer, hours and hours reflecting upon John's gospel, on this passage, on all of the scriptures, particularly the gospels.

Edith goes on to give us a little lesson for all of us, because she is always looking around. Why do so many people not see this? If these Magi from the East who have no knowledge of the Scriptures, if they have no difficulty in coming and worshipping before Jesus, getting down and putting their crowns before him, when John of the Cross can just know this and change his life and express it so wonderfully in his poetry and his teaching, why do so many not? Here is her answer. She speaks about a numbness in feeling, saying many believers – Christians, Jews, who have grown up in a religious milieu, knowing the scriptures – many believers are depressed, because the facts of salvation history do not at all, or no longer, impress them as they ought, and the facts of salvation history lack the strong influence on their lives that they should exert. That for Edith is the reason why, today, the story of Jesus of Christ, the scriptures, can leave us cold. They are no longer making the impression upon us that they should make and are no longer influencing how we live our lives. We can come to the ceremony today, we can live Good Friday, we can read the gospels, we can do the things we do, but what impact is this really making on our everyday lives? That's the challenge that Edith Stein is setting before us here. How is the story of Jesus upon the Cross, the story of his passion, death and resurrection influencing, impacting upon our daily lives, upon our decisions, our attitudes, our outlook, our understanding of the world, our way of living the human life we have been given? That's the question she sets and that she's telling us is the reason. So many Christians, so many believers are no longer inspired, are left cold, go back to what they were doing yesterday, tomorrow and the day after. They can partake in these ceremonies, listen to the Word, but it changes nothing – it's the impact that it makes upon our lives.

That's what she's seeing in John of the Cross and that's what John of the Cross is bearing witness to – not some theory, not something he has learned, but the impact it has made on his life. John has changed his name to *of the Cross*, because the Cross has made this impact on his life, and the Cross, which is the most powerful revelation of who Jesus is (as Edith said, the greatest theology of all), influences everything John does, every decision John takes. And John is making a statement when he chooses this as his name, he is saying that everything from now on, everything I live from now on, who I am, what my life stands for. is influenced, impacted by the Cross, by the greatest revelation of Truth, the Truth upon which all truth stands. Jesus is the Truth,

the Truth that has come into our world and the Truth that is manifested most clearly upon the Cross. The Cross is the brightest light of Truth that our world has ever known and will ever know.

So this faith, the example of the Saints – and of course John of the Cross is the one Edith is thinking about here, but you could take Teresa or any of the saints – the example of the saints demonstrates to people how things should actually be. Where there is genuine, lively faith, there, in these people, in the saints, whoever, in anybody who has a genuine lively faith, this is what's there, this is what the content of life is. The doctrine of faith and the tremendous deeds of God are the real content of life. And the tremendous deeds of God are the scriptures and one's own personal experience, they are the content of life, that's what life really is, everything else is superficial, everything else is just external. The real life being lived is in the scriptures; the real life being lived is in the truths of the scriptures, the doctrines of life, the truth of what life is. That, she said, is the life of a person reborn in Christ in the Holy Spirit. So that's the Truth that stood before Pilate, that's the Truth that is revealed to us in the story of the death of Jesus the gospels tell us, that is the greatest science, the greatest theology that we know, that's ever been revealed to us. It is the understanding, as Teresa tells us, that has been given to us, that we have come to understand that we understand.

So the journey for us is from Pilate, to Teresa, John of the Cross, Edith Stein and many, many other saints and mystics, Christians and non-Christians, all seekers of Truth, all genuine seekers of Truth, what all of them have come to. What Pilate could not acknowledge and say *yes* to, they acknowledge and say *yes* to. Whoever can acknowledge and say *yes*, whoever can follow the desire, the thirst for Truth that is there within them discovers that the wisdom of the Cross is there within, the theology of the Cross is there within. In other words Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection – but particularly through the Cross and through everything that is brought about by his death on the Cross – has given us the answer to the most profound, most real of all human questions, he has given us the answer to all human longing and searching and he is giving this to us all the time. All our deepest needs are fulfilled by Jesus giving himself, totally, one hundred per cent to us in his life and particularly in his death on the Cross. So let us not be inhibited by fear or ignorance like Pilate, but let us look Jesus in the eye, let us say *yes* to what he is saying to us. Let us acknowledge the Truth that stands before us today, let us worship that Truth and in doing so our lives are transformed, we discover what we really long for. Today is the answer to every human search, today is the point of arrival of every true, genuine, human life journey. Let us give thanks to the Lord and let us give Him praise this Good Friday, this good day, this greatest of all days for us as human beings, as people made in the image and likeness of God, people destined for life and for the fullness of life.

May God bless you and may this Triduum truly be a grace and a blessing for all of us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This Good Friday reflection was given by Fr Matt Blake and broadcast on video simultaneously from the Carmelite Church, Kensington and from the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality at Boars Hill. Transcribed by a member of the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order. An audio recording is available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11FjRvEw2W9ozhXCCGeNGdDKnpad9zBZe/view?usp=sharing>  
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