

Welcome, everybody, to this second session, as we speak about Teresa's book, *Life*.

Last night I tried to situate this book in the context of Teresa's life and in the context of her writings. What I want to do now is to look a bit more closely at this book and its overall structure, which I have given you in a handout with the relevant pages. I will also look at certain things that we should be aware of, or note, if we're to read this book well. As I mentioned last night, it can be a complex book; it can be particularly difficult for people to pick up for the first time and try to make sense of; so that's what I'm attempting to do this morning, how can we read this book well?

The structure

Many people (and you'll see this written in many places and in many commentaries) say that this is not a well-organised book, that Teresa goes all over the place, and makes all sorts of diversions. I'm suggesting that there's none of that; I'm suggesting that Teresa knew exactly what she was doing, that this is a book that's very carefully put together, very carefully organised, with a very particular purpose; and that's what I've outlined to you on the handout, "Teresa of Avila – Book of her Life."

Overall, this book is well structured over forty chapters, but it's not until the beginning of chapter twenty-three that she tells us how the book is structured. She said that's the real beginning; we're over half-way through the book, yet it takes that long. Because what Teresa's asked to write about is her life. When she's writing the second version (the first version is lost), she's fifty years of age; she has grown spiritually, humanly; she has acquired vast experience. As we saw last night, there is a lot more growth to come; seen from the point of view of experience and achievement, she's not half-way there yet. But she has grown; she has grown in all the gifts and titles we could put on her, as a writer, founder, teacher etc. So when she's asked to write about her life, as this fifty-year-old nun who has now founded the convent of San José, she's obviously based it on the version she wrote a few years earlier. As we don't have that first book we cannot compare the two, we've got what we've got.

Now, life for Teresa is the life that Jesus Christ lives in her. It is now the life that her relationship with Jesus Christ has enabled her to grow into. Life is seen now from the perspective of somebody who is living united with Jesus Christ; who is living, as she says in chapter twenty-seven, with Jesus

Christ there beside her always. He's always there, and everything is in reference to him, he is the prism through which she's seeing the whole of life. This is the life that Jesus Christ has brought about in her. Or another way of putting it is, she is now *living*. Before this, she was not living.

Conversion

I mentioned in the last session Teresa's attraction to saints who are converts. Saint Augustine is key to chapter nine of this book, a key convert to the Church. Mary Magdalen is another one, and there are many others. She's very attracted to saints who are converts. It has been said about Teresa many times that she has the mentality of a convert. What do we mean by that? We tend to see it as someone who's converted from one religion to another, from one tradition to another, but it's not that. The mentality of a convert is somebody who lives with a keen sense that there was an old life and there's now a new life. There was a yesterday and there is a today. That's in the past; now, this is how I live. She lives with this sense of, "I've let go of that, I have died to that, that's no longer how I live, this is how I live now". That mentality very much underlies her writing of this book. She's writing about her life; but we've need to understand the life that she did live and the contrast with the life that she now lives. What she has let go of, what's in the past, very much colours how she sees the present. But the present is a different land, a new life, a new world.

Prologue

What have we got, then, when we pick up this book? We get a very short prologue referring to what Teresa was asked to do. Her confessors, as I said yesterday, have asked her to write this. At least, that was the first intention. But it's complex; and sometimes this book reads like a letter to an individual person. We know who that individual person is, it's Garcia de Toledo, a Dominican. But there are others as well, or at least one or two other Dominicans and Jesuits who asked her to write. There are also theologians, Juan de Avila being the most important one, who are going to be assessing this book.

But Teresa always had in mind, always hoped that her sisters would read it, and not only them but also the wider public, though at that stage, she could see no possibility of it ever coming about. The hope is there. Teresa is a natural teacher and wants to teach everyone. But most importantly for her, as she tells us in the prologue, God wants this. This is a call of God. This is a vocation. God wants this. And God has let it be known to her that he wants this. But she will never act on that. She will only act when she's asked to by her superiors, her confessors, those whom she turns to. But in her heart, she knows that this is what God wants; therefore, God has asked her to write it.

