

## PRAYING WITH ST PAUL

Transcribed from a talk by Fr Matt Blake OCD – 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2021

### *Part One*

St Paul is our subject today and the first thing we've got to remember about Paul is that he takes us right back to the beginning of Christianity. Paul's letters were all written before the gospels or any of the rest of the New Testament was written, so he is the first person to put Christianity into writing, he is the first person to give us written knowledge of Jesus Christ. But more importantly than what he tells us about Jesus Christ, Paul tells us of the impact that Jesus Christ has made on his life. When we read the letters of St Paul we're reading somebody whose life has been totally changed by Jesus Christ or as Paul tells us over and over again in his letters, *I have come to know Jesus Christ and that's the only thing that matters*. He has come to know Jesus Christ and he wants his readers to know what he himself has come to know. How Paul came to know Jesus Christ he tells us in various ways, but he did not know Jesus Christ in person; he never met Jesus, though their lives undoubtedly coincided, but he has come to know him through the experience of Jesus Christ, he has come to know him through the grace of God, and we'll come back to that a little bit later.

I want to begin – if your bible is in front of you, just pick up Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – and many of the experts, the scripture scholars, those people who know far more of this than I do, say that this is probably the first book of the New Testament to be written. So when we read Thessalonians 1, we're reading the beginning of the Christian message as it has been transmitted to us in writing. I just want to read the first few lines because I think they are very relevant to what we are exploring this afternoon.

So Paul begins: *From Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the Church in Thessalonica which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, wishing you grace and peace. We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* There's an enormous amount being said here. The first thing we can say about it is that Paul writes from a place of prayer, Paul's letters are prayers, Paul is at prayer as he writes, what he writes comes out of his prayer and as he tells us later on in that letter, the intention is that what he writes be read to all the community. And of course prayers that will be read will be added to the liturgy, the Eucharist, when the community is gathered in prayer. So Paul's letters come out of prayer and are intended to be read, to be listened to, in prayer. Writing, for Paul, was a prayer for the church, listening is a prayer or another way we could put it is that through letters Paul unites himself with the church of Thessalonica or whatever Church he is writing to, in prayer. Maybe the equivalent of what we are trying to do with Zoom, we are united in prayer. Because we are Christian, because we believe in Jesus Christ, our lives are prayer, we're always in prayer we cannot not be at prayer. Prayer is happening all the time, it's the very

nature of church, it's the very nature of Christian community to be at prayer, to be living prayer and that's the first thing that Paul shows us here. But he is showing us something else, and that is that the very nature of being a Christian and the very nature of being Christian community, of being church is, to quote again the very first words of Paul's letter: *to be in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Whatever that might mean – and we wish Paul was here and we could ask him what he means by this – to be *in* God, to be *in* Jesus Christ, to be living in them, to be in their world, to be breathing their air – to be in that environment – he is saying that we are somewhere spiritual, divine, that's what it means.

Paul is very aware that he, Silvanus and Timothy are writing, not just to people who live in Thessalonica or a group of people who gather together in Thessalonica, he is writing to people who are living a divine life, a spiritual life, who are living in God the Father and Jesus Christ. In other words he is writing to people whose lives have been changed and transformed as his has and who are bearing witness to that and he is wishing them grace and peace. We are so used to those words, so accustomed to them from our liturgies. One of the fascinating things about Paul is how many of his words, his language, have crept in: *the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the peace of Christ* – they have crept into our liturgy, they are part of how as Christians we greet each other. But let's hear them in the original, as Paul would have spoken them. His wish, his prayer for the Christians of Thessalonica is that they will have grace and peace. These are two very rich words, grace is that life of God, that divine, spiritual life, reality, that God gives to us. It is having grace, living by grace, that is what distinguishes those who have faith, those who are in God the Father and Jesus Christ. It's a word that is very rich in meaning and peace. Peace is again a very rich Christian word – *peace be with you*, it's a peace that John defines in his gospel as something that Jesus gives *that the world cannot give*. But Paul is very aware that in speaking about Peace in the Christian understanding of the word he is speaking about something more than just the absence of war and conflict or the absence of noise and worry, he speaking about a profound spiritual gift that he has come to know since he came to know Jesus Christ and he knows that the Christians of Thessalonica know what he is speaking about.

