

IN THE SPIRIT OF TERESA: THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX AS A FRIEND OF GOD

At first sight, my choice of title for this talk may seem strange. In it, I have linked the name of St Thérèse of Lisieux with that of St Teresa of Avila. I have done this designedly. Because in my experience, many people today have heard of Thérèse – as we know from the rapturous welcome her relics have received here in England, not to mention in the many other parts of the world. But not everyone knows that she was a Discalced Carmelite, or even what it means to be a Carmelite. She lived and taught in the spirit of that remarkable woman, Teresa of Avila – saint, mystic and Doctor of the Church – who reformed the Carmelite Order in the 16th century and so founded the Discalced branch of Carmel, also known as the Teresian Carmelites. These two women, Teresa and Thérèse, lived three centuries apart, but they shared a common Carmelite heritage which was to condition their own spiritual formation and especially their teachings on prayer. Thomas Merton once wrote: ‘There is no member of the Church who does not owe something to Carmel.’ I believe that we can specify even further: there is no member of the Church who *cannot* benefit from Carmel’s teaching on prayer. It answers to the most urgent need for renewal in the Church today, and to a deep hunger in every human heart for a meaningful relationship with God and a longing to learn how to pray. In the Church, Carmel is synonymous with prayer.

Teresa herself wrote: ‘All of us who wear this holy habit of Carmel are called to prayer and contemplation. This call explains our origin,’ she continues, ‘we are descendants of men who felt this call, of those holy fathers on Mount Carmel who in such great solitude and contempt for the world sought this treasure, this precious pearl of contemplation’ (IC V1:1:2). Mount Carmel is a triangular range of hills sprawling across the northern part of the Holy Land. St Albert, patriarch of Jerusalem, gave a rule of life to these hermits at the beginning of the 13th century. Prayer and contemplation, as the *Rule* shows, are a priority for all branches of the extended and universal Carmelite family: ‘pondering the law of the Lord day and night’ in *lectio divina* and ‘watching in prayer’ (# 10). In the course of time, the ancient eremitical or solitary lifestyle was enriched with a new community dimension. The ruins of the first Carmelite oratory and refectory on Mount Carmel itself, still visible today, bear witness to this change. The Order of Carmel now encircles the globe and lives on in numerous monasteries of friars, like the community in our retreat centre on Boars Hill, and in even more numerous convents of nuns, and in lay groups. Its spirit survives, clothed in a rich variety of cultures. But it is particularly through Thérèse of Lisieux, though by no means exclusively, that we can see, in our own day, the Carmelite life and the teachings of Teresa of Avila lived and transmitted faithfully for all to witness and follow. Teresa once wrote: ‘All my longing was and still is that since [God] has so many enemies and so few friends, that those few friends be good ones’ (WP 1:2). Thérèse was to gratify that wish of Teresa and prove herself a true friend of God. But she was to live out that friendship in her own unique and original way, as we shall see.

The Scriptures speak eloquently of the call to relate with God as a friend. When Jesus calls his disciples ‘friends’, he explains: ‘for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (Jn 15:15). This self-disclosure of Jesus is an intimate sharing with his own, and was already foreshadowed in the Old Testament where we read: ‘The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend’ (Ex 33:11). To speak ‘face to face’ is to communicate directly, person to person, in a close and deep relationship. True friendship requires this trust and open sharing. Without it, there is no true love; and without love, there is no true friendship.

Intimacy between friends requires entire surrender in the service of one friend to another. Jesus has given us his example: ‘The Son of man came not to be served but to serve’ (Mk 10:45); ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (Jn 15:13). He requires no less of his disciples: ‘you are my friends if you do what I command you’ (Jn 15:14). Teresa echoes these words: ‘in order that love be true and the friendship endure,’ she says, ‘the wills of the friends must be in accord’ (L 8:5). She comments still further: ‘This union with God’s will is the union I have longed for all my life’ (IC V:3:5). Again, the Old Testament provides a beautiful illustration of friendship with God, this time between God and Abraham. The patriarch surrendered in faith to God’s command; he obeyed and was called ‘my friend’ by God himself (Is 41:8). The Letter of James expands: ‘the scripture was fulfilled, which says, “Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”, and he was called the friend of