How is she going to write about her life in a way that others will understand? That is the difficulty. It is one thing to write about her life; that she could do very easily. But she has to put it in a way that it will be properly understood. That is the big challenge in writing this book. There is a huge fear of misunderstanding, and Teresa has this shadow hanging over her. She has been so thoroughly misunderstood when she has tried to speak about her spiritual life. That is very much a key to our understanding of what I call these three introductions.

First introduction: conversion

The first introduction is, superficially speaking, the account of her early her early years. In reality it is more than just the story of her life. Chapters eight and nine give the introduction to and the story of her major conversion experience, and chapter ten describes her deepening life of prayer.

In the early chapters Teresa writes about her family, her early years, and her time at the Augustinian convent as a teenager. She, gives an account of her vocation, her early years in the Carmel of the Incarnation, her years of illness, and various other trials and struggles that she went through, externally, but also in particular, in prayer.

How the Lord began to awaken this soul

Teresa is really interested in writing about her prayer life, which will be very much about up and down struggles and times when she gave up prayer. It is summed up in that little quote that I put in your handout, "How the Lord began to awaken this soul". The first ten chapters are about how God awakens this person, this soul, up to when she has direct, mystical experiences in chapter ten. It is an awakening of the soul at many different levels, the Lord's work. And therefore, if we're to understand this person, understand her life, understand this book, first and foremost we have to understand that she has been awakened by the Lord. We have to understand how she got to where she is. It is the work of God, experienced by her as many trials, setbacks, and difficulties in the midst of her own weaknesses and miseries. At times she gives a very dark picture of herself, but that is seen through her seeing into the great light of Jesus Christ. All of that is the first section.

We can imagine Teresa having finished chapter ten and thinking to herself, "Mmm... they're not going to understand yet". Because in the first ten chapters, running through it like a theme, a leitmotif, is the whole issue of prayer. She wants to pray, wants to see prayer as the key to everything, as the door through which God comes into our lives. It is the door through which we

enter into God, prayer is everything. Without prayer there's no life, without prayer there's no coming to life. Teresa is not going to be understood by somebody who does not understand prayer, it *is* who she is. Prayer isn't just something Teresa does, or knows about, or teaches very well. It is who she is; it is the explanation of everything she is about; Teresa makes no sense unless prayer makes sense.

Second introduction: prayer

The second introduction is a treatise on prayer, really a book within a book, and some people, rightly perhaps, suggest that it could be plucked out of the book, it could stand on its own as a book on prayer, and indeed it does. Some people also recommend, and indeed I have said it myself, that when you are reading this book for the first time, skip these chapters. They interrupt the story, and if you want to read an account of her life it is a major parenthesis. But in the overall structure of the book, and for Teresa's overall intention, these chapters are essential. The second introduction is a treatise on prayer, and it is a work of genius. The four means of drawing water are the images she uses. In some ways we can see it as a first draft of the *Interior Castle* which she writes twelve years later, when she has a much broader, more complete perspective on prayer. But perhaps that is not fully doing it justice. It really is a full, complete treatise teaching on prayer as it stands. These people who pray are beginning to be servants of love. Prayer is love. Prayer is the most loving service that anyone can provide.

Third introduction: the humanity of Jesus Christ

At the end of her treatise on prayer, Teresa is obviously not satisfied that the picture is yet complete; , there is one other introduction that has to be given. This is one of the most important chapters in Teresa's entire writings: chapter twenty-two, on the humanity of Jesus Christ. It is good to read this in conjunction with chapter seven of the *Interior Castle*, where she picks up the same subject in that very vital sixth dwelling-place. Both chapters are dedicated to the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Here, most particularly, Teresa has the theologians in mind, because this was a controversial subject in theological circles in her time, and she is heavily criticised for the stand that she takes. The prevailing view among the so-called experts was that, if you want to live a good spiritual life, in the early stages you read the gospels and you consider the life of Jesus Christ, but when you grow to a certain level, you concentrate on the divinity and leave the human Jesus. There was a whole controversy built up around this which only theologians could understand, but Teresa rejected this