The next verse gives us something typical of almost all of Paul's letters and that is thanksgiving, a prayer of thanksgiving. This seems extremely important to Paul, to give thanks, and the specific thanks he is giving here is for those to whom he is writing: *we thank God for you all*. If we think about this for a moment, what might this mean to Paul? It means that Paul as a Christian recognises that the gift that God has given to him has many facets to it and one of the important facets is the gift of other Christians, the gift of being able to see the grace of God at work in these other Christians. That for him is so important; he's thanking God for them because that's so important to him and to Silvanus and Timothy and all the others who are a part of this. He's constantly giving thanks to God that these Christians exist, that they're bearing witness to Jesus Christ that Jesus Christ has changed their lives, the impact all of that has upon him and how that has enriched him. There's a mutual enrichment that Paul is very aware of and then he goes on: *we constantly remember you before God*. In

other words, in prayer – Paul now may be a long way from Thessalonica – but when he's at prayer he's at one with them, prayer unites Paul with God, with Jesus Christ, but also unites him with all the other Christians. In prayer there's no distance between them, they are one. When we go to prayer we become one with all Christians, all those who are praying, all who are one in Jesus Christ.

We see already in the very first sentences that Paul has written, the richness of the Christianity that he is now living, the richness of the prayer life that he is living. As I said at the beginning, we have a certain familiarity with Paul's story, who Paul is, what has happened to him. He tells us about it at various times in his letters and of course Luke writes about it three times in the Acts of the Apostles, when he gives us a long account of Paul's conversion. Let's just listen to one of Paul's accounts of his own story. Paul time and time again in his letters writes about himself, he doesn't seem to have any difficulty in speaking about himself, writing about himself, sharing his own experience because that is part of the message. Let's have a look at his letter to the Galatians and it's the first chapter, verses 11–24 where he breaks into speaking about his story:

*The fact is, brothers, and I want you to realise this, the good news I preached is not a human message that I was given by men; it is something I learned only through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You must have heard of my career as a practising Jew, how merciless I was in persecuting the church of God, how much damage I did to it, how I stood out among other Jews of my generation and how enthusiastic I was for the traditions of my ancestors. Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through his grace and chose to reveal his son in me so that I might preach the good news about him to the pagans. I did not stop to discuss this with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were already apostles before me, but I went off to Arabia at once and later went straight back from there to Damascus. Even when after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days I did not see any of the other apostles. I saw only James, the brother of the Lord, and I swear before God that what I have just written is the literal truth. After that I went to Syria and Cilicia and was still not known inside the churches of Christ in Judea, who had heard nothing except that their one time persecutor was now preaching the faith he had previously tried to destroy and they gave glory to God for me.*

There we have Paul bearing witness to the power of God in his life. He was a persecutor of Christianity, tried to destroy Christianity, was very zealous in his attempts to destroy Christianity, but God intervened – God, he said, who had chosen him in his mother's womb, which is very interesting. He is not saying that God, on a certain day when Paul was on his horse on the way to Damascus, decided I'm going to change this man's life. This was God's plan from the beginning, and he has come to know Jesus Christ and he emphasises this so strongly, not from anything that human beings have told him, but by a revelation. And this brings us perhaps to the very sense of why Paul is so important to us if we are to learn about and understand Christian prayer. We often hear Paul referred to as a theologian, and as he says

