

## Carmelite Church Kensington

PARISH ADVENT RETREAT – 13<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> December 2021

### *Preparing for Christmas with Carmelite Saints*

Fr Matt Blake OCD

#### **First Talk – St John of the Cross – Part 1**

I will be drawing various reflections from Carmelite saints. Today and tomorrow I will be drawing from St John of the Cross as tomorrow, December 14<sup>th</sup>, is his feast, so it's appropriate to draw from him, but more importantly, he has such a richness we can draw upon during this season of Advent.

The first thing to say about John of the Cross with regard to Advent and Christmas is that many of the people who knew John in his lifetime (1542–1591), when they were giving testimonies after his death for his beatification and canonisation, spoke of how important the seasons of Advent and Christmas were to John. The two feasts of the year that John seemed to give most attention to and that most filled him with joy and enthusiasm were Christmas and the Feast of Corpus Christi, and as we go on in our reflection we will see a little of why that might be so. So we're speaking about something that was very important to John at a personal level.

In particular, what interests John, and we see it as such an important theme in his writings, is that of the incarnation, of God becoming human, that greatest of all mysteries. John says the greatest of all mysteries is that God, the creator, joins himself with all his creation, becomes part of his creation and does so completely through birth, through life in this world, through death and resurrection – new life. In other words, God lives the whole life, the whole drama of what it means to be human, and in doing so, God affirms humanity – this is the way that John puts it.

John was a great lover of creation, of nature, of being out in the woods, out in the mountains and he loved all that God created and he tells us that in everything that God created, like the great artist – and John himself was a great artist – the artist always puts something of himself into what he creates. There are traces of God, signs of God, to be seen in everything that God created and then John goes on to develop that by saying that far greater than creating the world, the cosmos and the angels was that he himself becomes part of this through the incarnation, through God and humanity becoming one in the womb of Mary in the person of Jesus Christ. In doing this, John tells us God raised everything up; to use John's words *he clothed everything in beauty and dignity*, because once God becomes part of it, creation becomes something else, it's lifted up to a greater beauty and dignity because God is in the midst of it, God is part of it, God is everywhere, God is to be seen and experienced everywhere. This is the greatest of all mysteries and in doing so God makes Himself known in the beauty and dignity of all that God has created and in particular the beauty and dignity of human life.

John, in his life would have experienced what we might think of as the complete opposite to this. He's born into poverty; his father and older brother die when he's very young; his mother really struggles to bring up her two children, John and his surviving brother. The reality of grief and poverty hits John very early on in life. As a teenager he works in a hospital for sexually transmitted diseases and other illnesses that excluded people from society, illnesses that a person would be looked down upon for having. John knew how fortunate he was to receive an education; he was accepted into a school for orphans even though technically he wasn't an orphan, but his mother couldn't possibly have paid for his education, then later the Jesuits educated him and other benefactors helped. So John from a very early age, we could say, knew the tragedy of human life. If we read John's life story from beginning to end, what we see constantly reoccurring in all the places that John lived and in all the situations he found himself in was a great concern for the poor and the needy. John was a nurse all his life, always attending to the sick, sometimes in situations of great plagues and epidemics. He's also an educator; he's always educating everybody.

John knows, learns from experience that neither food, nor health, nor education or any of the good things of human life satisfy the human heart. The real needs of the human being go beyond material or intellectual well-being. The real needs of the human being are only answered in God and in what John would call union with God or one's relationship with God. So for John, what he's really fascinated by the relationship between God and human beings; we could say that this is what he gives his whole life to, this is what absorbs his time and attention throughout his life. That goes beyond the fact that God created us and created the whole world and clothed it in beauty and dignity and raised it up to a much higher level through the incarnation, through his becoming part of it, but what is most wonderful, fascinating, absorbing, is that we can know this God, we can enter into a personal relationship with God. Not only that, but it is only through that personal relationship with God that we can grow to full maturity, that we can become the people who we really are, that we can know and understand who we are. It is in that relationship that the greatest wisdom and the greatest happiness of humanity lies.

So that is what John gives his life to and that is what all his wonderful, deep and profound writings and teachings are all about, that relationship. And on the other hand we could say that, even though John, as I said, knows the tragedy and pain of human life very personally, in his own life; for him the greatest tragedy and pain of human life is to not know God or to not grow and mature in one's relationship with God; or to put it another way, not to grow and advance in prayer. That's the greatest unhappiness, that's the greatest of all tragedies of human life. Every person needs God, we're born for this relationship with God, we're born for this relationship of love with God, it is for this love, John tells us, that we are born, that we are created.