God' (Jas 2:23; cf. Gn 15:6). So, think of a close and intimate friend in your own life and all that this friendship means to you. Your relationship with God means *all* of that – only *much, much more!*

To discover the God of Carmelite prayer is to meet him as a friend in the person of Jesus. The portrait of a true friend in Ecclesiasticus is an inspiring and sensitive foreshadowing of what Jesus' friendship can mean for those who wish to commune with God in the spirit of Teresian prayer:

A loyal friend is a powerful defence:
whoever finds one has indeed found a treasure.
A loyal friend is something beyond price,
there is no measuring his worth.
A loyal friend is the elixir of life,
and those who fear the Lord will find one.
Whoever fears the Lord makes true friends,
for as a person is, so is his friend too. (Ecclus 6:14-17)

'The invisible God,' Vatican II tells us, 'out of the abundance of His love, speaks to people as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into friendship with Himself' (DV 2). These words would surely have appealed in a special way to Teresa of Avila. She had a remarkable genius for friendship. It conditions her whole teaching on prayer and helps her to shape what is generally known as her 'definition' or description of prayer. She writes:

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. (L 8:5)

These words contain all the essential ingredients of Teresian prayer. Teresa's concern is not primarily with stages or degrees of prayer, even though she is the author of *The Interior Castle*. Significantly, each of the seven mansions traversed on her inner journey of prayer, and described in that book, has several apartments of its own, where friendship with God at each stage of spiritual growth can be lived and experienced in many different ways. Thérèse herself never once speaks about degrees of prayer. In fact, Teresian prayer in all its depth, richness and variety has been experienced fully by many of Carmel's saints who prefer to focus on the essence of prayer rather than on stages of progress.

Witness the description of prayer by a more recent Carmelite, Edith Stein, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who died a martyr in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. She, like Thérèse, speaks about prayer and friendship with God in remarkable fidelity to the spirit of Teresa, but in her own particular style. She writes: 'The only essential is that one finds, first of all, a quiet corner in which one can communicate with God as though there were nothing else, and that must be done daily' (L 45). Her teaching, like that of Teresa, is the fruit of intimacy with the Scriptures and of quiet communion with God as a friend in prayer. But it is on Thérèse of Lisieux, and her affinity with Teresa, that I now wish to focus our attention.

What Teresa calls an ‘intimate sharing between friends’ translates, for Thérèse, into an ‘aspiration of the heart’. She distils her description of prayer into a few lines, which can be called Thérèse’s own definition of prayer; it has even found its way into the new *Catechism*, defining prayer for the entire Church (# 2558). Thérèse writes:

For me, *prayer* is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus. (SS, p. 242)¹

An aspiration of the heart! Could anything be simpler? ‘To aspire’ means, literally, ‘to breathe towards’ (from ‘spirare’ and ‘ad’) – that is, to *long* or to *sigh* for something or someone. In a word, it is to *desire*. When the object is God, it is an outburst of love – a fling of the heart to the heart of God. The young Thérèse recalls fishing expeditions with her father in the countryside. She would sit there on a riverbank bedecked with flowers: ‘my thoughts became very profound indeed!’ she says. ‘Without knowing what it was to meditate, my soul was absorbed in real prayer. I listened to distant sounds, the murmuring of the wind... Earth then seemed to be a place of exile and I could dream only of heaven’ (SS, p. 37). That was her prayer – her aspiration: her pilgrim soul in exile, longing for heaven. And Thérèse was only about six years old at the time.

In the case of Teresa of Avila, these same immortal longings also began to manifest themselves within her as a very young girl – though in a rather curious but highly

¹ SS = *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996.

significant way. At the age of seven, she set out without her parents' permission in the company of her brother Rodrigo, himself barely 11, to face martyrdom in the land of the Moors. It was a first stirring of Teresa's hunger and thirst to be with God as she kept repeating with her brother the words 'forever and ever and ever' (L 1:4). The two fugitives were quickly pursued by their uncle Francisco who met them on the outskirts of Avila at a spot marked today by four massive pillars, called Cuatro Postes, literally 'Four Pillars', and promptly restored to their relieved parents. Questioned about the reason for her departure, Teresa replied, 'I want to see God, and to see him I have to die.' Coming events cast their shadows. Little wonder the mature Teresa could rightly be described by the poet Richard Crashaw as an 'undaunted daughter of desire... brim-filled with fierce desires'.

