

## **Aylesford secular Order Retreat**

### **Talk 5 on Teresa's Life Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2022 pm**

This afternoon we are looking at Chapter 27, continuing to look at the place of Jesus Christ in Teresa's Life. This chapter is sometimes described by commentators as the decisive moment or the final conversion; not necessarily accurately. She is entering very deeply into the place of Jesus Christ in her life. We need to understand in a right way the visions and all kind of experiences that she speaks about, particularly in chapters 23-32. How might we be able to understand these? There's the sense of Jesus being with her. Towards the end of Ch 26 she has this experience when the Inquisition forbade the reading of works of prayer in the vernacular and she heard the words "Don't be sad, for I shall give you the living book". She didn't understand what this meant at the time, but it became clear a bit later.

#### **The Living Book**

Ch 26:5 "His Majesty had become the true book in which I saw the truths. Blessed be such a book that leaves what must be read and done so impressed that you cannot forget."

She's entering into these very profound experiences, for He is the book, the Word and all kinds of expressions like that. Whatever must be read and done so impressed her that it cannot be forgotten. There's a certainty to it. But just before this she's given a principle that she always lived by; she would never take a decision based on these kinds of experiences. She was asked by her confessors to write this book, (See Prologue) and had known for a long time that the Lord wanted this book, but would never act until she was ordered to do so. She clarifies more clearly the process of taking decisions at the beginning of para 5 Ch 26:

"As often as the Lord commanded something of me in prayer and my confessor told me to do otherwise, the Lord returned and told me to obey my confessor; afterward His majesty would change the confessor's mind, and he would agree with the Lord's command."

That repeats itself over and over again in her life. God speaks directly with her, He also speaks through people; through the Church; through the Church's representatives, confessors, superiors. It is only when both coincide, when she has human authorisation, that she will act; no matter how certain she is, and often she is very certain.

#### **The wrong path**

This is a good introduction to Ch. 27. First of all, we have this very decisive, very profound experience of Jesus Christ; then she gives us the context, which is a very profound internal battle. She's been told that she's in the hands of the devil; that her way of prayer is wrong and is leading her astray. In her day the devil was very real, God was also very real. The devil was leading her astray, that's what she has been told by these expert theologians, experts in the spiritual life. She's really caught here. Let's hear her own words.

27:1 "The truth of the matter is that though I was beseeching God and however much I wanted to desire another path, it wasn't in my power to desire it, even though I always prayed for it because I saw my soul so improved. . . . I saw that I was a completely different person, I could not desire another path but placed myself in the hands of God that he would carry out

His will completely in me; He knew what suited me. . . ,Nor was I able to force myself, even though I did all I could to believe and desire another road it wasn't in my power to do so. I made novenas. I recommended myself to St. Hilarion and to St. Michael the Archangel of whom I became a devotee for this purpose.”

### **In the devil's hands?**

She's been told to pray that the Lord will lead her on a different path, as the one she's on is wrong; yet she says she's unable to desire this. She hasn't the power to desire this for she sees the path she is on is doing her so much good. The path she's on is right but these human beings are telling her that she's in the hands of the devil; that she's gone completely the wrong way! The battle is going on; she is praying that the Lord will guide her. She can't force herself to believe something where the evidence to the contrary is so overwhelming. She brings in the saints because she really needs them here.

### **Christ by her side**

27:2 “Being in prayer on the feast-day of the glorious St. Peter, I saw or to put it better, I felt Christ beside me; I saw nothing with my bodily eyes or with my soul, but it seemed to me that Christ was at my side - I saw that it was He in my opinion who was speaking to me. . . .It seemed to me that Christ was at my side.

He's there, He's always there. This is the truth that's imprinted in her soul. He's always there:

27:3 “I immediately went very anxiously to my confessor to tell him. He asked me in what form I saw Him. I answered that I didn't see Him. He asked how I knew it was Christ. I answered that I didn't know how, but I couldn't help knowing that He was beside me . . .For if I say that I see it with the eyes neither of my body nor of the soul, because it is not an imaginative vision, how do I know and affirm that He is more certainly at my side than if I saw Him? . . . [this is] a knowledge given to the soul that is clearer than sunlight . . . but that a light, without your seeing light, illumines the intellect so that the soul may enjoy such a great good. The vision bears with it wonderful blessings”.