completely. She took a very strong stand and was highly criticised for it, so here she is defending herself. Giving this book to the theologians, she is telling us over and over again that she totally accepts what they say, and if they say no, she will be quite happy. But chapter twenty-two is a very strong defence of the position that she's taking. Why? Not to defeat the theologians, which she succeeds in doing of course, but because, for her, this is essential to the life of prayer. For her, the life of prayer is a following of Jesus Christ, a walking with Jesus Christ. As she puts it in the *Interior Castle*, "it is living the life that most mirrors the life of Jesus Christ, the life that God gave to his son". Jesus lived a human life, right to the end. It's in his humanity that God is revealed, and therefore, thought Teresa, the more we grow in prayer the more human we become, - she said, we're not angels. If God wanted us to be angels, he would have made us angels, but he hasn't, he has made us human beings and it is human beings that he wants us to be, and it is a human being that he wanted his son to be.

So, this is a very strong chapter, a very important one: the place of Jesus Christ, human and divine, in the life of prayer. The place of Jesus Christ lies in the life of prayer.

The real book begins, Chapters 23-31

So those three introductions are essential. After these, the real book begins; and the real book is the life that Jesus Christ lives in her. From chapters twenty-three to thirty-one, there is an ever deeper entry into the mystery of Jesus Christ, a heightened awareness of the presence of Jesus Christ, attention to his presence, and attention to what he is doing. Be surprised, be challenged by what he is doing, by entering ever more into profound encounters with Jesus Christ. It is as if she has thrown herself into the deep-end of the spiritual life; this is a person immersed in Christian mysticism.

These are very profound chapters and the real subject of the book, but they can only be understood in the context of everything that's gone before. Or maybe another way of putting it is, that, having spoken about it in her treatise on prayer, particularly the third and fourth ways of drawing water, she shows us that these ways are real. (The third and fourth ways of drawing water vaguely correspond with the sixth dwelling place of the *Interior Castle*.) This is how she is living. This is what real life is for her. It is explained in the third and fourth ways of drawing water, and now she is going to give us a look from the inside, so as to speak, at what this is really like, what precisely we've got in those chapters. Then, how should this – and this is a major surprise in the book. Going to tell us about her first Foundation. From coming from the depths of mysticism to

founding a convent. But for Teresa this is not a surprise at all, or a contradiction, or an interruption to the story, it's part of the story, because she wants us to understand, she wants the sisters living with her in San José as she writes this to understand. She wants these theologians, the powerful people in the Church to understand, she wants history to understand that the foundation of her convent of San José is a work of God. It's the work of Jesus Christ, present in her. It's the work of Jesus Christ that is now bearing fruit; not her work, it's his work. And it is the very same work of God as the interior one. It's a natural consequence, fruit, of her interior life. That's something she breaks off prayer to do, it is something that prayer brings about. Founding a convent is a work of prayer, all that is involved in all the practicalities are a work of prayer every bit as much as being there in the chapel, it's creating a new place where God will be served, creating a new place where God will be given honour and glory.

The way I now live, chapters 32-36

In the last chapters, thirty-seven to forty, Teresa says, "this is the way I now live". This is how she was living her life at the time of writing. (That was only in the second version, in 1569). It is a deeper experience of God. Teresa goes effortlessly from the external to the internal to external because it is all one life. It is a drawing-together of what all of her life is.

Finally, Teresa wrote the epilogue, a letter written to Garcia de Toledo entrusting the book to him, and giving him the task of, as she says, copying it and sending it to Juan de Avila. He does neither, as it turns out, but Teresa eventually gets it to Juan de Avila, who approves it. One of the confusing things about the letter is that it that the date she puts on it is obviously the date that she finished the *first* version, even though the letter is clearly about the second version, because she says "I have expanded on the material you asked me to expand on". So, the book she's sending him is obviously the expanded version, which is the second version. Nobody has been able to explain that. Teresa does get her dates mixed up, but did the two letters get mixed up somehow? We don't know. It would appear that this certainly is the covering letter attached to the second version of the book that she is sending to Garcia de Toledo, and in which she wants the book sent on to Juan de Avila.