himself, he's an apostle, but the most important thing we can say about Paul is that he's a mystic, he's a person of prayer, a spiritual person and it is Paul's mysticism that gives him his theological insights, his wisdom. He has come to know Jesus Christ through personal experience. It's impossible to put words on that, but we have accounts like Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles and what Paul is trying to tell us here himself and at various other times is that he is absolutely convinced that this was a work of God and that this work of God was effective, was powerful in his life. It is the work of God, the free intervention of God that changed him, it is God's free choice that has made him who he is – not anything Paul has done, or anything anybody else has done – it's God's free intervention. More than anything else that's what Paul is bearing witness to, giving testament to, what God has done, what the experience of God for him is – it completely changed the direction of his life – he was going in one direction and he's now going in the other direction. He has completely changed and that change is total and is permanent. That's the power of God, the grace of God; it's the power of prayer. If he himself can be changed 100% – the direction of Paul's life was completely changed – that's his most powerful message, that's what he's bearing witness to and that's what prayer is. That's Paul's understanding of prayer – God's intervention, God's work. What happened that day, however it happened, was a mystical experience, a spiritual experience, an encounter with God. And Paul does what is instinctive for anyone who has a spiritual experience – they go away to be alone – *I did not consult with anyone*, he said, *I went to Arabia*. Arabia of course is the desert, solitude. Whenever a person has a profound experience of God, their deep desire – there's a pull, an instinct – is to be alone. One just wants to be alone. One might have no idea that it's an experience of God, one might have no idea of what has happened, but when one feels this pull, this desire to be alone, this need to be alone, this almost unstoppable force to be alone, that's the classic sign that this is of God. He goes off to Arabia into the desert – the birth of a whole spiritual tradition of the desert, going into the desert, spending time in the desert, that need there was to spend time there, that's a typical mystical experience. He doesn't go and speak to others about it, no inclination to do that, just needs to listen to what God is saying within, which is far more important, more powerful than anything anyone else could want to say. So Paul is a mystic, and we could go through Paul's letters if we had the time, but we haven't, and find so many signs there, indications of his mystical experiences and how it is out of his mystical experiences that his understanding comes. Mysticism gives rise to understanding, that's how he comes to understand.

So, the first witness to Christianity, the first to write, to put the Christian message in writing, does so first and foremost from his own mystical experience, his own prayer life, his own time alone with God, his direct personal experience of God. This is what has brought him to this profound knowledge of Jesus Christ that he speaks about, that he writes about. That doesn't in any way divorce him or cut him off from the story of his life, rather it deepens it. In that account from the letter to the Galatians that I just read, Paul makes reference to two dimensions of his life – he was enthusiastic for the traditions of his ancestors, he was a faithful Jew, he was born a Jew, trained as a Pharisee, was an expert in the scriptures. His encounter with Jesus Christ, his mystical experience of Jesus Christ did not in any way cut him off from that; rather, it

enhanced it, he comes to a deeper understanding of the scriptures, he becomes a better Jew. Paul never saw Christianity as a rejection of Judaism because he was a Jew; how Jesus has helped him was to go deeper into his experience of his Judaism – the traditions of his ancestors, the scriptures, all that he has learned. And the second thing that comes into this, and Paul never hides it, is his earlier life of opposition to Christianity and persecuting Christianity. In some strange, mysterious way that also becomes part of his story. God somehow worked through that it was in some mysterious way God's plan that the person who was the great persecutor of Christianity would become its greatest champion.

These are two signs of authentic Christianity spirituality in Paul that would be signs of authentic Christian spirituality down through the ages – an ever deepening entry into the scriptures, into the word of God and a reconciliation with one's whole life, seeing one's whole life and experience as part of the journey God has brought a person on. Even the parts where one seems to go furthest away, somehow they are redeemed, they are reconciled. Paul is able to say in all truthfulness that in his mother's womb, God had formed him, called him to this mission. God hadn't forgotten that half way along or for a few years and left Paul. Somehow in all of this, Paul, having come through all of this experience, Paul has learned, Paul has grown, he has been purified and transformed, he has been reconciled. Paul has been brought to a level of what we might call human and Christian maturity, that's what comes through in Paul's letters. We are listening to a human being who understands human life, who has grown and matured through his knowledge of Jesus Christ, someone whose knowledge of Jesus Christ has helped him to come to terms with his whole life, to come to terms with, to be at peace with who he is and when one is at peace with who one is then one has the wisdom, the life, the energy to do God's work, to fulfil God's plan, to become for the purposes of what we are doing the great teacher of prayer. Paul grows and evolves from being the one who has discovered the power of authentic Christian prayer to the one who can express that and teach it, that's what we find in Paul's letters, that's at the heart of the message in Paul's letters. Paul himself is a mystic, a person of prayer, he has experienced the power and effectiveness of prayer, he now wants to share that with his churches. He wants to do more than that, he wants to convince them from his own experience that they are losing something; they are missing something if they do not give themselves totally to it. And that's what we will be picking up in the second session.

