

Teresa of Avila and Conversion of the Heart Secular Carmelites 30th March 2019 - Lent

You already know that God is everywhere. It's obvious, then, that where the king is there is his court; in sum, wherever God is, there is heaven. Without a doubt you can believe that where His Majesty is present, all glory is present. Consider what St Augustine says, that he sought Him in many places but found Him ultimately within himself. Do you think that it matters little for a soul with a wandering mind to understand this truth and see that there is no need to go to heaven in order to speak with one's Eternal Father or find delight in Him? Nor is there any need to shout. However softly we speak, He is near enough to hear us. Neither is there any need for wings to go to find Him. All one need is to go into solitude and look at Him within oneself, and not turn away from so good a Guest but with great humility speak to Him as to a Father. (WP 28:2,5)

So St Teresa proposed in the Way of Perfection that her daughters should be with God as ones dearest friend, for each days prayer is a remembrance of one's first conversion, of hearing one's name called, and a time to turn ones heart and will with all their force, toward the One who longs to make known to us everything He has learned from His Father cf John 15:15

High aims indeed. Teresa wrote this when she was about 51, at which time she was able to look back on her life and say *I would have done nothing but fall and get up again if the Lord in His mercy had not done everything within me* (L31:17).

What Teresa hadn't expected in the ordinary development of her vocation (but whose vocation is ordinary?) happened to her during Lent 1554 when she was approaching 40. While praying before an image of Christ she had the impression that her 'heart was breaking' and she felt, *she knew*, she had crossed a threshold. This experience was so intimate that it moved her determine to abandon the way of life she had been leading and turn to another way. It turned her to a source of wisdom and insight that was based solely on Jesus. She was later to write that prior to that moment she was in misery. She realised that she had spent years partially, fleetingly, wholly, but not really, truly putting God at the centre of her life. In her own words she 'had been tossed on the stormy seas' of her Parlours, her renown as a spiritual guide, her vivacity, the warmth and attractiveness of her personality. Yet it was precisely these natural gifts and abilities that had prevented her from belonging to the crucified and risen Christ whom she loved so much (L11,1). At the natural, human level, she could so easily yield to the pretence that she could be independent concerning important matters of the purpose of her life. What she had drifted into settling for had while good in themselves actually become an obstacle to her true end.

By this time my soul was growing weary, and though, it desired to rest, the miserable habits which now enslaved it would not allow it to do so. It happened that entering the oratory one day, I saw an image which had been procured for a certain festival that was observed in the house and had been taken here to be kept for that purpose, It represented Christ sorely wounded; and so conducive was it to devotion that when I looked at it I was deeply moved to see Him then, so well did it picture that He suffered for us. So great was my distress when I thought how ill I had repaid Him for those wounds that I felt as if my heart were breaking, and I threw myself down beside Him shedding floods of tears and begging Him to give me strength once and for all so that I might not offend Him. And she goes on to say He must have heard my cries and had compassion on all my tears (L IX:9...For God denies Himself to no one who perseveres but gradually increases the courage of such a one till he achieves victory (L XI:4)

She was leading a kind of freedom, ordinary freedom as it were, following a Rule which has God as its object and end and yet it was quite specifically from this experience that her

conversion was to rescue her. She was liberated by truth into a life totally given up to and centred upon God's presence. Simply put that evening and that experience of Jesus' presence full on, face to face as it were, was to change her utterly. And throughout the rest of her life she was to receive such intense experiences again and again.

There is then a distinct break in her life a before and an after. And she herself realised that she turned around, that she lived in the faith of Jesus Christ, having 'quite lost trust in myself therefore placing all my confidence in God (L9,2). In this was a shift towards true wisdom and an impulsion prompted by the Lord to share what she was leaning about Him. In her writings on prayer and a life of loving service and gentle charity she strikes out against prevailing religious cultures which tighten things, close a person in on themselves. She speaks out strongly against fear: if one is free there is a breadth that is opened up and can be explored in the presence of God that fear closes down. And in straining oneself forward in prayer, in assuming that it is 'my' work and that 'I' can monitor its progress and effectiveness there is a loss. How much more intense it is to let the Spirit pray through me without strain. Liberal, free, wide open, spirituality. One breathes an entirely new atmosphere. One is urged onwards by an authority that is gentle but allows no rest; that teaches with keen and learned analysis that might weary the soul but by a desire to draw more closely the ties uniting the soul to God so that without fatigue or constraint one is led to true recollection in God.

