

Talk on Teresa's Life Wednesday 27th July 2022 AM

Continuing with the Book of Teresa's Life, and picking various bits out of it, I will focus on themes which are important for an overall understanding of the book. This time I'm looking at Ch. 22, which is a very important chapter, It is essential, right at the centre, the fulcrum of the whole book and the understanding of Teresa's thinking and teaching; it is the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life. The spiritual life for Teresa is walking with Jesus Christ beside you. (We will look at ch.27 of the Life this afternoon.) In the spiritual life one is never alone, this is always a life lived with Jesus Christ beside you; and it is always Jesus Christ bringing about the growth, maturing, purifying and the healing of all that is taking place. The person is opening themselves to the work of Jesus Christ.

Teresa has sometimes been described as a very Christian saint. You might think that's a strange thing to say, isn't every saint a Christian saint surely? But it is saying something; it tells us about the place that Jesus Christ plays in the Christian life, in the spiritual life, and particularly in growth in prayer. We grow in prayer with Jesus Christ beside us. Teresa's writings have been described many times as a "Gospel" in the true sense of what a Gospel is. A Gospel is, as the opening line of Mark's Gospel describes it, 'Good News about Jesus Christ'. Teresa's teaching is the good news about a life lived with Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ, journeying with, walking alongside the person. This is the good news of what happens, what Good News is about, of what takes place, of what great graces and benefits come to the person through this life with Jesus Christ being beside them. It is a Gospel.

There are two other things that might illustrate this a bit; the obvious one is explained on the sheet of paper I gave on the first evening divided into the first and second parts of her life. In the last twenty years of her life, she signs herself as *Teresa of Jesus*; which is very significant; it says so much. She is Teresa of Jesus. If you visit the museum of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, you'll see the famous stairs and a statue of Teresa and a statue of a little boy. There's a well-known story that one day Teresa met a little boy on the stairs who asked who she was; she said, 'I am Teresa of Jesus' and then asked the little boy who he was. He answered that he was Jesus of Teresa. A lovely little story but like all these stories, it conveys a fundamental truth: the importance of Jesus Christ in the thinking of Teresa, and particularly as we see here in Ch.22, it is the humanity of Jesus Christ.

I already mentioned that this is something that she had to defend in her own lifetime. One of the things I didn't mention and that can often be very helpful in reading this book, is to read the little titles that Teresa gives to each chapter. In her title to ch.22 for example she says:

Treats of how safe a path it is for contemplatives not to raise the spirit to high things unless the Lord raises it and of how the humanity of Christ must be the means to the most sublime contemplation. Tells about a mistaken theory she once tried to follow. This chapter is very beneficial.

She had no difficulty in boasting about her writings and sometimes the censors crossed out her boasting! She had no difficulty boasting because she knew it was needed and she goes further in the second line of the chapter, “If your Reverence (and this is the Dominican Garcia de Toledo) thinks it is good it can be used for giving advice since it could happen that you will have need of it”. There is very good reason for her writing that because she has by now effectively become his spiritual director, even though he is meant to be her's. She is telling him what to teach and guiding him in prayer; she is aware that what she is saying will be needed. It is a strange kind of set up in the sense that she is writing so that the theologians can assess what she's saying and give an expert opinion on whether or not she's on the right road, and she at the same time is advising them on the road that she is on, and on what the right way is, so that she has become their teacher; she recognises the need for this, for not only will he need it but also many others. What she's saying will be so important for so many people. It is the place of Jesus Christ.

We will look now at para. 4, “I had been devoted all my life to Christ . . . and thus I always returned to my custom of rejoicing in this Lord, especially when I received Communion”. (She is living in a time when they didn't get frequent Communion and it was often strongly discouraged.) For her, closeness to Jesus was so important, “I wanted to keep ever before my eyes a painting or image of Him since I was unable to keep Him as engraved in my soul as I desired.” She always carried a little picture of Him with her that she would hold in front of her when she tried to pray. She was a person of the visual, she needed imagery. The art work in her convents was so important to her, the sisters used to complain that she'd spend all the money on a new piece of art and there'd be no money for food.

Regarding Teresa's emphasis on the humanity of Christ, she says:

Is it possible my Lord, that it never entered my mind for even an hour that You would be an impediment to my greater good? [Of course it had and that is why it pained her so much.] Where have all my blessings come from but You? I don't want to think I was at fault in this, because it deeply saddens me and it certainly was ignorance. Thus You desired in Your goodness to remedy the matter by sending me someone who would draw me away from this error- and afterward by letting me see You so many times, as I shall explain later on - so that I would understand more clearly how great the error is, and tell many persons what I just said, and put it in writing here.