I will pick out a few specific things that will help us get a picture of what it is that Paul wants to say to his churches and wants to say to all of us. But we only appreciate what he is saying when we have a sense of what Paul's own experience is and the effect that his own experiences had upon him, because for Paul himself – his life, is his message, is his lecturing. It's not just Christianity that Paul has come to know, but it's Christianity that has changed Paul, Christianity that he knows from personal experience; therefore it is personal and because it is personal he wants it to become personal for everybody else. Paul wants his Christians and his Christian communities to be authentically Christian, not just conforming to Christianity or practising as Christians, but to be Christian to the depths of their hearts, to the depths

of their being, to the fullness of who they are. And he does this because he himself knows what this is and in knowing what it is, he also knows the tragedy of not knowing this. He knew the misery of not having what he now has; therefore he is able to proclaim authentically what he now has.

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## PRAYING WITH ST PAUL

### *Part Two*

In this session I will pick out a few things from Paul, because he wants his Christians to know what he knows, to know from experience the value, the worth, the preciousness of what it is he has come to. I want to start with a text in his *Letter to the Philippians*, Chapter Two verses 6–11. This hymn will be known to all of you. In Paul's letters there are a number of hymns that have crept into our liturgy. Nobody knows whether Paul wrote them or whether they were hymns sung by the early church. What matters here is that Paul has chosen this hymn to illustrate to the Christians of Philippi what their minds, their mentality, how their thinking must be. He introduces it:

*In your minds you must be the same as Jesus Christ, and his hymn expresses what Jesus was, the mentality of Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and become as all men, and being as all men are he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross, but God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim 'Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father'.*

What a statement in what it is saying to us about prayer, about how we live, our relationship with Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus, a disciple – one who walks the same path as Jesus – it's a whole journey of letting go, or to put the term more strongly, it is a dying, a dying to everything that is not of God. He clings to nothing, he did not cling even to what is essential and most important – his equality with God – he didn't even cling to that. He had a deep inner freedom, a spiritual freedom. He was not attached to anything or anyone. That deep inner spiritual freedom of Jesus – that's the mind of a Christian. I remember somebody beautifully summing this up for me a few days ago. We'd been speaking about maturity and what maturity is, and she said *it's all about letting go, that's what it is – letting go – letting go completely.* A capacity to let go, to no longer cling to or hold on to, to be no longer trapped, to have that inner spiritual freedom, that's what Jesus has, he no longer needs to be equal with God, he can let go of that, to let go of every status, everything, and become as all people are – we're dust, we're nothing – we're totally dependent on God. *He emptied himself* – and he was humbler yet – *even to accepting death, death on a cross* – a criminal's death, a shameful death. There is nothing that life or death could throw at him, nothing that could come his way that he could not just let go of – it's OK, – true humility – inner spiritual freedom. Humility has always been and is the hallmark of a mature Christian, a mature spiritual life and it is then that God raises him up, it is then that God has the freedom to do in him what God wants to do; that's what makes Jesus the one that *every tongue should acclaim, every knee should bow to* – not because of

his great dignity, but what God has done to him. And that for Paul is what the essence of prayer is – not what I do or what I achieve, or what I am or what I have, but my capacity to let go of all of that, that there may be space and freedom to be open to it and to accept all that God is doing, all that life brings one's way, all that may happen, because God is in it and God can do something great in it. So this hymn here is Paul's way of expressing the mind of a Christian and we could put it very simply: the Christian is the one who lives true human freedom, because that's what this is an expression of – true human freedom.

