

Introduction No. 1: change and conversion

This time, I want to look at the last part of the first section, chapters eight, nine and ten, just picking out certain things. These are chapters showing how Teresa *arrived*.

“Well, let us speak now of those who are beginning to be servants of love.” (11:1) Teresa begins chapter eleven, the treatise on prayer, speaking of those who are starting to become *servants of love*. That is Teresa’s definition of those who are now growing in prayer. Teresa comes to a point in chapter ten where she recognises in herself that prayer is changing, and it is changing on God’s terms, not hers. Things are happening that are not her doing. There is no way of influencing the process or bringing it about, there is *learning* taking place here. That is what spurs her on, after examining and writing more deeply about what prayer is. In the chapters leading up to that, eight nine and ten in particular, we can see Teresa’s growing, see how she arrived.

She couldn’t pray

As she tells us, she always speaks from experience. And the starting-point to that experience, on the surface at least, as Teresa tells it, is negative. She just couldn’t pray. She sees just how inadequate and weak a person she really is. I want to take one little bit from the first paragraph of chapter seven, where she defines for us how she has been living for a long period of time. She said she is going from pastime to pastime, vanity to vanity, from one occasion of sin to another. Then she says,

I was then ashamed to return to the search for God by means of a friendship as special as is that found in the intimate exchange of prayer. And I was aided in this vanity by the fact that as the sins increased, I began to lose joy in virtuous things and my taste for them. I saw very clearly, my Lord, that these were failing me because I was failing You.

Teresa would probably tell us that this statement sums up twenty years of her life. It is obviously objectively not true, but it is how it seems to her at this stage. She is plunged into a very deep awareness of her sinfulness, of her unworthiness, and how she comes to recognise that the evil one, the devil, uses this to get her to give up prayer. The evil one gets her to lose confidence in prayer, to lose trust in prayer, and, as she says, not to return to prayer. We can see here the origin of one of Teresa’s most important counsels on prayer: just pray, just pray, let nothing put one off

praying. She says this in various ways throughout her writings, because she has very personal experience of being put off praying - a false humility, or an exaggerated sense of how unworthy she is.

As I said, Teresa was not objectively-speaking living a bad life; she was not committing serious crimes or acting sinfully. However, as is always a feature when God's grace strikes a person, they actually experience a profound sense of their unworthiness. The light shows up the darkness, like John of the Cross's image: when the sun is shining on the window, we see all the specks in the beam. If the sun isn't shining, we won't see them. When the light of God's grace is shining on Teresa, that is what is happening. By the grace of God, she has gone through a long patch of just not being able to pray. What she needs, as she tells us further on, is courage.

Friendship

Courage is so needed to pray, because courage is needed to face oneself, it is the way forward. Teresa said, "I was ashamed to return to the search for God by means of a friendship as special as I found in the intimate exchange of prayer". Prayer as *friendship*; that is what she is learning at this stage of her life. This is the most intimate friendship of her life. And it comes at a time when her life, externally, humanly speaking, is suffering very much from unhealthy friendships.

Teresa has so often been described as the woman of friendship; she is very faithful to her friends and has so many friends; she searches for friends, is loyal to friends, is very hurt when they let her down, because she is such an outgoing person, an extravert, a person of relationships, friendships, and prayer is the greatest friendship of her life. But she has also suffered from friendships that were not right, that were not life-giving. It is in that context that she really begins to live, when she sees how destructive some friendships can be. The friendship that really gives life is her friendship with God.

Therefore, prayer is what she returns to; that is now what is happening in these chapters. Prayer is starting to do what prayer does, as she personally experiences it. She has been longing for prayer all her life, longing for what she describes as the support of the strong pillar of prayer, because what has been taken from her is her joy. She didn't enjoy God, she said, and she didn't find happiness in the world. (8:2) We can all identify with that. It is a stage met so often in people who are growing spiritually: they can't enjoy God but nothing else is enjoyable either. It corresponds with one of John of the Cross's signs for the dark night: when the person no longer finds joy in the

things of the world, but neither in the things of God that gave them joy before. God has to take these joys from them to purify them, because they are not God.