The conviction that she's called to be a teacher and a writer really grows with this particular insight, until now it is there in her treatise on prayer. I said she began this book by stating that it is a vocation, God wants this book to be written; God wants the whole world to know about this. She is the missionary, she is already the Doctor of the Church, she is proclaiming to the ends of the earth the Good News.

In paragraph 6 she gives a little more on how she prays:

If our nature or our health doesn't allow us to think always about the Passion, since to do so would be arduous, who will prevent us from being with Him in His risen state? We have Him so near in the Blessed Sacrament, where He is already glorified and where we don't have to gaze upon Him as being so tired and worn out, bleeding, wearied by His journeys, persecuted by those for whom He did so much good and not believed in by the Apostles.

In paragraph 7, Teresa addresses those who will read her book, Garcia de Toledo was a lord as well, for Teresa loved her titles. She always gave people their proper titles even though she said Carmelites should never use them and she herself never used them in Carmel:

Thus your Reverence and Lordship should desire no other path even if you are at the summit of contemplation; on this road you may walk safely.

Remember the heading we read at the beginning, Jesus Christ must be the means to the most sublime contemplation; in all stages of the journey from beginning to end, one is accompanied by Jesus Christ and must stay very close to Him and to the life He lived in this world. Jesus Christ would be her teacher when the Inquisition banned most of the books on prayer; He would be the

Word for her; He was constantly teaching her. He is the real teacher of the spiritual life.) She goes on:

This Lord of ours is the one from whom all blessings come to us. He will teach us these things. In beholding His life we find that He is the best example. What more do we desire than to have such a good friend at our side, who will not abandon us in our labours and tribulations, as friends in the world do? Blessed are they who truly love Him, and always keep Him at their side.

He is always beside us in times when we feel alone, times we feel that prayer is going nowhere, times when we cannot pray. He is always there, whatever difficulties we may have. This is something it took Teresa years to accept deep down within. He's there, He's truly there and nothing could change her mind.

The saints

Every time Teresa really wants to really get a point across to her readers in her writings, she brings in the saints. The saints are very close to her, and it is interesting to see which saints she brings up. St. Paul had an enormous influence on her, even at an external level. He went around founding churches and writing letters to them, Teresa went around founding communities and was constantly writing to them. So much of Teresa's language comes from Paul, her ideas, her way of seeing things. Why might that be? What do they have in common at the deepest level? They have both come to know Jesus through *direct experience*. Paul tells us that he did not know Jesus, who made Himself known to Paul; The Jesus Teresa relates with is the One she has come to know through experience, the One who walks by her side, lifts her up when she is down, whom she adores; she knows Jesus personally. So the language of Paul resonates with Teresa. It doesn't seem that any other name fell from Paul's lips than that of Jesus, as coming from one who kept the Lord close to his heart, just as she herself did. She continues:

Let us consider the glorious St. Paul: it doesn't seem that any other name fell from his lips than that of Jesus, as coming from one who kept the Lord close to his heart. Once I had come to understand this truth, I carefully considered the lives of some of the saints, the great contemplatives, and found that they hadn't taken any other path: St. Francis demonstrates this through the stigmata; St. Anthony of Padua, with the Infant; St. Bernard found his delight in the Humanity; St. Catherine of Siena... and many others about whom your Reverence knows more than I. (22:7)

There are two groups of saints in particular, contemplatives and sinners. Some were converts like St. Augustine and St. Mary Magdalene, also St. Paul; and some were the Apostles, Martha, Mary and Lazarus and the Samaritan woman, those who were close to Jesus. In paragraph 9 she says:

For then the soul is occupied completely loving the One whom the intellect laboured to know, and loves what it didn't understand, and rejoices in so great a joy that it couldn't have experienced it save by losing itself in order, as I say, to gain itself. (22:9)

We're dealing with something here that is beyond our understanding. The person will be struggling to find Jesus, struggling to have any holy thoughts or prayer or anything, yet will be engaged totally in loving at a deeper level. A person may be praying at a deeper level, with the mind having no knowledge of it, or thinking it can't pray at all, or being totally distracted and confused, yet be in the deepest loving, the deepest prayer, the deepest relationship.