Sweet is His yoke, and it is essential that we should not drag the soul along with us, so to say, but lead it gently, so that it may make the greater progress. (L XI:16)

In a sense Teresa's words and insight echo those of St Gertrude who when she was 26 experienced a conversion that that she believed dispersed the darkness of her night of self-reliance. *You my creator and redeemer have sought to curb my stiff-necked obstinacy through your sweet yoke with the remedy best suited for my infirmity. From that hour and in a new spirit of joyful serenity I began to follow the way of the sweet odour of your perfumes and I found your yoke sweet and your burden light which a short time before I had thought to be unbearable.*

Teresa in her writing and her witness takes us to the essence of conversion where we are made over to God. What is this event called conversion? Two linguistic conventions are employed when working out the meaning of the word. In Greek there are two words epistrophe – used only once in Act 15:3 which speaks of the gentiles being converted to Christ by the Apostles. More commonly metanoia is used 22 times in NT and numerous times in the Septuagint, which connotes conversion, a change of mind or heart. Technically metanoia is an after-thought by which something happens. An after-thought when one is turned around. In the Latin comes the root word *verto* an active word, a verb, to turn around, to turn about, even to turn towards, to incline oneself to, more specifically in respect to conversion to change, transform. Previously directed to oneself, one turns away from self, toward what is other.

As *converso*, conversion, this word indicates an event, it points to something that is being said by this word, directs one into the essence of what has happened in order to bring it about. In this way the word touches us, involves us in what is being said, by questioning ourselves. So that this turn, this change becomes possible again to the one who hears it.

And this experience of Teresa's is Biblical. Think for example how this word helps us come close to St Peter. Here was a man who left what he was doing, fishing by the Sea of Galilee at the call of the Master to follow Him into the work of the Kingdom of God. We are only told that immediately he went. If there is an event of conversion, a turn-around in his understanding it would be on the top of the mountain where Jesus led him one day and where he would see the Lord transfigured, lifted up and glorified by His Father. There Peter was given to see the divinity of this human being Jesus, and to know Him as God's own Son. And Peter clings to something here which is not disclosed until later in his life. And he clings to the understanding that to be transfigured one needs a tabernacle, a tent in which

Jesus needs to dwell on this earth so that His glory may 'captured' and made manifest to everyone. And how enthusiastically Peter speaks of this at the time "let us build you a tent" let us make a place for you so others can come and see you God and man. But it comes about that a deeper conversion is required. A second turn. And one that is altogether more painful and intrusive in his understanding of himself and all the more anguished because of what it was to demand of him for the rest of his life.

For Peter was to be taught that the dwelling of God is not in a tent made of human hands but is the heart and he had to learn it by having his heart broken. Only in his tears of repentance and before Christ's look of compassion at his impetuous denial of his Lord, only when Peter knows himself to be a betrayer yet forgiven, was he able to see afterwards the meaning of what had happened on the Mount: an *after-thought*. Only then could the transfiguration of Christ take place in his heart and thus is Christ given a dwelling place on which to build his church.

Two aspects of conversion are brought to light in this story of St Peter. First a conversion cannot be willed in the usually sense of the word; one does not intend to do it, or set out to make it happen, nor is it a product of self-determination. Rather there is a passive element to it; a being made to face in the opposite direction; having to retrace one's steps through something that has befallen one. A turn around on the spot of an encounter or a seeing as though for the first time. A movement towards or away from something in the shock of what comes to be known. A turn comes over one. A conversion happens. It is an event which is only possible not by my decision of foreknowledge but when my life is open to it. It is a moment of vision when I am given to see what I never saw before and I am given to change.

And second: in conversion something comes possible that is wholly authentic to one's life and allows one to see how inauthentic one's existence has become which is therefore absolutely decisive for what is to come, for the future. In conversion something real is touched, a basic, fundamental experience which becomes the ground from which one is to live; it shapes what is to come and in that sense it is decisive. It discloses how far one has fallen into what is false; the things that are immediately accessible, that are easy and ready at hand. How far one has sunk into what is routine and dull. We are able to see ourselves; our lives with a clarity which makes what has been seem tawdry, ephemeral, of no account.

And so, it turns the converted one to the future. Not as a matter of planning, of calculation or speculation as one might treat a thing in a chain of events, but rather as a matter of being ready for what is beyond to take hold of us. For the Christian this is the electrifying impact of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom, to conversion, to receive what is being offered to us by God merciful kindness. To be opened to the work of grace, to making new one's heart and letting oneself be clothed in His love and so be made into His likeness.

What more appropriate season for considering conversion of the heart than Lent. Lent is often a difficult season to enter into with an open heart and a willing mind. How long before we can really absorb that this season is unlike anything else. It is a pull away from my comfort zone, of greater discipline, that I be brought close to an anguish of heart much much deeper than my own and one which promises to be redemptive. How subtly we hold back, perhaps look to the redemption and skim over the anguish, the how. And yet is there any other way. The Lamentation reverberates: Jesus weeping over Jerusalem through the words of Jeremiah the prophet: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, be converted to your Lord your God. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, be converted to the Lord your God.