Transformation

Now, Teresa is growing her relationship with God. Courage is needed, she said, because the so-called supports that she would have relied upon, and others would have relied upon, have been pulled out from under her. She is at the cusp of real growth, real transformation, and she wants to write with complete truthfulness (Prologue,2). That is the great gift of Teresa's prayer: in her writing we feel we are taken into her experience, the experience of God. This is what really happens.

All the time, Teresa comes back to the devil. She said, "I can speak of what I have experience of . . . may the devil not tempt them, the way he did me, to give up prayer out of humility". (8:5) It haunts Teresa that she was tempted to give up prayer out of humility. The more she realises the value of prayer, the more she comes back to this. Paragraph 8:5 is a key paragraph so often quoted from Teresa's writings.

Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good. (8:5)

Don't go without so great a good. Teresa means not just going through the external rituals of prayer, or even spending time in silence and prayer. It means both of those, of course, but it means something much deeper. It means *trusting* that whatever is happening or not happening, whatever one is doing or not doing, it is valuable, it is worthwhile, it is prayer. Just trust in one's desire to pray, one's failure to pray, one's struggle to pray, don't give up. The person who doesn't give up always grows. And if one perseveres, she says:

I trust then, in the mercy of God, who never fails to repay anyone who has taken Him for a friend ... For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord. The will of the Lord, it is already known, cannot be at fault; our will is vicious, sensual and ungrateful. And if you do not yet love Him as He loves you because you have not reached the degree of conformity with His will, you will endure this pain of spending a long while with one who is so different from you when you see how much it benefits you to possess His friendship and know how much He loves you. (8:5)

In this friendship, and the growing in this friendship, we see how different he is. And that for Teresa is the cause of our need for courage. He is different. This is the most intimate friendship of one's life, a friendship with someone who is very different to any other friend in this world. A growing has to take place, and that takes time. But that is what gives life.

Ch 8, paragraph 6: the struggle

As Teresa so often does in her writing, in the sixth paragraph of chapter eight she turns to prayer. She is addressing her readers, then addressing God. When she addresses God directly, she is making a very important point to her readers. Always take note when Teresa suddenly starts addressing God. Really, she is addressing her readers, but putting it in terms of addressing God. This is a critical paragraph where she addresses God:

Oh infinite goodness of my God, for it seems to me I see that such is the way You are and the way I am!

Pause there; that of course is what she is – that is what prayer is showing her, at ever deeper levels, what she will later call self-knowledge. The way you are, and the way I am. But she goes on with the prayer: ‘

O delight of angels, when I see this, I desire to be completely consumed in loving You! How certainly You do suffer the one who suffers to be with you. Oh, what a good friend You make, my Lord! How You proceed by favouring and enduring. You wait for the others to adapt to Your nature, and in the meanwhile You put up with theirs! You take into account, my Lord, the times when they love You, and in one instant of repentance You forget their offenses. (8:6)

God's love is always there, but God walks at our pace. He waits for us. He is patient with us. This is a time when God's patience is really being seen. A person's impatience, somehow, is becoming an obstacle. We want everything. We want it now, but we do not recognise our need for growth, for change, for repentance, for purification; this friendship has to change us; it is changing us but it is so difficult for us to recognise that.

This continuous process keeps building up in Teresa's writings. She is defending it because she is looking back on it so many years later. She is recognising the struggle that was going on within her, and giving us the elements of that struggle. At the very end of this chapter, (I have already quoted a little bit of this paragraph which is so key to the whole book, to the whole life), she said, "I wanted to live." This is what was really going on: the call to life, and the frustration of not knowing. Then she puts in brackets:

(For I well understood that I was not living but was struggling with a shadow of death), but I had no-one to give me life, and I was unable to catch hold of it. He who had the power to give it to me was right in not helping me, for so often had He brought me back to Himself; and so often had I abandoned Him. (8:12)

We come to life through relationships. Modern psychology shows us that so well, but Teresa understood it in the sixteenth century. Moreover, she understood that there is only one relationship that really brings us to the fulness of life, and that is our relationship with God, our relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the relationship with which we grow into the fulness of ourselves, the fulness of our humanity, the fulness of peace, of joy, of everything that we are created for, that we long for. Only he can give it. He is right, she said, in not giving it. Why is he right in not giving it? Because the human being has to grow. We have to grow into love, to grow in our capacity to love, then we can relate with God. He is right, she said, in not giving it until the time is right.