But how are we going to know this, how are we going to enter into this? A very simple expression that John uses over and over again in his writings is *fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ*. When we fix our eyes on Jesus Christ in our minds and in our hearts, we see before us our God and we see before us the fullness of what it means to be human, we see the union of God and humanity, we see God coming down and being with us, we see God who is among us, God who is part of our lives. The life of prayer for John, the life of growing in prayer, is in our own personal way to grow into that great mystery. The God who became one in humanity with Jesus Christ also is

one with us, becomes one with us as we become one with him; this for John of the Cross is the greatest of all mysteries. He tells us, for example, in one place in his writings this great desire that we have to die and to be with God is a desire to enter more deeply into the mystery of the incarnation, on that everything else depends. It reminds us of the words that Jesus gives us in Chapter 17 of John's gospel when he said that eternal life was *to know the one God and to know Jesus Christ*. The person who really knows God and knows Jesus Christ lives has the fullness of life, has eternal life and that John of the Cross sees there in front of him in Jesus Christ. Whether it be Jesus Christ in the crib here or Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament or Jesus Christ in our own hearts, Jesus Christ in our own lives. John of the Cross tells us that when the person grows to this maturity, when the person is truly living as a human being is created to live – in deep profound relationship with Jesus Christ – when a person has grown to the fullness of human maturity through relationship with Jesus Christ, John tells us that that person knows the secrets of God and of humanity, or is brought into the deep wisdom of God and humanity. The greatest wisdom of God, John tells us, is to be found in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is God's greatest revelation of himself, or as John of the Cross puts it, taking it from John's gospel; *Jesus is the Word*. The famous phrase of John of the Cross: *God the Father spoke one Word, that one Word was his son Jesus Christ and that one Word was spoken in eternal silence* – a wonderful phrase, that – everything in the scriptures, everything in human experience is contained in Jesus Christ. All the scriptures, John of the Cross tells us, speak of Jesus Christ; everything we could ever say or know, we only know it through Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that we have the greatest of all wisdom. This is God showing us who he is, speaking to us, and we hear it in his word, in the scriptures, but if we really are to hear it we must enter that deep silence, it's the silence of creation, the silence of the millions of years that this world has existed, it's the silence of all that we do not know, we enter into that great silence, we hear that Word, that Word can speak to us, that Word can change us and transform us. So we'll take a time of silence now, to enter that silence, to hear that Word, the Word that will become flesh in Mary, the Word that lives among us here and now, the Word that is in our world, the Word that enables us to understand and to know our world, the Word that is God's Word, God's Word to us, God's revealing himself to us, God enabling us to know him and to be in relationship with him.

Transcribed from the YouTube recording: <https://youtu.be/4goESw0WrEk>

**Second Talk – St John of the Cross – Part 2**

As today is the Feast of St John of the Cross I will continue the reflection that I gave yesterday. I want to begin this evening with a little poetry from St John of the Cross. We remember of course that he was a poet and that poetry was his favourite artistic expression. Some of the finest poetry in the Spanish language has been written by John and he is the patron saint of poets, for those of you who are poets.

The little part of the poem I want to read is the end of a long poem that John wrote, called *The Romances on the beginning of John's gospel*, the Word that becomes flesh. In this poem John begins with God, with the Trinity and takes us right through what we call the story of salvation, or to put it in John of the Cross' language, *God's great work of God*, God's great work of creation that I spoke a little about yesterday, and all the anticipation and preparation for the birth of Jesus which is the high point, the final completion of everything that God set out to do. I just want to read the last lines of the poem and you will notice that John presents this great event, this mystery as a wedding feast, as a great celebration, because for John everything centres around God making himself known to us, inviting us, desiring that we enter into relationship with him and this is the completion of that union between God and humanity.

*When the time had come  
for him to be born,  
he went forth like the bridegroom  
from his bridal chamber,  
embracing his bride,  
holding her in his arms,  
whom the gracious Mother  
laid in a manger  
among some animals  
that were there at that time.  
Men sang songs  
and angels' melodies  
celebrating the marriage  
of Two such as these.  
But God there in the manger  
cried and moaned;  
and these tears were jewels  
the bride brought to the wedding.  
The Mother gazed in sheer wonder  
on such an exchange:  
in God, man's weeping,  
and in man, gladness,  
to the one and the other  
things usually so strange.*

What a great statement of the incarnation and I just want to draw a few points from it. So the time has come – that's a very biblical statement, God's timing. What is taking place is right in every way, is right according to this great plan of God that the earlier

part of the poem has outlined for us. Now the time has come – *and he went forth* – this is God’s initiative, the great work of God, embracing his bride, holding her in his arms, the great act of love. When we look at the child in the crib, when we look at that scene depicted artistically in front of us, what we see is love, because that is what God sees; this is the great act of love, the great act of love that is completed on the Cross. The entire humanity of Jesus is this great act of love, embracing his bride – the bride being humanity, all of creation, all the heavenly and earthly worlds – the poem tells us, are all the bride that he embraces. So the rejoicing is in this world and in the next, humanity and the angels are rejoicing, because all now is bride and all is being embraced, all is being received in love and being embraced and enveloped in love and transformed in love. So the earthly and the heavenly world rejoice, all of creation rejoices in what is taking place. And God, he tells us, is there in the manger, crying and weeping and humanity is rejoicing. *Things so strange to the other*, and that is the critical statement in the whole thinking of St John of the Cross, his whole way of seeing this. The greatest mystery, as I said yesterday, is God becoming part of creation, becoming part of human life and living human life. He doesn’t just accept what we might call the nice bits or the easy bits of human life, he unites himself to all of human life and that includes the pain, the suffering, the darkness, the rejection; all the tragedy that human beings live through. All of it is bride, all of it is embraced, all of it is taken in the arms in love, everything that we could ever experience God unites himself with, God embraces. And humanity rejoices in a joy that is beyond anything known or possible up until now. It’s a new joy, a deeper and fuller joy that comes from God. Perhaps it is best expressed for us in John’s gospel when Jesus tells his disciples: *my joy I give you, my own joy, a joy that the world cannot give*. That’s the kind of joy that John of the Cross is speaking about here, it’s a joy that God brings to the marriage, that he brings to the relationship.