27:4 . . . “In this vision it is seen clearly that Jesus Christ, son of the Virgin, is present . . . in this vision, along with the impressions, you see that also the most sacred humanity accompanies us and desires to grant us favours”.

The human Jesus, the humanity of Jesus, that's the Jesus that she sees and experiences, something like what the Apostles have after the Resurrection. She faces huge difficulties; she has to convince her confessor; she has to find a way of writing about it.

27:5 “Then the confessor asked me “Who said it was Jesus Christ?” “He told me many times” I answered. But before He told me He impressed upon my intellect that it was He, and before doing this latter He told me He was present - but I didn't see Him . . .The Lord desires to be so engraved upon the intellect that this vision can no more be doubted than can what is seen”.

### **A new way of seeing**

This is a whole new way of seeing, of knowing, of experiencing. It has all the marks of an act of God: this is a purely spiritual experience. It is a certainty, more certain than if a person is standing there; more certain than if a person is speaking; or if you can touch a person. There is a greater certainty here that it is Him and no one else. It can never be forgotten. It is imprinted, she said on the intellect and on the soul. She sees herself so much improved; the outcome is so positive; its purpose here is preparing her for what is to come. This is the experience that makes her a writer, a teacher, a founder. All of that will come in the next few years. God is preparing Teresa. In addition to seeing, there is *hearing* this heavenly language.

27:7 “This kind of vision and language is something so spiritual that there is no restlessness in the faculties or in the senses in my opinion, by which the devil can deduce anything.”

So, nothing is heard, nothing in the senses, nothing is felt at a bodily level, nothing is imagined. There is no way that this can be from the devil: no way that evil can creep into this, nor can it be distorted in any way. She uses food as an image to explain this

27:7 “It is as though the food were already placed in the stomach without our eating it or knowing how it got there. It is clearly known to be there, although the stomach doesn't know what food it is or who put it there.”

A great image to describe this, its nourishing, but no knowing what it is, or how it got there but knowing that it is there. She then goes on to speak of the Trinity:

27:9 “The mystery of the Blessed Trinity and other sublime things are so explained that there is no theologian with whom it would not dispute in favour of the truth of these grandeurs.”

To expand that – we have a few of her Spiritual Testimonies on this topic it is also seen in the Seventh Dwelling Place of the Interior Castle, chapter One, where she goes into the truth of the Trinity; more clearly than any theologian could explain, or any book or any library filled with attempts to explain the Trinity. Here she understands it In exactly the same way as the theologians do but with a clearer and deeper understanding that comes from this heavenly language that cannot be put into words.

### **Heavenly language**

27:9 “One of these favours is enough to change a soul completely, free it from the love of things and make it love Him who it sees makes it capable, without any effort of its own; of blessings so great, who communicates secrets to it and treats it with such friendship and love that one cannot describe this in writing... Those who don't have a very living faith will be unable to believe in them.”

Over and over again she tells us in this chapter that she can't put into writing what she's attempting to put in writing. Only those who have experienced this will know exactly what she's speaking about; it will jump off the page. It cannot be wordily understood.

27:10 “For God and the soul understand each other only through the desire His Majesty has that it understand Him . . . It's is like the experience of two persons here on earth who love

each other deeply, and understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance, it seems, they understand each other. This must be similar to what happens in the vision; without our knowing how, these two lovers gaze directly at each other.”

These two love each other, understand each other, but only through what God does, not through anything the human being does. This is heavenly language, a language of love and understanding, Now she turns to God in prayer as she so often does. This is a lovely prayer:

27:11 “O admirable kindness of God, You allow me to gaze upon You with eyes that have so badly gazed as have those of my soul. May they, Lord, become accustomed through this vision not to look at base things, so that nothing outside of You might satisfy them! O ingratitude of mortals! To what extremes will you go? For I know through experience that what I say is true and that what can be said is the least of what You do, Lord, for a soul to bring to such frontiers.”

After turning to God, she turns to Garcia de Toledo again, for whom she's writing this. She has a need to tell people about this; they must know about this. But she's a sixteenth century woman, she's not allowed to speak, not allowed to write or to teach. She's all the time coming up against this so she turns to him.