Chapter 9, Conversion

Chapter nine is what changes Teresa. Often described as her conversion experience, - (one of them, there are a few other experiences that have been described as conversion), she recounts something to us that brings about irreversible change. That I suppose is what we could define as conversion: a spiritual experience that brings about irreversible change. There is no going back. It was brought about here by an experience in front of a work of art, a statue (9:1), but what really gave Teresa the key understanding was her reading the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. That book truly changed her. That is what opened Teresa's eyes to what was actually going on and gave her the wisdom and understanding of the change that was taking place. Books were so important for Teresa anyway, but it just shows the effect of reading a book at the right time. In particular she brings out that it is Augustine's account of his conversion that gave her the wisdom to see right into herself.

To be silent and alone

So, we get the sense of chapter nine; what is now coming out of this? '

It seemed to me my soul gained great strength from the Divine Majesty and He must have heard my cries and taken pity on so many tears. The inclination to spend more time with Him began to grow. (9:9)

That is key. Teresa *wasn't* inclined to spend time with him, she found it really hard. Further on, she tells us she would go to prayer and all she would be doing was listening to the clock striking – clocks struck in those days – watching the time, will it ever pass? One seemed to be somewhere else, just not wanting to be there at all costs. Where was that coming from? She has come from that to this pull, this inclination, to be in silence with him. That is the sign of grace. She will always pick that out in her writings as the key sign if something is of God: the person will just want to be alone. It doesn't mean that anything has to happen when they are alone, it doesn't mean that the time alone has to be filled with some wonderfully good feelings or anything. It might be as empty as it was before; it might require every bit as much courage or more than it did before, but they will *want* to be there. The person will know it's right to be there. Previously there was questioning of that; now the person will know it is right to be there. That is the first sign she gives, an inclination to spend time alone.

Then she says, 'I started to shun the occasions of sin.' However, as I keep saying, it does not mean that there are some great sins happening here, but rather, there is a care and attentiveness around sinfulness. This attentiveness, she tells us, is present right up to the highest mansions of the Interior Castle. The person has a very keen sense of what sin is, because it is to go against love. When love grows, there is a great care not to go against love. The more that love grows, the more careful the person is not to do something against love; love is growing, therefore there is a fear, a loathing, of what is contrary to love. There is a deeper sensitivity of what is contrary to love because it avoids a return to loving His Majesty.

In my opinion, I clearly understood that I loved Him; but I did not understand as I should have what true love of God consists in. (9:9)

That has been the key struggle for Teresa. She comes now to understand that she did love God. She loved God all this time. Even though his love for her of course was never in question, her love for him was. She questioned her love for him; now she recognised that she did love him, and always did. What she needed to learn was not to love God but to learn what real love means. We are coming back to what I quoted at the very beginning of this talk, *those who are beginning to become servants of love*. She could have put it as, "those who are beginning to learn what real love is". They begin to learn what real love is, then they begin to see what real prayer is. She needs to explain again what prayer is. Prayer has brought her to the point of learning what real love is. Now she sees prayer in those terms. She's learning now what real love is.

Mystical prayer

Chapter ten is the beginning of Teresa entering into mystical prayer, into contemplation. Or perhaps a better way of putting it: it is the beginning of her understanding that this is where she has been brought. Of course, it has been happening earlier; of course, God has been pouring his love and grace into Teresa. But she has not been able to recognise it, has not been able to see what it really is. Having to go through the struggle of God shining his light upon her, she is seeing everything that is not God, and not seeing that it is God who is shining light on her.