Let's go to another passage in Paul, this time from his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Chapter 3:14–21, and it's a prayer. Paul turns to prayer and what's striking in Paul's letter is the amount of times he's explicitly praying, turning to God and praying. And here, writing to the Ephesians, he turns and he prays and this is Paul's prayer for the Christians of Ephesus, for everybody – it's the prayer for all of us because in this prayer Paul expresses what he would want for everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, everyone who is a disciple of Jesus Christ. It's a very familiar passage and a very profound one and it is clearly very close to Paul's heart, it's spoken, it's prayed with great feeling, great emotion. This is a message Paul is putting across very strongly:

*This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name: Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.*

We can never get to the end of what Paul is speaking about here, but let's just for a moment get the gist of it. Paul is writing to these Christians in Ephesus, he's giving all sorts of teaching and advice and everything else, but now he opens his heart to them and tells them what he really wants. As I said already, it comes from what he himself has experienced. He's kneeling before the Father to pray, because only God can give this, but God can only give it to the one who is open to it, who has that inner freedom that we saw in the *Letter to the Philippians*, that detachment, that humility to totally accept what God is doing, to be open to it, to put no obstacles in the way of what God is doing. So he's kneeling before the Father, begging the Father, and so out *his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong* – the hidden self must grow strong. There's a self within, a hidden inner world, a spiritual world, a spiritual life within that must grow strong. It's not about external or physical strength or emotional or psychological strength that one might or might not have, but it's a spiritual strength.

St Teresa gives us a wonderful insight into how spiritual strength differs from other kinds of strength. She says other kinds of strength – physical strength or emotional



strength – as the years go by they grow and then they diminish; as we grow old or get ill, our strength diminishes. Spiritual strength doesn't; spiritual strength does not diminish when physical strength does, but very often, and hopefully all the time, it grows. The person can be physically very weak or diminished in various other dimensions of themselves, but the spiritual strength can continue to grow and hopefully does continue to grow, that inner spiritual strength that Paul here knows and recognises, and it is only God that can make this grow, but he needs us to be free and open for that. *So may your hidden selves grow strong* and when it does *Christ lives in your hearts*. He makes his home within, he's living within, it's his life that one is living; *and then, planted on love and built on love*. We're sown in love, we're like seeds that are put into love, like seeds that are inserted – we will only grow in love when we are seeds that have been put into love, that have been planted there. If we are planted anywhere else, we don't grow, but when our roots draw from love, then we draw our life from love. It's a lovely image of being sown, being planted in love, when we are planted in love then we will grow in love, we will be built up in love because we are drawing our life from love. Nothing else gives life, nothing else changes and transforms us, only love. Love is that food, that life that our roots are taking in, then we grow in love and proclaim love; so to be planted and to be built in love. *You will with all the saints* – all those who are saved, all those who are Christian – for Paul every Christian is a saint because they have received salvation, they have been saved. And Paul knows very well from personal experience what that word means, he was saved by Jesus Christ and he tells us that, that he was saved by Jesus Christ – he's a saint – a saint is whoever is saved by Jesus Christ. So you will be one with all the saints when you have been sown and when you grow through love – you will become one with the others who are saved.

You will then have God's greatest gift: wisdom. It's the greatest gift that God gives as the scriptures tell us, that wisdom of God, and this is for Paul what the fruit of prayer is, this is what the person of prayer, the person of strong spiritual strength has – *the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth* – in other words to something infinite. There are no limits, the mind is opened, the heart is opened, the person sees a bigger picture, there's no place for close mindedness here, there's no place for limiting or excluding. This has a breadth and height and a depth to it, this wisdom is infinite – *until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God*. No one knows what love is, planted and grown in love, knowing the love of Jesus, which is infinite. Paul is filled with the fullness of God. Then he goes on to reiterate his prayer in another way: *Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine* – that's again a feature, a characteristic of the spiritual life. We set out with goals and ambitions and desires and when one is truly living spiritually, one receives what just can't be asked for or imagined, it is something way beyond it, it never comes as one expects it to or is never limited by our expectations or our knowledge, because it is the life of God that the person is being given – *glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever*.

Paul might be in the very first generation of Christianity, but prayer is giving him a wide vision to look way into the future, generation after generation, this is what is going to make the church last – this lasts forever. We can see how his vision is expanding, that's what prayer does and that's what Paul wants for these Christians in Ephesus. And why is Paul speaking so strongly and speaking from his heart? He tells us over and over again why, in different ways, because he looks around and he sees the tragedy that people aren't giving themselves fully to this, they are accepting something less than this. For Paul, we must never accept a Christianity that's less than what he is expressing in this prayer. That's tragedy – to be a Christian and to settle for a halfway house, something that's compromised, something that doesn't do the fullness of what Jesus Christ can do for us. That's tragedy for Paul and that's why he's praying so earnestly.

