

Aylesford retreat

Thursday 28th July 2022 pm 7th talk

We have been looking at various aspects of *The Book of Her Life* in the past few days with the purpose of getting a deeper and better understanding of Teresa's writing. I have deliberately skipped over Teresa's treatise on prayer which is in the middle of her book until this last session, because having a sense of the overall picture of the whole book helps us understand her treatise on prayer.

The treatise on prayer

At the end of Chapter 21, Teresa draws together her ideas of prayer as set out in Chapters 11 –21. She spoke about these souls that are living this [life of prayer],

'Hence it seems to me that souls upon whom the Lord bestows these favours and who receive them with humility and fear – always understanding that it is the Lord Himself who grants them and that we ourselves do almost nothing – could be placed in the company of any kind of people. Even if these people are distracted and corrupt, the soul will not be disturbed or enticed in anything; on the contrary, this experience will help it and serve as a means to greater progress. These are now strong souls the Lord chooses to benefit others, even though their fortitude doesn't come from themselves.' (Ch 21:11)

'Strong souls' then, the Lord chooses to benefit others, with a strength that does not come from themselves. That defines what Teresa would consider as a person living a mature prayer life. This is somebody who has the strength of soul that benefit others. The key point that Teresa wants to make is that spiritual life lived by an individual is not for the benefit of the individual but for that of the others. Like the Carmels that she founded, they were not for the benefit of those living within, but for everyone. Their **life of prayer** is a service to the whole Church and the whole world. Whoever lives a life of prayer and leads a mature Christian life, that person is benefitting many, many other people. They don't see it themselves, nor the people who benefit from it, but this is Teresa's conviction that this does great good, that human beings becoming fully alive. That's the whole purpose of prayer. That's why Teresa has to explain prayer. There is no other way of understanding Teresa's life except by experiencing it personally. Time and time again she emphasizes the need to experience prayer. Only those who pray can understand Teresa's life, and can understand what she is doing and why she is doing it.

The four ways of drawing water

Teresa uses the image of a garden to explain prayer: flowers of love grow there; a garden needs watering to grow. One needs water to live. Prayer is the water that enables the person (the soul) to live, and grow. To be alive is very important for Teresa: Teresa is a woman who wants to live, as we read in her writing. She has the conviction that prayer brings her **to life**. The one, with whom one communicates in prayer, gives life. He is the one who gives life, who brings the person to life. Prayer is the relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, and this relationship brings a person to life.

Her image of the garden is a rich imagery: the flowers in the garden are the virtues and fruits of prayer – that is, the maturity of the person and the growth of love. The person, who begins to pray, begins to water the garden. The most important thing to remember – when the person begins watering the garden, God has already made the way, cleared the weeds, cultivated the ground and sown the seed! An enormous amount of work has been done by God, before the person even realises it and gets the idea or the thought to pray. Everyone is a recipient of God's grace, of God's generosity and of love, in abundance. Prayer is a response to what God is doing. The beginner in prayer thinks that he/she has to do everything, but then realises that God has done almost everything, and that he/she has done very little. Prayer is a growing awareness of this. Of course,

the person has to commit at the beginning (as they have to draw the water in the first stage), but God has already put into the depth of this person's soul the capacity to grow and the potential to mature. God has cultivated the garden and the seed has been planted.

'Speaking now of the initial stages of those who are determined to seek out this good and embark on this enterprise, the greatest labour is in the beginning because it is the beginner who works while the Lord gives the increase.' (Ch 11:5)

The cross – suffering and salvation

Teresa then continues:

'In the other degrees of prayer the greatest thing is enjoying; although whether in the beginning, the middle, or the end, all bear their crosses even though these crosses be different. For all who follow Christ, if they don't want to get lost, must walk along this path that He trod.' (Ch 11:5)

There is always the cross there. That is what it is – a life like the life that Christ lived. The point of arrival of all authentic Christian lives is always the cross. The cross may take different forms at different stages for each individual, with a different meaning too.

There are two aspects of the cross. On the one hand, there is pain and suffering, sacrifice and self-giving. On the other hand, the cross is the salvation of the person. The cross is the very place where the person is saved, where the person grows into life, the old life dies and the new life comes in. The cross is where the person comes to life. We often see the cross in two different ways, but it is in fact one reality – both aspects bring about the overcoming of the false self and the emergence of the true self – the free self. This transformation takes place in different forms at different stages.

Teresa also points out that the cross is there all through life. 'This gardener helps Christ carry the cross and reflects that the Lord lived with it all during His life.' (Ch 11:10) So does the one who prays. 'And so he determined, even though this dryness may last for his whole life, not to let Christ fall with the cross.' (Ch 11:10). In this early stage, the cross is often felt as the dryness and the struggle to pray. This is the cross one bears, but it is also the salvation of the person.

Dryness and distractions

Teresa sums up in para. 17 of Chapter 11 –

'So I return to the advice – and even if I repeat it many times this doesn't matter – that [in all the stages of prayer] it is very important that no one be distressed or afflicted over dryness or noisy and distracting thoughts.' (Ch 11:17)

'Dryness, noisy and distracting thoughts' are always there. Teresa herself suffered so much with this dryness in prayer. There may be a sense that one is getting nowhere, of going backwards, of having no sense of the presence or the closeness of God, of feeling that this is pointless, of being distracted, impossible to concentrate, unable to think about anything holy or life-giving, experiencing all sorts of disturbances, etc. A person may feel great distress and pain. Whatever the form dryness may present, take no notice of them, Teresa advises, don't be distressed over any of these.