Now she is beginning to recognise who God is. But the recognition is coming in a way that she never expected, and struggles at times to understand. This just came over her, as she said:

that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in him.

Teresa has already told us that prayer is the key to this. Prayer is what allows God in and allows us into God. Now God is showing her what this means. The intellect doesn't work, in other words there is no understanding at an intellectual level, but it is as though amazed by all it understands; God desires that, with regard to the things his Majesty represents to us, it understands nothing. The mind realises that it understands nothing, yet it knows that God is doing all this.

In conclusion, Teresa tells us, "As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for anyone who has not had experience". It is another key learning point for Teresa, for it simply can't be explained until it's *experienced*. Only the person who has experienced what she has will recognise it, but use other words. Somebody with experience will pick up Teresa's words and say, "Ah! I know this, I recognise it. It is putting into words what I have already experienced." That is what she is recognising here. She goes on to say:

I'll speak of some things that as I understand them are obstacles to progress along this path and other things in which there is danger. These things I'll say from what the Lord has taught me through experience and through discussions with very learned men and persons who have lived the spiritual life for many years.

This is an audacious statement in the context of Teresa's life. I imagine the theologians crossing it out pretty quickly, because in her day this was very suspect. What the Lord has taught her through experience she is going to write, also, what she has learned through discussions with learned men, (they are the very theologians who will be looking at this, her superiors and assessors) and

“persons who have lived the spiritual life for many years”. She is distinguishing these persons from the theologians; they would be her sisters and many other holy people that Teresa knows, many who had been coming to her for years for spiritual direction.

One of the things we know about Teresa, throughout all these years of real spiritual struggle, is that people were coming to her for spiritual direction. I mentioned yesterday that her father was coming to her for spiritual direction for a few years before he died. She thought she wasn't praying at all; she thought she had given up prayer, but people were coming to her, were drawn to her; and she was giving them advice and help and support, which was obviously very effective. The Lord was working through her even though she didn't recognise it.

Now, all that experience is coming together; Teresa is preparing for what she is now going to speak about in her *Four Waters*, or treatise on prayer, her first real teaching book. She has learned through the Lord, and she is all the time conversing with, and writing to, and corresponding with the main theologians who are experts in scripture, and with many other persons. “I love to talk about prayer” she said, “teach prayer.”

She is already a teacher. But she adds:

It will be seen that within only twenty-seven years in which I have practised prayer His Majesty has given me the experience - along with my walking amid so many stumbling-blocks and so poorly on this path - that for others took forty-seven or thirty-seven years; they journeyed in penance and always in virtue. (10:9)

Twenty-seven years is of course how long she has been a religious in the convent but she is recognising that the Lord has given her what took other people much longer. She is recognising the work of God that has happened despite saying she wasn't praying at all. Now she is recognising the truth, that she *was* praying all along. Of course, she wants to allow for thinking that what she was doing was not prayer, but in reality, it was, and she is recognising that. That is the source which she's going to use to write about prayer; to write this wonderful work on prayer.

I will finish with the last paragraph of chapter ten that is again very personal:

May His Majesty be blessed for everything and served by me on account of who He is. For my Lord knows well that in writing this I have no other aim than that He be praised and extolled a little when it is seen that in so filthy and malodorous a dungheap, He should make a garden with so many delicate flowers. May His Majesty be pleased that through my

own fault I do not pull them up again and let the garden return to what it was. I beg for the love of God that your Reverence [Garcia de Toledo] pray for this since you know more clearly what I am than you have allowed me to tell here. (10: 9)

“Dungheap” - what a way to describe herself, goodness! But it is her way of expressing the transformation that has happened. She wants to talk about her sinfulness, God wants her to talk about prayer, which is what she’s going to write about. It is a transformation that has happened, that God has done in her; she is making a very strong statement that what she has learned in prayer she now intends to turn into teaching. That is what prayer has done: she has been teaching for so long, unofficially of course, because she lives in an age when women are not allowed to teach. So, it just gives a sense of the courage that this woman has; courage coming from prayer. She just has this trust in prayer, a certainty that what comes from prayer is effective and will be effective.