Just one other thing to pick out of the story – Mary, the mother, gazes there in sheer wonder – Mary, the person of prayer, the contemplative, and that’s an idea John would have learned, received from the Carmelite tradition. In the Carmelite tradition Mary is the great contemplative, the model of contemplative prayer, the one who holds all of this in her heart, the one who is there treasuring, contemplating all that is taking place and here this poem, right at the end precisely has her contemplating the greatest mystery that God reveals to us – his presence – not only his presence in our lives but his presence in our vulnerability, our pain, our darkness, in the mystery of human life. So John captures in poetry the essence of this mystery that unfolds before our eyes at Christmas.

As I said yesterday, for John this is what defines our relationship with God. We could put it this way, what takes place here shines a light on what takes place in all of our lives, in all of our journeys on this planet earth, in all our relationship with Jesus Christ, with God. This same mystery unfolds in a very personal way in each of us, because what each of us is born from, created for, is to be one with God, to live in union with God, a union of love. To live, to be, to become, to grow into being is what the very first page of the Bible tells us – we are made in the image and likeness of God – so when we look at the little baby in the crib, we see the image and likeness of God, but when we look at any human being and look at ourselves in the eyes of faith, we see also the image and likeness of God. What God sees when he looks at the child in the crib, looks at his own son there, is love, for God to look is to love. That’s a famous phrase of John of the Cross – the look of God, the gaze of God, communicates

love – not only does it communicate love, whatever that love hits – it’s like a flame of fire, hitting something, it simply transforms it, beautifies it, purifies it, because his look is love. When we look at the child in the crib, it is love that we also see, we see beyond the superficial, we see beyond just what our physical eyes can see, we see there love manifested to us, love making itself vulnerable and open and accepting before us. But there’s another aspect to this and John brings this out beautifully in the previous part of the poem. I will just read a few lines. He has come now to the story of the Annunciation:

*Then he called  
the archangel Gabriel  
and sent him to  
the Virgin Mary,  
at whose consent  
the mystery was wrought,  
in whom the Trinity  
clothed the Word with flesh.*

The key phrase there: *at whose consent*. John in this wonderful poem has outlined the whole mystery of God as revealed to us in the scriptures, this great work of God, this great plan of God – but he makes everything dependent upon a human being saying *yes*. Everything depends on the *yes* of Mary. With the *yes* of Mary, the Trinity then clothes the Word – the second person of the Trinity – in humanity, becomes incarnate in the womb of Mary. Everything is made dependent upon that *yes*. I mentioned yesterday, referring to another part of John of the Cross’ writings, that God created the world, but at the incarnation he clothed the world in beauty and dignity, that he raised up, not only humanity, but all of creation. Now here in the *yes* of Mary, we see the fullness of the dignity of humanity; that a human being’s *yes* could be so powerful. John of the Cross will spell this out to us in various parts of his writings: the nature of God is love, the nature of one’s relationship with God is love, God only loves love, but most importantly, in the very nature of love, it must be freely chosen and freely given. And John describes the whole spiritual journey, the whole journey of growing and changing and transformation, the growing into the fullness of Christian maturity, as a growing to the point where one can make the free and total *yes* of love. That’s the high point, the culmination of human dignity, the beauty and dignity of humanity – a human being, a creature that can give the free and complete free and complete *yes* of love. That’s what Mary was able to give at the incarnation because, as John of the Cross said, she always lived completely by the grace of God. All the rest of us must grow and mature into that place. We must be purified, we must go through all this journey of the spiritual life to reach that point where we can freely choose and give a complete *yes* of love, because that’s what love requires. It’s not enough that God give us his love, pour his love into us. The very nature of love is that he respects our freedom, that he waits for our response, that he walks slowly beside us as we grow into this freedom and this strength and this purity so that we can make this response of love. That is the Word of God becoming flesh in each one of us, that is the incarnation becoming real in each of our lives, that is us growing into and becoming human beings who live in union with God, what Mary gazed in sheer wonder at when she looked at that little child. The truth that she is meditating upon there is the fundamental truth of God’s relationship with us, of who our God is. God is love and God gives us the capacity to love him, gives us the capacity to love. The

beautiful way John of the Cross describes it is that God – and the language he uses is the Bridegroom, who gives the bride the instrument of love. It's like teaching someone to play the piano, giving them the instrument and then teaching the person through accompanying them. That's what God does – he gives us the instruments to love – he jointly, with the bride shows her and teaches her how to love. He puts the instrument into the bride's hands and together they play this beautiful instrument of love. That's a beautiful way of expressing this union of love of God, the union of love between God and humanity, seen visibly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and at the same time lived spiritually in the depths of every person who opens themselves to this love and who is willing to respond with generosity and self giving and co-operate in God's work of leading and helping us to grow in that love, that like Mary also, let us pray that we may be able to give that free and complete *yes* of love.