Teresa once said, 'There are some, Lord, who serve you better than I, but that there are some who love you more or more ardently desire your glory, I will never abide!' (*). These words would have resonated in the heart of Thérèse. Even while still only a novice, she too was dauntless in the range of her aspirations and desires. One incident speaks volumes. 'Father,' she once said to a visiting Jesuit priest, 'I want to become a saint, I want to love the Good God as much as St Teresa.' 'What pride and what presumption!' he replied. 'Moderate your rash desires.' Undaunted, she insisted: 'But, Father, I do not regard these as rash desires, I can truly aspire to sanctity, even to a more exalted sanctity, if I wish, than that of St Teresa, for Our Lord said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." You can see, Father, how vast the field is; and it seems to me that I have the

right to run in it.’² The reaction of the priest is not recorded. We can only imagine his arched eyebrows as he gazed down on the diminutive figure kneeling before him in the confessional.

By the time Thérèse came to describe her ‘Little Way’, her desires were virtually limitless, infinite. She experienced, she said, ‘great aspirations’ (SS, p. 197), ‘measureless desires’ (SS, p. 197), ‘*infinite desires*’ (LT 107), ‘desires and longings which reach even unto infinity’ (SS, p. 192). She found that there was a longing in her that went beyond every boundary, breaking open every goal. It was a need, a hunger and thirst, to embrace every vocation in the Church, including that of the priest, the apostle, the doctor, the martyr – in short, she longed to be ‘everything’ (SS, pp. 192 & 194). The theologian who vetted her *Prayer of Self-Offering* and changed her expression ‘infinite desires’ to ‘immense desires’ missed the full import of her experience. She wrote ‘infinite’; she repeated it elsewhere (LT 107; cf. SS, p. 192); and she meant it. In fact, these vast desires of Thérèse are inseparable from her ‘Little Way’. They confirm that she was in touch with her own radical poverty, her own infinite emptiness for God, her total, immense and limitless capacity for God, her endless need for the Jesus whom she called the ‘only Friend whom I love’ (PN 23:5). ‘Lord, to you alone I’ve given my life,’ she said, ‘and all my desires are well known to you’ (PN 23:6). Absence only made her heart grow fonder.

² See *La Bible avec Thérèse de Lisieux*, compiled by Sr Cécile, OCD & Sr Geneviève, OP, Paris: Cerf & Desclée De Brouwer, 1979, p. 158; also, Guy Gaucher, OCD, *The Spiritual Journey of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987, p. 107. The visiting priest was Fr Blino, SJ.

At the grave of Lazarus, we are told, Jesus ‘raised his eyes’ in prayer; and again at the last supper, ‘Jesus raised his eyes to heaven’ and prayed his great priestly prayer (cf. Jn 11:41; 17:1; Mk 6:41). True friends communicate with each other at the deepest level without the noise of words. A flick of the eyes, a meeting of gazes, can speak volumes. Thérèse, significantly, describes her ‘aspiration of the heart’ as ‘a simple glance directed to heaven’. Here again, she is writing in the spirit of Teresa, whose advice is to *look* at Christ with a simple, intuitive gaze of faith. She says: ‘behold Him on the way to the garden... Or behold Him bound to the column... Or behold Him burdened with the cross... He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate...merely because...you turn your head to look at Him’ (WP 26:5). Teresa is simply repeating her earlier advice to beginners: ‘just remain there in His presence with the intellect quiet... occupy ourselves in looking at Christ who is looking at us’ (L 13:22).

For Thérèse, prayer is a glance towards heaven, not just in times of joy but ‘in the midst of trial as well’. One incident in her life illustrates this beautifully. It was when she was on her deathbed. ‘What are you doing?’ her sister Céline asked her, finding her awake in the middle of the night. ‘You should try to sleep.’ ‘I can’t sleep,’ Thérèse replied, ‘I’m suffering too much, so I am praying.’ ‘And what are you saying to Jesus?’ ‘I say nothing to Him, I love Him!’ (LC, p. 228). That was her prayer: one long, ceaseless glance of love in her weakness and pain directed to her Friend – in a moment of intense trial.