27:13 “Your Reverence ought to cry out these truths since God has taken from me the freedom to do so. I should like them to be proclaimed to me always; yet I’ve been so slow myself to hear and understand God, as will be seen in what is written here, that it is very embarrassing to speak about this; as a result I desire to be silent. I shall only say what sometimes comes to mind. May it please the Lord to bring me to the goal that I might enjoy this blessing.”

### **The need to teach**

She wants him to express it; she doesn't want to be silent; she wants to cry out; she wants everyone to know about this. She's becoming ever more convinced of the vocation to be a teacher, to spread the news. She knows that in the context of her history, this is putting the whole book in danger, as if the book wasn't in danger already. This puts it into great danger as there was great suspicion in Teresa's time about all this area [of prayer]. So, there's nothing better than to bring in a friend to defend her.

The saint she brings in has just died, St. Peter of Alcantara, who had helped her greatly not long before. She brings him in here to defend her: he's conveniently dead so no-one can ask him. She gives a long account of his life; many people think he's a saint. He is one of only two people she names in the entire book. He had broken away from the Franciscans and had lived an extremely austere life; he practised extreme mortifications for many years. (She never adapted any of his practices for her communities.) Then she comes back to Garcia de Toledo.

27:21 “What a discourse I've got myself into! May it awaken your Reverence so that you will not esteem anything pertaining to this life- as though you didn't know and weren't already determined to put renunciation into practice!”

She's all the time exhorting him; he had come under her spiritual direction a little while before. She

tells us elsewhere that he had grown very rapidly but he wasn't quite at the stage where he can understand this, but she's guiding him and then she would guide the world. Teresa's vision is always looking around the world. The deeper her prayer life the more she finds herself taken out into the world; the deeper Teresa's spiritual development, the greater her sensitivity and awareness of the wider world. Prayer does that.

### **A deep understanding of Jesus and the Trinity**

This whole chapter we could say is about being taken into a very deep understanding of Jesus Christ; the Trinity, the nature of God; and of how God relates with the person, but she never loses sight of the fact that the deeper prayer goes, the deeper understanding of the whole world it takes you to; not just at some superficial level but at a very deep level. In the last paragraph she goes back to that:

27:21 "I see so much perdition in the world that even though my writing about it brings me no more benefit than to tire me out, I find rest in doing so for everything I have written is against myself. [A little bit of diplomacy here!] May the Lord pardon me for my offences against Him in this matter, and may your Reverence do so too, for I tire you unintentionally. It appears that I want you to do penance for my sins in this matter."

### **Changed by prayer**

Chapter 27 was very carefully constructed, bringing together what this whole book is about. It is about coming alive, growing in prayer; it is about what prayer really is; this conversation of friendship with God, beyond all human friendship. That is God's doing. The person consents to it, accepts it and is open to being changed by it. Teresa says if you want to live a life of prayer, you're going to be changed. Don't come on this journey unless you're willing to be changed, and changed in ways that you didn't expect. In this experience of God, of prayer, that she is brought into by God, that grows and matures in her, there comes a very strong calling to speak about it, to teach it. It is in speaking about it and writing about it that she becomes a teacher. She's now writing about this to help others understand, because they need to understand. She says to Garcia de Toledo - "You need this your Reverence, you need this!" She sees that he is someone who can guide souls; and shortly after this he goes to Peru to be chaplain to the Viceroy, where he'll stay for many years.

But there's something else she's doing, that she has to do. In the context of her time it is difficult and problematic: she has to defend prayer; in particular has to defend the deeper stages of prayer, the deeper riches of prayer. There was a great suspicion in her time particularly around women being brought into the deeper stages of prayer. There were people being misled of course and there were difficulties. She has to defend the work of God and what God does in people's lives, because she said Jesus did this in the Gospels. Jesus defended people of prayer, particularly women of prayer. Women were very close to Jesus in the Gospels and therefore should be close to Him now. She will say later that far more women live this [life of prayer] than men do. She's defending that, defending the vocation that's growing deeper as we go through this book. The book comes alive at deeper levels, but this chapter 27 is particularly important, it is as if all the building blocks are in place.

This chapter needs very careful reading.