Now we will have some time for quiet prayer, like Mary to treasure all of these things in our hearts.

Transcribed from the youtube recording: <https://youtu.be/NGPumukOiDA>

### **Third Talk – St Teresa of Avila**

Today I want to turn to St Teresa of Avila and I want to focus particularly upon Teresa's relationship with Mary, the Mother of God, the Mother of Jesus and the place Mary held in her life. One of the things we notice about Teresa's writings is that time and time again she recommends that we stay close to the people who were close to Jesus. If we want to be close to Jesus, she tells us, be friends with those who were his friends and of course the person who was closest to Jesus was Mary. And Teresa is very much drawn to Mary, Joseph, and of course the twelve apostles, and then St Paul and others and the significant saints down through the years. *Those who are friends* – friendship is so important to Teresa – and she describes prayer as *friendship with Jesus, friendly conversation with the one we know loves us*.

Perhaps an image would be helpful to us to begin with. On some occasions in Teresa's life, she describes certain situations as being Bethlehem, the crib. When she makes her second foundation at Medina del Campo, she turns up there in the middle of the night with her sisters to get this very derelict house ready to be lived in. In the morning in the daylight, on seeing the derelict state of the room that will become the chapel, she describes it as Bethlehem – *we have put Jesus back into the stable again*. Or another example, a little over a year later, when she makes her first foundation of Carmelite friars, again when she visits the place and sees the building – a cattle shed – that has been turned into the chapel, she describes it again as Bethlehem. For her, what she sees when she looks at this image is the humility of the situation, the humble circumstances in which this great event is taking place. In addition to the humble circumstances, she sees the faith of those who were involved and out of that and because of that and through that God is bringing about something truly great. She can see beyond what is there physically visible before her, can see the seeds, the beginnings of a great work of God and that of course is what the crib is, that's what the scene at Bethlehem is that we're so drawn to. On the one hand it is a very humble scene – a stable, animals, a manger, a poor family, poor shepherds, travellers who have come from a distant land, sheep, animals etc. – but there, also, are people of great faith and the person of course with the greatest faith is Mary and what is taking place before our eyes is something that is truly great. Mary is a witness, a partaker in this great work of God, of this great revelation of God's great plan, great deeds. So that image of Bethlehem – Teresa, who loved art, loved imagery, who liked to have a picture before her – this is the picture that she sees.

Teresa tells us that from a very young age her mother taught her to pray, particularly to Mary and the saints but Mary really becomes significant in Teresa's life when her mother dies when she was 14–15 years of age. I will read a little of what she says: *when I began to understand what I had lost, I went afflicted before an image of Our Lady and besought her with many tears to be my mother. I have found favour with this solemn virgin in everything I have asked of her and in the end she has drawn me to herself*. Out of that situation of loss, of grief, of pain, there emerges a very significant life giving relationship. This teenage girl turns to Mary, asks her to be her mother, asks her to fill this enormous gap that is now in her life, but of course she does much more than this, she mothers Teresa's spiritual life, mothers her spiritual growth and development, nurtures and nourishes her relationship with her son, Jesus.



So the relationship which begins in these circumstances will grow and mature over the years and will bring Teresa closer and closer to Jesus.

When we read and observe how Teresa speaks about Jesus we note two things in particular. One is that the relationship is very familiar, very personal. She truly speaks to him as a friend, somebody she can be totally open with, very familiar with, and secondly, the other thing we note is the great importance she gives to the humanity of Jesus, the incarnation. Jesus is human and of course that is the Jesus Mary knows that is conceived in Mary, that she gives birth to, that she nurtures and nourishes as her child, that she educates, that she lives with and accompanies – the human Jesus. So often in Teresa's advice about prayer she tells us to stay close to the human Jesus, stay beside him in the scenes and episodes in the gospels, be beside him in Bethlehem, be beside him when he is alone at prayer, be the people who are close to him, like Mary of Magdala, Martha and Mary and others, be these people, be with these people, and most importantly of course in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the Cross and at the tomb, at all the significant places in the gospels where people are, where we are told he had companionship and also where we're told he had no companion. If you see him lonely, she said, be his companion, if you see him in tears, comfort him, as the women did when he was on his way to the Cross.