In these words is gathered up the grief of Jeremiah over his homeland. The sorrow of Rachel weeping for her children. The whole history of a people called out of slavery by God, brought to a land of safekeeping and expected to live in faithfulness and love of God's law, now turned against him. A history relentlessly decried in Psalm 77 as one of testing and rebelling, gifts and refusal, wonders and rejection. God ever holding out His hands to a stiff-necked people who will not turn to receive him. (Epistrophe, incidentally, is also the name given to the first of the neck vertebrae and if it won't turn you have become a stiff-necked

person). In this and in other Psalms in the daily Office we are turned outward to see where we have got to exactly. And to recognise in the context of the promises of this generous God just how perverse has been our constant turning aside that greets Him. And in Psalm 50 I am directed inward to face myself in all my anxieties and distractions, in the weakness that I seem to have inherited that I can't control or don't want to, in the little dreams from which I draw comfort. I come to know myself as one who must be brought to truth as to a fountain of living water, for I live under the shadow of death. And what does the Lord require of me but a broken and contrite heart and then to turn around, hanging only on His word of promise that He will not despise this offering.

Everything in this season turns upon the heart. Teresa calls us to authentic and renewed conversion to the Saviour of the world, to find fulfilment to all the longings of the human heart to know love as the answer to the drama of suffering and pain and to realise the power of forgiveness as we are delivered over from the emptiness of death into the radiance of God's own life. Yet Teresa felt strongly that no one (least of all herself) could speak of 'a' conversion – rather her life, our lives, are made up of new beginnings. She herself speaks frankly of having passed her life in falling and the Lord passed His time in picking her up: *I will get tired before He does! she wryly remarks* (L19,15). We should be grateful that conversion is never once and for all.

Peter first converted and secondly converted after his betrayal. The temple, the tent, is the human heart. Being opened to one's own failings and to forgiveness. This is no 'treat for a child.' We are not children and it will tear us open as it tore Peter open, so as to let Jesus look at us with compassion. All the time Teresa is speaking of a conversion to Jesus, not a conversion to self. So often when we have a conversion or pseudo-conversion we think we are a new person when in fact conversion is all about being opened up to the person Jesus and His infinite compassion. I don't 'change' as it were in the person I am, I am rather drawn more to the person of Jesus. So, it can almost feel as though one is going backwards, because who I am becomes more of a reality with that look of compassion, yet I am drawn on to the person of Jesus not to myself. My falls, my failings and breaks are pure grace. As Julian of Norwich perceived, we fall in our eyes, yet in God's eyes we never stand! I would much prefer it not to be like that! I would rather it not be like that as I want to be that smooth and perfect shining nun! However, that is incomplete, a wrong vision, I should rejoice in that I am so wrong on this point! That I am not, cannot, will never be, my own saviour. Jesus is. The sheer freedom in that is overwhelming – the grace of being in our Lord.

Perhaps this sense of deepening trust is conveyed in the opening line of the second psalm at Vespers this evening (Ps 129): *Out of the depths I cry to You, o Lord; Lord hear my voice. O let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleading.* As this day of Lent ends, most to us are aware of various ways in which, during the course of it, we have missed opportunities for on-going conversion. We end our day, therefore, remembering God's mercy: *If you O lord, should mark our guilt, Lord who would survive? But with You is found forgiveness, for this we revere You. My soul is waiting for the Lord, I count on His word.*

God is rich in forgiveness, in mercy, through His word made flesh, Jesus Christ. This image of abundant, over-flowing mercy is placed before the Ephesians by St Paul when he writes that in Christ: *we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace* (Eph 1:7). And later he will write that God: *will show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Jesus Christ* (Eph 2:7)

This merciful redemption is the evening sacrifice of the Last Supper and the Cross, that salvific raising of Jesus' hands in prayer when He loved us to the end. It was the evening sacrifice, offered while the world was in darkness through which the Father: *delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins* (Col 1:13, 14). This is the Word on which we count, for which we yearn and in which we place all our hope. As did St Teresa:

The work of grace perhaps takes a lifetime. God has to restore health to the depths of our hearts, of our liberty. Through weakness and frailty many things will escape us for a long time, perhaps always. What matters is to think of 'the love the Lord has for us' and take courage once again. 'I have never lacked confidence in His mercy, though I have often lacked it myself (L9,7). It is His goodness which has achieved everything, while I have done nothing but fall and get up (L31,17).