That is a mystery which Teresa becomes more aware of as she tells us that she could never control her own mind, was always distracted. But here it is more than distractions, although she really doesn't understand this at an intellectual level but at the level of love. But that's not some kind of dream place, some kind of heaven on earth, we need human support every bit as much. She tells us:

It is an important thing that while we are living and are human, we have human support. This disadvantage of not having human support leads to the other reason I referred to. [The reason is that we have to stick to the humanity of Jesus Christ.] With regard to the first reason, I already began to say that there is a small lack of humility in wanting to raise the soul up before the Lord raises it, in not being content to meditate something so valuable, and in wanting to be Mary before having worked with Martha. (22:9)

Martha and Mary: she comes back to these two saints over and over again. The contrast between them is seen in Luke's Gospel where Mary is sitting listening and Martha is serving. How those two relate to each other was a struggle in Teresa all through her life. Is she Mary? Is she Martha? Eventually she resolves that she is both: every Christian has to be to be both; a Christian cannot be one without the other. The one who listens is called ever more deeply into a life of service.

When the Lord desires to raise up the soul, even if He does so from the first day, there is no need for fear: but let us restrain ourselves as I believe I said before. This little speck of lack of humility, even though it seems to be nothing, does much harm to progress in contemplation. (22:9)

Humility and humanity

If there is any lack of humility, the person is not growing; the more progress we make, the more humble we become. No matter how holy or contemplative the person might appear to be, if humility is not growing then the person is not growing. Therefore, to people who say one should be thinking of more high and exalted things if one becomes holy, Teresa says no, that is not a sign of holiness. A person making progress is more humble and more human than ever. Feet are more firmly on the ground.

To get to her second point, (the first point is humility, the second point humanity), Teresa says in paragraph 10, “We're not angels, but we have a body.” Spiritual growth is about becoming *more human*, not less, becoming more involved in the life of this world, not less. To get a little more of what Teresa says here:

When one is in the midst of business matters, and in time of persecution and trials, when one can't maintain so much quietude, and in time of dryness, Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as man and see Him with weakness and trials - and He is company for us.

(22:10)

She is referring to all the things that could take one away from quiet and from some kind of perfect spiritual life that we think a contemplative should have; such as business matters and times of persecution and trials, whatever they might be, interior or exterior. Teresa is living through many of these in her own life: and that is when Christ is a good friend. Jesus Christ lived a human spiritual life just as He lived a human life, in every way. Whatever a human being is going through in their spiritual life, Jesus Christ has been there. He lived life to the full and therefore He lives a human spiritual life to the full. All the trials, struggles, tribulations and challenges that human spiritual growth requires, Jesus will have lived it, will have known it, will understand it and support us along the way if we open ourselves to Him. That is Teresa's thinking, that is what's going through her mind all the time; that is what she's teaching.

Conclusion

Well I want to conclude by saying this: As often as we think of Christ we should recall the love with which he bestowed on us so many favours and what great love God showed us in

giving us a pledge like this of His love, for love begets love. Even if we are at the very beginning and are very wretched, let us strive to keep this divine love always before our eyes and to waken ourselves to love. If at some time the Lord should favour us by impressing this love on our hearts, all will become easy for us, and we shall carry out our tasks quickly and without much effort. May His Majesty give us this love--since He knows how fitting it is for us--on account of the love He bore us and on account of His glorious Son, who demonstrated His love for us at so great a cost to Himself, amen. (22:14)

When she puts in an Amen a red light should flash! She really wants us to hear this. All prayer is a response to His love; prayer is a relationship of love with the One we know loves us.

Just love

At whatever stage one is at, if one is very wretched at the beginning, think of His love; if at the heights of contemplation think of His love. See in Him the demonstration, the revealing of God's love; no greater love than to lay down one's life. Just love, she says; whatever opportunity there is to love, just love. She gives that advice so often in her writings; the one that comes to mind is the Fourth Dwelling Place in the Interior Castle, a very difficult place to explain. Look, she says, it is all about love, just love. That's what it is about, that's what Jesus Christ did, He just lived by love. The life of prayer is always the following of Jesus in a personal friendship in one's own life and circumstance, one lives according to one's state in life, wherever God has put one. There is no state of life more conducive to holiness than another. Where God has put us is where Jesus walks beside us.

The more holy we are the more human we become.