Her relationship with Jesus is a very personal and very human familiar friendship, staying very close to the humanity of Jesus. This is very much how things would have been taught in Teresa's day, much of the teaching about Jesus would begin by telling people about the humanity of Jesus and then would move on to the divinity of Jesus. When you have grown in prayer, you see Jesus as divine, as God, of course he is divine, he is God, and Teresa knows that and very much acknowledges that, but for Teresa, the more one grows in prayer, the more deeply one goes into prayer the more deeply one appreciates and comes to know the humanity of Jesus. The whole journey of prayer for Teresa – and this is a lovely description I heard someone say some years ago – that the whole journey of prayer, the whole process of growing and maturing in prayer is like walking on a road held by the hand of the humanity of Jesus. Holding the hand of Jesus' humanity, the human Jesus, right to the very heights of prayer. Because Jesus lived a human, spiritual life, he was human in every way, including and very especially spiritually, he lived a human spiritual life like we all do, therefore he knows us and accompanies us spiritually and there is nobody this applies more to than Mary. We saw a little bit of this yesterday when reflecting upon what St John of the Cross said about Mary and Mary living always by the grace of God.

I want to read a little text by Teresa where she is reflecting upon the Annunciation, the angel coming to Mary. We saw yesterday how St John of the Cross reflected upon it, now let's see what Teresa has to say: *O secrets of God, here there is no more to do than surrender our intellects and reflect that they are of no avail when it comes to understanding the grandeurs of God. It is good to recall here how God acted with the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady. In spite of all her wisdom, she asked the angel 'how can this be?' But after he answered 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you', she engaged in no further discussion. As one who had such great faith and wisdom she understood at once that if these two intervened there was nothing more to know or doubt. What a great statement, let's pick a few things from it – there's no more to know or doubt. We surrender our intellects; they are of no avail to understanding the ways of God. So the whole scene*

of the incarnation, the annunciation is beyond human understanding. Teresa tells us here more than once that Mary is a person of wisdom. That's a very biblical word; it's the greatest gift that God gives in the bible, that wisdom of God and it is out of that wisdom of God that Mary is living, and the whole response of Mary here comes from that deep place of prayer, of meeting with God within her – not up here, not an intellectual decision – but a spiritual one. Mary asks the question *how can this be?* because of course it is beyond all understanding, and the lovely way that Teresa responds: *Mary is told that this is a work of the Holy Spirit and a work of God and once Mary understands that she asks no questions.* Once Mary knows that this is a great work of God, a work of the Holy Spirit, there is no more function for her mind, for thinking this through, for her looking at the practicalities, it is *yes* – totally and completely – to what God is doing. There is no possibility of being able to understand, there is no possibility that our minds can take in what this is, because it is a work of God, a great work of God, and of course what Teresa is telling us, her listeners, is that this is prayer, this is how we relate to God. So often it is like this in our lives when we come to understand that something really is a work of the Holy Spirit, we simply go with it, we say *yes*, we do not question any more, the power of the Most High comes upon us, the Holy Spirit comes upon us. So Mary, once she saw that through the wisdom that she has, had no difficulty in giving herself totally to the will of God, to the welfare of her son, to the great plan and work of God that she is part of.

So St Teresa asked Mary to be her mother – that mothering, that nurturing that Teresa receives through prayer and contemplation, through staying very close to Mary and staying very close to those who were close to Mary's son Jesus; that nurturing, that life brought Teresa to the fullness of wisdom and of light. When a human being allows Mary to really be their mother – this is what Teresa is telling us – one must, one has to grow in prayer, grow in deep friendship with Mary's son. This is such a key moment in Teresa's life, when she came to see and realise that Jesus was with her all the time, her constant companion. A lovely expression that she uses about Jesus – that *he is the living book* – Teresa loved books, she was only happy when she had a new book; reading and writing were her life, but he was the living book that she was always learning from, who was always teaching her. It was Mary who had helped her and nourished her to grow into becoming this great and intimate friend of Mary's son. So let us, as we approach Christmas, let us befriend those who were close to Jesus in the crib, particularly Mary, and allow ourselves to be drawn into the humility and the love and the wisdom of Bethlehem, the great work of God that begins in such humble circumstances.

Transcribed from the youtube recording: <https://youtu.be/zlYawRx982I>

#### Fourth Talk – St Edith Stein

Today I want to turn to St Edith Stein, or St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross as she was known in the Carmelite order. Incidentally, it is very appropriate as Edith was baptised January 1<sup>st</sup> 1922, one hundred years ago, she would have been 30 years of age at the time. She had been, to use her own expression, a professed atheist from her mid teens, maybe even earlier, so it would have been a very significant time for her, her last Christmas before her baptism and no doubt she was entering very deeply into the spirit, the mystery of Advent and Christmas. We know that a very important part of her reading at this time would have been the writings of St Teresa of Avila.