So that is a general overview of the book.

I want to make a few general comments about the book.

Anonymity

In that covering letter at the end she says, “I want you to get somebody to transcribe the book”, because she doesn’t want her handwriting to be recognised. That is a huge task because Teresa’s writing was not easy to transcribe even in those days. She has already told us back in chapter ten that she is putting no names into the book. In fact, she puts two names in, both now canonised saints, Pedro di Alcantara and Francisco de Borgia; Pedro was a Franciscan and Francisco de Borgia was General of the Jesuits. She names nobody else, doesn’t name herself, and doesn’t give the names of places, not even Avila or Toledo. Why that might be is not clear. There could be all kinds of explanations but it is a feature of the book, something to take note of. If you look at the footnotes you are generally told who she is talking about, and what place; but there are a few occasions where it is impossible to know. However, it is clear that Teresa knows who she’s talking about, so she wrote in her particular style.

God and the devil

Another general comment I want to make is that we need a certain understanding of the kind of world that Teresa lived in, how it differs from ours. And one of the ways it differs is, I’ll put it like this, in her world, God and the devil are real. Nowadays, they are not so real in people’s minds, in how people look at the world and see events going on, and many people never think about God or the devil. In Teresa’s time, everybody did; God and the devil were direct players in world events and in the personal lives of people. They were real. At one stage, for example, she said in the *Book of her Life*, “some people mightn’t think of God for a few days”, but nowadays, some people might not think of God in their whole lives! In her day that would be incredible. God was part of everybody’s life, as was the devil. They were both very real, and she speaks about both in very direct ways in the book, because that was the thinking of her time. She is a person of her time. Teresa talks about the devil as someone who was very much engaged in human life, very much around in us, as is God. God is directly involved in everything, so we need to adopt a little bit of her way of seeing things.

The Reformation

Teresa carried another mentality of her time: in sixteenth century Spain, the Reformation was taking place. Teresa has very little understanding of what is going on in the rest of Europe, but does have a strong awareness of it. She sees the Church is under threat. Everything we live for and stand for is under threat. She is very aware of that. God needs defending. Prayer needs defending. This is just another aspect running through her book. Related with that, and to understand the book

well, Teresa is defending *herself*, not just herself as a person but as a woman of prayer. She is a woman who has a lot to defend. That sets the tone of the book. It helps us, I think, to understand the way she's putting a lot of the content, the way she's writing it, the way she's expressing it; there is an enormous amount here to be defended.

Spanish Conquests

Another general comment I would make on the book that might be helpful to its understanding, is – how can I put this? - the whole sort of environmental ambience that is changing; a world that is expanding and growing. Though as I said yesterday, her full awareness of that is yet to come. Her eyes are going to be opened much more in the years immediately after writing this. But the ambience is there. The majority of her brothers have already gone to America. She is aware that the world as they know it is changing, and is being called into question. Change is in the midst of them.

The approach to the rest of the book

That is a general introduction. How am I going to approach the rest of the book? Without going into the whole book, I will pick out various sections of it over the next few sessions with the purpose of tending to an overall understanding of Teresa and of this book, so that you can feel confident to pick it up and read it. I mentioned last night the enormous influence that this book has, not just because it's written by Teresa but because it changes the whole way that prayer is written about. Teresa deliberately, as I said, writes in the language of ordinary people, everyday language. Teresa writes from experience. She'll make it very explicit in *The Way of Perfection* which she'll write a few months after writing this, but she also says in the *Book of her Life* that she is only writing from experience. That's revolutionary. Nobody did that before. She is writing the language of everyday life; she is writing primarily from her own experience and out of the experience of a new, living community, the community of San José of Avila. In the first version she doesn't have San José, but obviously the second version is very much about their lives; it is her lived experience, and God is in the midst of that, and it is God who is giving life to it.