

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

Part Three: How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

This document is Part Three of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

We now come to the third of the three questions posed at the beginning of Part One. How can Elizabeth speak to us today, or perhaps this might be better phrased as: How *are we able to understand* Elizabeth talking to us today?

The first problem here is the question of language

We now live in an apparently secular culture. Yet despite this the popularity of 'Wellbeing' and 'Mindfulness' suggest that many perceive something to be missing in their lives. Elizabeth has much to say to this *lacuna* but unfortunately she does not express herself in a language that is still familiar in our own times. There are two aspects that pose problems for contemporary audiences:

1. The language of 19th Century French Spirituality often appears to express a desire to suffer. For many nowadays this is uncomfortable.
2. The language of pre-modern mysticism presupposes a world-view and self-understanding that is very different from our own.

To take these in order:

HER LANGUAGE OF SUFFERING

When we reflect on what Elizabeth says to us from the depth of her suffering we must not allow ourselves to misread what she is saying. For me, it is clear that she is not saying that we ourselves must all suffer in order to get to where she has come.

I read her as saying that to understand anything in our life properly, we have to navigate our own way back from the highly separated and individualised world-view that is the inheritance of what Christian tradition calls our fallen humanity. Now this was clearly an urgent realisation for Elizabeth at the turn of the last century, so how much more should it be so for us today when we live in a world so focused on 'Me', 'My Lifestyle' and 'My Needs'? She says that if we are to do this we must somehow re-discover and re-establish this lost perspective. We must move our priorities away from the self and re-establish ourselves within the Divine. It is only here that we can also experience what she was told at her First Communion: that it is *we* ourselves who are the house within which God lives. She tells us that when we see the events and relationships that form our life from this radically different viewpoint and our whole being will be changed.

I must re-emphasise once again that I do *not* hear her saying that we all have to suffer horribly, as she did, in order to see what she has seen. She is saying that we must find *our own way* to come to this change of perspective. In her case it was not the *suffering* that brought this about, in fact it was actually the other way round. It was through her changed perspective in Christ that she would finally come to see the pain of her illness in a completely different way. In the words of a text that she quotes some 24 times, we can arrive at the point where St Paul says:

'It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me'.¹

HER LANGUAGE FROM THE PRE-MODERN WORLD

If Elizabeth is inviting us to come alongside her, how then are we supposed to get there?

To answer this we must turn to her mystical writing. Along with most other mystical writers Elizabeth does not of course set out a sequential to-do list, because the world of action plans is fundamentally different from that of mystical writing. Throughout her letters and texts she has much advice to give but for me there are three things that particularly stand out:

Firstly: Contemplative Prayer

Elizabeth demonstrates that the practice of a contemplative prayer life does have the effect of shifting how we see things. Thus if at first mystical writing appears to be no more than pious text, the practice of contemplative silence will in time make the text begin to speak to us. In other words it will begin to disclose its '*mustikos*', the so-called hidden meaning that was introduced earlier in Part Two of this series.

In my own reflections I have come to see that this is a view that she shares with many other mystics. I would paraphrase this view as something like this:

We have a natural home that is within God but somehow we have separated ourselves from this unity that is our birthright. In the Christian story we call that 'somehow' the Fall, where 'sin' is the resultant ongoing process of turning away from God; however this God is a loving God who is constantly calling us to return to reclaim our lost unity... *if only we will hear Him.*

Now the Carmelite route to experiencing this hidden truth is made real through interiority and silence. It is not through exemplary virtue or heroic struggles to conquer the heavenly heights but, as Teresa of Avila insists, it is developed through the constantly deepening life of prayer which she likens to being 'an intimate sharing between friends'.²

¹ Galatians 2:20.

² Teresa of Avila, *The Life*, 8: 5.

Of course Christians must strive to find their own way to achieve this and Elizabeth as we have seen certainly experienced her own struggle. However at the end of her life she wanted to underline the importance of what she had finally come to realise. At this time she would write to Soeur Marie-Odile:

*It seems to me I now see everything in God's light, and if I started life over again I should not want to waste one instant.*³

Adding in her penultimate letter that she addressed to the doctor charged with her care:

*I wish I could make souls understand and tell them the vanity and the emptiness of anything that is not done for God.*⁴

Secondly: She asks us to share into her vision of the Trinity.