The reflections I want to draw upon this evening are from two texts she wrote toward the end of her life, one for Epiphany 1940 and the other written just before her death in 1942, her Preface from her book on St John of the Cross. I will now draw upon that Preface she wrote for her book *The Science of the Cross*, in which she is reflecting upon that wisdom of God that is within each of us; that presence of God that she said *determines who we are, determines the lives that we live, the decisions that we take and do not take*. If we truly allow that presence of God to speak in us, then we live lives in a very different way, to a very different rhythm – what she calls the rhythm or the science of the saints – how they live their lives. The saint is the person who has discovered how to live life, how to live life well, how to live life as it should be lived.

What I want to briefly comment upon is how then she goes on from that to speak about believers in Jesus Christ, people of faith – by now she has been twenty years in the church and is a Carmelite nun – she said that for many believers, *what we have often heard and long known “leaves us cold”* – that very disturbing, but real truth, that often the feasts of Christianity somehow leave one cold. She said there can be many reasons for this, preoccupations with oneself, etc., but she defines the experience something like this: *a person who cannot feel joy or pain. Those, she said, who are not left cold are still able to feel deep genuine joy and deep genuine pain*, which she says is a real grace in comparison to this rigid insensitivity that she observes in so many people. And now she goes on to the reason for this: *many believers are depressed because the facts of salvation history do not at all or no longer impress them as they ought and lack the strong influence on their lives that they should exert*. That’s a great statement – *the facts of salvation history* – and that’s what we speaking about when we speak about the crib here or about Christmas or about Easter, or anything else that we hear about in the bible, in the scriptures – the facts of salvation history. How real are they for us? What impact do they make on our everyday lives? That is the question she is posing here and inviting her readers to reflect upon, and she then goes on to observe the saints, and in this case particularly St John of the Cross. They live by these facts of salvation history; the bible has an impact on their everyday lives, how they think, how they see things, how they understand the world around them, the decisions that they take and do not take. In other words, these events are not just history or something that happened to someone else out there somewhere, they are real living events, they are part of life and their impact is real, is immediate.

Now I want to draw this out a little bit, I want to look at another text that she wrote and this is one of her Christmas reflections, it was written for the Feast of Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, but it could apply to any Christmas reflection. Again she is looking at this event of Christmas, the birth of Jesus that we're celebrating, and she speaks about it as an event in our hearts. She said *as were the hearts of the first human beings, so down through the ages, again and again human hearts have been struck by the divine ray*. Right from the beginning of history, she said, God strikes human beings, human hearts. Then she goes on to say: *this is hidden from the whole world, but yet it has an enormous effect upon the world, in every era of human history God shines his light in the hearts of human beings. The vast majority, their lives are hidden, yet they are God's instruments*. Many of these people will have some awareness of this, but she said some will not have, in fact she said many will not have, yet they are like God's instruments, God works in them and through them – the hidden work of God in our world. She speaks about two churches: the visible church – those who are members of the Body of Christ, who profess to be Christians – and the hidden church, which is anywhere, everywhere; it is those to whom God makes his presence known, those through whom God works, through whom God does real good in our world. For some people, she said, it will co-incide, they will be part of the visible church and the hidden church; many others will not be, they will be perhaps part of the visible church but not really living it in depth, not really struck by this divine light. But others then will be part of this hidden church and it is this hidden church, this hidden presence of God that changes human history, that has the greatest impact of all else that is happening in our world, upon life. Now she goes on to illustrate this with the story of Christmas and the lives of those who are involved in this event.

There is one other point I want to make. Looking at the world that she's in when she is writing this, it's in the midst of the Second World War, and not only is the war going on all around her, but her own life is also in serious danger at this time. She said that it is at the times in history when humanity is most engulfed in the night of sin and estrangement from God that more souls united to God are needed, and God does not permit a deficiency. Edith Stein herself is evidence of one such soul in her own time, a sign that God is constantly making his presence known in our world in hidden ways. Then she goes on: *Because hidden souls do not live in isolation, but are part of the living nexus and of a position in a great divine order we speak of an invisible church. Their impact and affinity can remain hidden from themselves and others for their entire earthly lives, but it is also possible for some of this to become visible in the exterior world. This is how it was for the persons and events intertwined in the mystery of the incarnation – Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds and the kings Simeon and Anna; all of these had behind them a solitary life with God and were prepared for their special tasks before they found themselves together in those awesome encounters and events and in retrospect could understand how the paths left behind lead to this climax. Their astounding adoration in the presence of the great deeds of God is expressed in the songs of praise that have come down to us*.

So there she is making a point about all these people who play a part in the great story depicted here in the crib, that God has prepared them over many many years for this. Simeon and Anna were obviously very elderly, as were Zechariah and Elizabeth; Mary was young; Joseph, we do not know his age, nor do we know that of the shepherds or the Magi, but it's not so much about years as the depth of God's work in

them. They could have had no idea, even months or years before this event, what was going to happen, what their destiny was, where they were going to find themselves, how they were going to find themselves a part of the greatest event of human history – but God did – and everything of their lives in retrospect, all those years of searching, of prayer, of good living, of faith, of hope, of charity, whatever their lives consisted of, was in preparation for this event. It was God working in their lives and Edith is using this to illustrate how God works in all of our lives – nothing is lost, there is no unimportant time, there is no empty time – God is always present, God is always bringing to fulfilment in our lives his plan, his purpose.