Let's go to the *Letter to the Romans* Chapter 8:26–27. In a sense we could say Paul has given us this very strong message in Ephesians, but Paul is also realistic and he knows how difficult the Christians in Rome will find this. Just because Paul speaks in such strong language about prayer, this doesn't mean that prayer comes easily to him and here he is showing the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives:

*When we are weak, when we find prayer difficult the spirit too comes to help us in our weakness and when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly the spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what he means and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the spirit are according to the mind of God.*

So when we find prayer difficult, when we can't pray – and we've all been there – we meet people there and all they say to us is *I can't pray*. Most of you are probably spiritual directors, and will hear people say *I can't pray, I used to be able to and I can't*. Very often that is a sign that they are praying, and praying at a deeper level. Prayer has gone deeper, but what they are really saying is prayer is not how it used to be, or prayer is not what I think prayer should be or what is familiar to me, and Paul rightly says that this is when the spirit comes. When we feel weak, inadequate, can't do it, my own strength is nothing here, that's when the spirit comes, that's when perhaps we're praying most profoundly of all because it is the spirit praying in us. So when we cannot pray, the spirit prays, the spirit knows and understands because what matters is not the words that we use, or the kind of prayer that we have or anything like that, what matters is the desire to pray, feeling that need to pray, feeling one's inability to pray. Paul, the mystic, knows this, because the mystics don't just experience the highs of prayer and the strong feelings of prayer, the strong spiritual feelings and the sense of the presence of God. The mystics so often experience the opposite to that, the absence of God, their inability to pray, their weakness. The mystic can be very spiritually strong but feel very spiritually weak and Paul knows this very well and he knows that we feel so weak, we feel so inadequate. If the desire to pray is there, that's when the spirit comes. The spirit praying in us is far more authentic, far more real, because God knows our real needs. He expresses our pleas in a way that could never be put into words and God knows everything our hearts

because prayer comes from the heart, not from the mind. The mind can be all over the place, the mind can be in confusion and distractions and depression and worry and so much else, but the heart can be close to God, the heart can be at prayer, the heart can be love, love can be speaking from there. So the spirit prays in our hearts and that prayer of the spirit is according to the mind of God, therefore it is at one with God. It is what is right for us in other words, not what we think is right for us or think should happen. So there is a very sound lesson in prayer here.

Let's go back to Romans 8:14–17. Again, it's the spirit and what it is to be children of God, but in various ways it is expressing what it means to be Christian here. *Everyone moved by the spirit is at one with the Son of God* – is at one with Jesus. Everyone moved by the spirit is in a sense drawn into the life of the Son of God and that spirit that we receive is one that sets us free; it's not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into our lives – fear is the great obstacle – it's setting us free, that deep inner spiritual freedom that the Holy Spirit brings about. It's a spirit of the Son; it's the spirit of Jesus Christ that cries out *Abba!* That's the prayer that Jesus prayed, they have it in the gospels and Paul obviously knew it and it had come to him that this was how Jesus prayed. It would have been revolutionary for a Jew, a Pharisee, to be using that term for God the Father; Paul is only using it because he has been told that that was how Jesus prayed. This gives us a sense of how much Paul has changed – no Jew would use a term like that – that's how much Jesus has changed him, he prays as Jesus prayed – *Abba!* and it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to do that. It's only the work of the Holy Spirit in Paul that has enabled him to come this far, from a Jew who can't even pronounce the name of God to one who would use such an intimate term for God that only the Son uses. That's how much Paul's prayer has changed and grown, how much Paul's whole way of thinking has changed: he has put on the mind of Jesus Christ.