The concept of the Trinity remains difficult even for the most committed Christian. Whichever way it is rationalised, the idea of there being One God who is actually Three Persons and yet somehow remains mono-theistically one God, does not lend itself to understanding through our standard intellectual processes - but Elizabeth did not turn to the intellect.

Elizabeth does not fall into the trap of thinking that the Trinity is a *thing* as such (or even Three Things). For her it was more like a participation in an ongoing eternal relationship, that is entered through our becoming conformed to the image of Christ. Given the many things that Elizabeth and St Paul say about this, we too should be thinking in terms of something that we ourselves could also participate in. She situated this in what she enigmatically describes as the 'eternal now'. Words here are of course highly inadequate but the process she sees runs something like this:

1. God the FATHER, the creator is infinitely different from us who are his creation. There is thus no logical way, for us, the creation to actually participate or share in this creator God because he is by definition infinitely different.
2. Now Jesus the CHRIST as the SON participates in the TRINITY and is a fully divine part of this infinite God.
3. And yet, paradoxically, it is insisted that Jesus of NAZERETH was also fully human.
4. We as part of the creation are also fully human.
5. It is thus through this shared humanity that we can become conformed to the image of Christ. Thus it is through his life, death and resurrection that we too now have the potential to participate in the SON's divine relationship with the FATHER.

The Gospel of Luke 17:21 says clearly that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us.⁵ Elizabeth quotes this passage with joy saying yes, this is so, because it is the Christ who lives within us.

³ Letter 335.

⁴ Letter 340.

⁵ Or 'in our midst' depending on which translation is preferred.

She says that it is not our self-made imaginations that animate who we *really* are: it is this Christ within us. Furthermore, she says that if we can make this relationship with Christ conscious, then even now in our own lifetime we are able to become included within the life of the Trinity.

Thirdly: she invites us to learn from her reading of Scripture

Given that it was only after Vatican II that Catholics were actively encouraged to interact with Scripture, Elizabeth's intuitive understanding of the Word of God is simply extraordinary. In this, what I have been describing as her natural mystical sensitivity was drawn like a magnet to the letters of Paul almost to the exclusion of all else.

So why was she drawn to St Paul?

Here are some of her most quoted passages:

Romans 8: 29. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (23 quotations).

Corinthians 3:16. Do you know that you are the temple of God and God's spirit dwells in you? (7 quotations).

Galatians 2:19 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me (24 quotations).

We might paraphrase these few verses into one paragraph to say:

Our whole purpose in life is to become the image of Christ, where our baptismal vocation in Christ is also a baptism into his death, a death that we must share with Christ. If we do (in our own different ways) share in the suffering of his death we may also be reborn and thus share in his new life. In this transformation, by the death of the 'old self' we are returned to a state where we begin to partake in Christ's way of being in the world because our whole being is now in relationship with God.

In her best-known prayer *O Mon Dieu Trinité* Elizabeth states the 'mission' paraphrased above quite clearly. She says that we can become transformed members of a community that is able to carry on doing the work of Christ in the world, begging God therefore:

To create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the WORD: that I may be another humanity for Him in whom he can renew his whole mystery.

It is worth quietly reflecting on the full implications of this request. What she asks here is surely a staggering request and a challenge for all who would seek to lead the Christian life.

So how does this speak to me?

So, at the end of this third and final piece about Elizabeth it is finally time for me to come off my theological high horse and risk explaining what I understand Elizabeth to be saying to me personally.

For me, when Elizabeth talks of being crucified with Christ, putting off the old man, being hidden in Christ I understand her to be talking of the death of that individualistic selfish side in our personalities, that part of us that does not love our neighbour as ourselves, that part of our personal makeup that is not yet ready to be conformed to the will of God.

When she is talking of our being conformed to Christ what I imagine is that slow process of the lived Christian life where all the personal hopes and fears that we cling on to, must be gradually and painfully submerged into the will of God.

This process includes therefore the surrender of all our cherished personal ambitions, but these are the very ambitions that we just don't realise are responsible for keeping us from seeing the true path. This true path is the way back to the divine birthright that Elizabeth says we must all work to recover. To use another metaphor we might say that these very personal ambitions are actually our false gods, the false gods that meantime we cherish so much that we initially experience the process of letting them go as nothing less than pain and suffering.

What I believe that Elizabeth is assuring us is that if we can ever cross that threshold, painful as it may be - and even if only briefly - then we will find for ourselves immeasurable peace, acceptance and love on the far side of it.