She goes on to write about the Magi, these visitors from the East, using them as an illustration for that journey. Obviously we know nothing about their lives until they turn up in Bethlehem, but what we can be certain of is God's presence in their lives from the very beginning and what God is bringing about through them. *The kings from the faraway East indicate the gentiles for whom salvation is to come, so here there is already a Church made up of Jews and Gentiles. 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 had to appear to show these wise men the way to Truth. And so now they stand before the incarnate Truth, bow down and worship him and place their crowns at his feet, because all the treasures of the world are a little dust compared with it. The seekers of truth have now found themselves worshipping before the incarnate Truth.* Time and time again Edith Stein referred to her studies and research and all this work she that did over so many years as a search for truth and just like these Magi, her search for truth brought her to worship Truth itself, Truth in flesh, in the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Truth that became flesh in the womb of Mary and was born at Bethlehem. She tells us elsewhere in her writings: *whoever is searching for Truth is praying, is searching for God, whether they know it or not, because God is Truth and all genuine searching for Truth leads us to God and to Truth itself, Jesus Christ.*

Let us pray that we also, evermore and ever more deeply, may be drawn, may be led to the Truth, the son of God, Jesus Christ.

Transcribed from the youtube recording: <https://youtu.be/HrXiDs4rJcg>

### **Fifth Talk – St Elizabeth of the Trinity**

This evening I want to look at a text from St Elizabeth of the Trinity. It's not written for Advent or Christmas specifically; in fact it is a very personal little document. Elizabeth died in 1906, and at the time she was writing this she was in the infirmary of the Carmelite convent in Dijon. She was extremely ill; she was dying and she knew she had not long to live. She writes this little document, really a personal letter to her Prioress, Novice Mistress, Mother Germaine, who was her spiritual mother and guide during her years as a Carmelite nun. She leaves her this little document which Mother Germaine will read only after Elizabeth has died as she will write it and hide it away so it will only be found after her death. Then nobody else saw it for another thirty years until after Mother Germaine's death, she kept it to herself over those thirty years. Elizabeth very deliberately is writing this, to use her own expression – *from the furnace of love, from heaven* – that's how she describes heaven, *the furnace of love*. She is saying Mother, when you read this, that is where I shall be, in the furnace of love, before the Lord, in the Lord's presence, and she is anticipating that and giving this very strong message to her prioress. I have chosen it this evening because it forms a very good conclusion to what we have been reflecting on in this retreat and we can apply it to ourselves, but perhaps more so to humanity, to the human race, to the whole world into which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born.

The core of the text is this: it is based upon the passage at the end of John's gospel when Jesus turns to Peter and asks him *do you love me more than these others do?* that critical question that Jesus asks Peter, the question that Peter needed to be asked, the question that would be central to Peter's future mission as leader of the Church, leader of the disciples of Jesus. This is what will be asked of him: love, heroic love, limitless love, a love that goes beyond what the others around appear to be able to give, a love that knows no limits. Now Elizabeth turns that around for her prioress; that is not the message that her prioress needed to hear, the message that her prioress needed to hear is: *can you let yourself be loved more than these others?* – to let yourself be loved. Mother Germaine was a very capable woman and a very capable leader, both of her community and as a spiritual leader and writer; she had great gifts, but Elizabeth also recognised a fundamental weakness, that deep within she was very insecure, unsure of herself despite all her gifts lacked that confidence, that trust in her own ability. There was a block there; there was a barrier there that only love could remove. I just want to read a little piece from this letter. These are words that Elizabeth puts in the mouth of Jesus. We can see what Elizabeth is doing here – she is totally taken over by Jesus – we could say this is the fulfilment of the famous words of St Paul: *I no longer live but he lives in me*. It is Jesus speaking – it is Jesus speaking through Elizabeth. Elizabeth here becomes prophet, priest, she's ministering, she is communicating what Jesus wants to say. Here are the words she puts on the lips of Jesus: *Mother listen to what he tells you* – this is Jesus now speaking – *let yourself be loved more than these, that is without fearing that any obstacle will be a hindrance to it, because I am free to pour out my love on whom I wish. Let yourself be loved more than these is your vocation. It is in being faithful to it that you will make me happy, for you will magnify the power of my love. This love can rebuild what you have destroyed. Let yourself be loved more than these.*