*We cry out Abba! The spirit himself and our spirit, they unite in witness that we are children of God.* The spirit – the Holy Spirit – and our spirit. Each one of us has a spirit, we are spiritual, we are spiritual beings – the most true, the most intimate dimension is the spirit. When that spirit is united with the spirit of God, when it becomes one spirit with God, or as Paul says elsewhere, then the two spirits unite in witness that we are children of God. That's a wonderful phrase – to be united with the Holy Spirit, bearing witness. What Paul is speaking about here mystics down through the centuries have seen as the highest of Christian mysticism: *breathing the air of the Holy Spirit* that St John of the Cross speaks about – united with the Holy Spirit, that it is Holy Spirit living within us, the Holy Spirit and our spirits are one. If we want to see it another way it's the fulfilment of what Jesus prays in the Last Supper in John's gospel. Jesus prays that *the love that there is between the Father and the Son may be in them.* Of course the love that there is between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is the relationship between the Father and the Son. Here Paul already, intuitively, instinctively, from experience knows that. Paul is bearing witness here to a profound spiritual knowledge of God: Jesus Christ, and not only that, but this is for everybody, this is what it means to be Christian. So

they unite in witness that we are Children of God, that's what it means to be a Child of God, to be one spirit, to live by the Holy Spirit.

And then Paul goes on to something else that is astonishing: *if we are children we are heirs as well, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his suffering so as to share his glory.* To be heirs, to be living as Jesus lived, sharing his suffering and sharing his glory, again those two are one; Christian mysticism shows us this over and over again. The Cross is the greatest manifestation of the wisdom of God. Paul will show us this in his *Letter to the Corinthians*, but there is no time to go into that. It is something that Paul explores in various ways – the relationship between glory and suffering, between prayer and carrying the Cross of Jesus – what the life of the Christian is, how it is a following of Jesus Christ – as he shows us in the hymn we looked at – even to accepting death, the Cross, slavery, all of that and to be authentic children of God, an authentic follower of Jesus Christ.

One other little piece in Paul's *Letter to the Galatians 2:20*, perhaps the high point of all of Paul's mysticism. Mystics have been using this phrase: *I have been crucified with Christ and I live now, not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me. No longer I live, but the life of Christ.* That has been used by so many mystics and teachers of prayer, saints and Doctors of the Church down through the centuries, the whole Christian mystical tradition, that idea that the I dies and Christ lives in me.

What Paul learns from his experience is that the closer one comes to Jesus Christ, the most one *puts on the mind of Jesus Christ*, the more alive one becomes, the deeper that one is living, the richer one's life is. Here's a prayer that Teresa gives us – in it she is praying for what Paul is speaking about:

*that this I may die  
and the other live in me who is greater than I and far me better than me  
that I may be enabled to serve Him  
that He may live and give me life  
that He may reign and I be his slave,  
that my soul may not desire another freedom  
how can it be freedom if one is distant from the Most High?*

That, more than probably any other text brings out the meaning of Paul's statement in the Galatians. The I – that's the ego, the false self – may die and that He live in me. Then she uses two phrases straight out of Paul's writings – this is so influenced, every word of this could have been used by Paul. She brings in two words that Paul uses over and over again: *to serve Him* and *to be His slave*. We have it in Mark's gospel; it is the one who serves: *I have come to serve*, as Jesus said, *and not to be served* and *to be his slave*. At the very beginning of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* he introduces himself to the Christians of Rome, a church that he does not know, and says: *I am a slave of Jesus Christ*. That must not be seen in a negative sense, it's a sense of total loyalty to Jesus Christ, belonging to Jesus Christ, totally at the service of Jesus Christ, one's identity tied up with Jesus Christ – it's very positive for Paul and that sense is

what Teresa is picking up here, *to serve Him; that I be His Slave*. And this is what true freedom is and she recognises that this is what true freedom is and this of course is what Paul is talking about all the time, that those who live in Jesus Christ are the ones who are truly free, because that is who Jesus is. Paul has learned that Jesus was the most free human being that ever walked this earth and that the followers of Jesus are the most free human beings – the more they enter into relationship with him, the more free that they become, and that’s a freedom which Jesus lived in letting go of his equality with God. It’s the freedom to let go, not to have, but to let go, the freedom to be free of everything, to be detached. It’s the freedom to love, to love in a way that is free, that is not in any way self-centred, to love in the way that Jesus Christ loved, to be planted in love and to grow in love.

*That I can live* – that’s Paul’s prayer and that’s what prayer is for Paul, it is the way to live, it is the journey into life, it is that relationship that brings us into life and brings us into the fullness of life.

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