'If people wish to gain freedom of spirit and not always be troubled, let them begin by not being frightened by the cross, and they will see how the Lord also helps them carry it and they will gain satisfaction and profit from everything.' (Ch 11:17)

The goal is to gain freedom of spirit, this inner freedom, the freedom to give of oneself, however things may seem, whatever progress or lack of it there may be, whatever one may feel – peace or turmoil – simply give oneself freely.

‘For clearly, if the well is dry, we cannot put water into it. True, we must not become neglectful; when there is water we should draw it out because then the Lord desires to multiply the virtues by this means.’ (Ch 11:17)

Attentiveness, commitment [are needed], and the Lord will always bring about something, He will bring about the growth.

Self-knowledge and the growth in truth

The First Degree of prayer is setting the scene. A very important part of the First Degree of prayer is **self-knowledge**, just like the First Mansions in the *Interior Castle*. ‘This path of self-knowledge must never be abandoned, nor is there on this journey a soul so much a giant that it has no need to return often to the stage of an infant and a suckling.’ (Ch 13:15) All the time at every stage of the four ways of drawing water, as well as in the Mansions in the *Interior Castle*, one returns to self-knowledge. At every return, there is the growing in self-knowledge, and a growth in truth. This is the key. Sometimes, that truth can be very painful, challenging and distressing, but there is always the freedom. The truth sets you free. That’s the principle given in the Gospel of St John, ‘you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free’. (John 8: 32) Indeed, this is the growing in self-knowledge that sets the person free. Whatever it is that our eyes need to be open to, whatever darkness there is that we have not seen, the light of Jesus enables us at the right time to see. Where there is something in one way or another that is compromising, distorting, where one is not free, or where there is a blockage, the freedom of spirit is most needed and desired. This is always the question in spiritual life. The lack of freedom is often found in the first stage of drawing water.

Detachment and the growth in love

In the second stage of prayer, the person is growing. The Lord is doing more. The person is gradually drawn in.

‘Only the will is occupied in such a way that, without knowing how, it becomes captive; it merely consents to God allowing Him to imprison it as one who well knows how to be the captive of its lover. O Jesus and my Lord! How valuable is Your love to us here! It holds our love so bound that it doesn’t allow it the freedom during that time to love anything else but You.’ (Ch 14:2)

That’s the detachment that is setting in in the second way of drawing water. The person is drawn from loving all sorts of things that pull one in all directions to the love that focuses upon Jesus. One who loves Jesus Christ first, can then love others in the way that is free and mature, without self-interest. This involves a withdrawal from the earthly things. The person is growing in self-knowledge and detachment, and particularly, **growing in love**. ‘For here in these souls love has now increased, and it is love that is at work.’ (Ch 15:12) Love is the motive. The person who is growing in prayer, is also growing in love, in selflessness, in the capacity to be generous and the capacity to give. That is true love.

Another aspect of this second way of drawing water is shown in the pull towards silence and a deeper listening. Thus the person is more attuned to what God is doing.

The growth of virtues

Teresa’s interest is more on the third and fourth way of drawing water, partly because this is where her spiritual life is at. The person at this stage is going deeper.

‘In all these ways in which this last water comes from the spring I mentioned, the glory and repose of the soul is so great that the body very perceptibly shares in that joy and delight; it does so “very perceptibly,” and the virtues are as advanced as I have mentioned.’ (Ch 17:8)

Here, the virtues are growing and the person is at peace. This is all the Lord's doing, Teresa explains.

The right guidance is important for a person of prayer

'It seems that the Lord has desired to explain as much of these states in which the soul finds itself as can be understood here below. Your Reverence [Garcia de Toledo] can discuss this explanation with a spiritual person [Juan de Avila] who has experienced these states and who is also learned.' (Ch 17:8)

These two persons were very important for Teresa. [They both had the experience of prayer and were learned theologians.] Teresa struggled to find someone like them who could give her the right advice. She insisted that the spiritual directors had to be someone who had the experience of contemplative prayer, and had the learning and knowledge to understand it. One who did not have the experience would not understand and one who did not have the knowledge may mislead, and so would give the wrong advice to the one seeking guidance.

'If he should say that the explanation is all right, believe that it was given by God and thank His Majesty very much for it. Because, as I have said, with the passing of time individuals will be very glad to understand what it is; even though they are given the grace to enjoy it, they aren't given the grace to understand it.' (Ch 17:8)

This point is very important for Teresa. She had experienced the struggle herself and saw in her convent and many people of all walks of life who came to her for advice and assistance on prayer. Many of them were very advanced in prayer but, without the proper guide, did not recognise that they were on the right path. They wanted to pray but were given the wrong advice. Therefore, she understood that her writing about prayer was very much needed.

'If His Majesty has given you the grace to enjoy this prayer, you will through your intelligence and learning understand what is said here. May He be praised for everything throughout all ages, amen.' (Ch 17:8)

This is Teresa's purpose of writing this book. It would give guidance to those who are on this journey of prayer.