So those words, put on the lips of Jesus, spoken through Elizabeth, are words that we can all hear as we come before the new-born Jesus in the crib. There love looks at us through a new-born baby, there love looks at us through this family there in front of us, there love looks at us, looks at us straight in the eye, as the word that has become flesh, God who has become part of humanity, God who has become one of us – this great act of love – and key to what Elizabeth is saying here is *let, allow, be open to, put no obstacle in the way of this love*. Of course there will always be obstacles, that's part of the human condition, but somehow love can break those down if we can persevere, if we can truly believe in it, then the love can break down those obstacles, break down those barriers. And that applies much more than just to us as individuals. If we were to think of this in terms of the whole human race – God, who is love, has been born, is one of us – if we as the human race could open our hearts and our minds to a love like this, then all the other problems of the human race would simply disappear, go into the background, be seen for what they really are. As Elizabeth points out to her mother prioress: *it is the key to everything, this is your vocation, this is your calling, this is everything, if you can do this, then everything will somehow fall into place, everything else will be OK*. To take a little bit more from this: *He loves you like that* – and she puts in brackets – *more than these*. That term *more than these* – I think we have to be careful, this doesn't mean we are on a higher plane than everybody else but rather it is more than the limits that others seem put on us. It was the same with Peter, when Jesus was saying to him *love me more than these*, didn't mean that somehow you're better than the others, but rather that those limits will not confine you, because the world around us – people, society, traditions, customs, everything – limits our capacity to love. This little voice that says *thus far and no further, this is OK but not that, don't take this risk*, because love ultimately is the greatest of all risks, so be careful, don't risk. No, it's OK to let the love of God in, so letting yourself be loved more than these – which she's emphasising in almost every line of this document is saying – let there be no limits on your capacity to receive love, to believe in love, to believe in what God says, to believe in what is happening before your eyes.

*He will do everything in you* – that is critical; he will do it in you. The burden, of course, that is afflicting her is that she is carrying this enormous weight, she has this awesome responsibility. She has great gifts, yes, but how to use them; the gifts can weigh a person down, rather, just accept the love and let him do it in you, let him do it. The little baby has been born, God has come into our world, he has lived, he has died upon the Cross, he has saved us. Let the truth of that do it for us and in us, let him become flesh in us, in our world, let him live in us, let him make his home in us, let him do it. And that's what Elizabeth is getting at here and it is something that is right there in the tradition in the Church right from the beginning. We have the manger here, we have the tabernacle – the places where God is – but the human heart, the human soul is the real manger, is the real tabernacle. *I will come and make my home in you*, as Jesus says in John's gospel, *I will dwell in whoever loves me, the Father and I will live in whoever loves us*. Let him live in us and when he truly does live in us then he does everything through us – we don't need to see it, we don't need to know it – he does it – and therefore she's exhorting her prioress to believe in that. He will do it in us and likewise for our whole world with all its problems, let's not be burdened by them, taking them on ourselves. Rather he saves the world, he is the Messiah, he can do it in us and through us if we can be open and receive that love.

*He will do everything in you, he will go to the end, for when a soul is loved by him to this extent, in this way, loved by an unchanging and creative love, a free love which transforms as it pleases, O how far will this soul go! That's the kind of love we're speaking about. I will just read another little bit of this. Mother, the fidelity that the Master asks of you is to remain in communion with love, flow into, be rooted in this love who wants to mark your soul with the seal of his power and his grandeur. You will never be commonplace if you are vigilant in love, for in the hours when you feel only oppression and lassitude you will please him even more if you faithfully believe that he is still working, that he is loving you just the same and even more, because his love is free and that is how he wants to be magnified in you and you will let yourself be loved.*

So that's this very strong message and that is the message of Christmas, that is the message of the incarnation, the Son of God becoming human, that's the message to the world: God loves us, God loves the world that he has created, there is no limit to that love. If we could stop putting limits on it, if we could believe in how free it is, how unconditional it is. If we could simply believe in that love, live in that love, that limitless love, that free love that the presence of Jesus in our world is communicating to us, is giving to us as Elizabeth sees the possibilities for her prioress. If the prioress could only believe in this, then all these great gifts – human and spiritual gifts that this woman has – could truly flourish, and to use Elizabeth's words, she would *magnify the Lord* [Magnificat], so it would be for us also, would be for the whole Church and all believers, all humanity. And this little reflection from Elizabeth that I just have briefly touched on perhaps can give us a way, a way that we can enter more deeply this Christmas into this mystery that we celebrate. For it is a great mystery that is personal to us and must be personalised, as Elizabeth does with her prioress – each of us needs to hear it in the way that is right for us. As I said, Jesus spoke to Peter, asked him what he needed to be asked, he asks also each of us in a very personal way what we need to be asked, what obstacles there might be in our lives, where we need to open our hearts and minds, that this love may truly work in us, may do great things in us, may make the Lord known through us and when that happens, then the world is a better place – the fruits, the benefits go so far.

Elizabeth herself is of course a great witness to that, she doing that, she's doing it right at the moment she's writing this in her last illness when she is quite literally in the last weeks of her life. She is giving herself totally to God's mission, trusting that she's already in that furnace of love. Even though she is in the midst of great suffering, she is living in that furnace of love that is Jesus Christ, she's living in him, he's living in her and he is working in her and through her. We also are living in him – he lives in us and he is always working in and through us.

Transcribed from the YouTube recording: <https://youtu.be/IHR6p0ibzNg>

© Fr Matt Blake OCD December 2021