Thérèse, we have seen, qualifies prayer as an aspiration of the *heart*. The ‘heart’ is the symbol of love. But Thérèse does not linger on the image of the Sacred Heart so popular in her own day, accurately described by her eldest sister Marie as ‘crowned with thorns, with a big cross set up in the centre’ (LT 122). Thérèse once wrote to Céline:

you know that I myself do not see the Sacred Heart as everybody else. I think that the Heart of my Spouse is mine alone, just as mine is His alone, and I speak to Him then in the solitude of this delightful heart to heart, while waiting to contemplate Him one day face to face... (LT 122)

In these few words, we find an emphasis on the ‘heart’ which we also discover in the gospel: ‘Where your treasure is there will your heart be also... out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’ (Mt 6:21; 12:34). This ‘heart’ is the perennial spring of all Teresian prayer. An intimate communing with God in prayer ‘does not lie in thinking much,’ Teresa tells us repeatedly, ‘but in loving much’ (F 5:2; cf. IC IV:1:7). And Thérèse exclaims: ‘I need a heart burning with tenderness’ (PN 23:4). This was the heart she found in Jesus who described himself as ‘gentle and humble of heart’ (Mt 11:29) – one of her favourite gospel texts. The heart of Jesus was the answer to her search for the heart of a friend.

Both Thérèse and Teresa place significant stress on solitude and silence as an essential condition for Carmelite prayer. Thérèse herself speaks of ‘the solitude of this delightful heart to heart’ and even cries out, ‘O Jesus, Lovers must have solitude, / A heart-to-heart lasting night and day’ (PN 17:3). Her need to withdraw for prayer implies, in the words of

Teresa, ‘taking time frequently to be alone with [God]’ (L 8:5). It is the way Jesus himself prayed in the Gospels, withdrawing frequently to the hills away from the crowd, to commune in love with his Father in the silence of the night; it is the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray: ‘Go into your room’ – which, St Anselm explains, is the ‘inner chamber’ of the human heart (Divine Office, vol. I, p. 67) – ‘shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Mt 6:6). Teresa repeats the lesson in her own original way: ‘We have no need of wings to go to find Him. All one need do is go into solitude and look at Him within oneself... with great humility speak to Him as to a father. Beseech him as you would a father... Those who can... enclose themselves within the little heaven of our soul, where the Maker of heaven and earth is present, and grow accustomed to refusing to be where the exterior senses in their distraction have gone...should believe they are following an excellent path...for they will journey far in a short time’ (WP 28:2.5).

Perhaps no practical lesson on prayer is more urgent for us today in our anxious, noisy, stress-filled world. Cost what it may, we all need to withdraw from the turmoil at times, and spend some quiet moments communing in prayer with Jesus as a friend.

Human frailty presents no obstacle to friendship with Jesus. Nobody knew that better than Teresa and Thérèse. They are at one in their assurance: weakness is no obstacle to a deep relationship with Jesus as a friend. Moreover, it can be a stepping-stone to an even deeper relationship. God wants us to relate with him as we really are, not as we would like to be or have others think we are. As friendship deepens in prayer, the scales begin to fall from our eyes: Jesus unmasks our false securities. He wants to engage with the real

person, not a persona – the pose, the masks, the façades, the illusions that hide the vulnerable and unwanted aspects of ourselves, those parts that we prefer to conceal and which we refuse to acknowledge and embrace. The inner journey of prayer exposes us to the shadows of our hidden fears and anxieties. Thérèse once said, ‘I tell the whole truth, and if anyone doesn’t wish to know the truth, let her not come looking for me’ (LC, p. 38). She also said: ‘I can nourish myself on nothing but the truth’ (LC, p.134). And, just hours before she died, she said these stunning words: ‘I never sought anything but the truth. Yes, it seems to me I’m humble’ (LC, p. 205). For Teresa, too, ‘humility is truth’ (*). Little wonder that both saints invite us repeatedly to accept our limitations and engage in self-knowledge as a condition of true friendship.

Both Teresa and Thérèse took to heart the words of Jesus: ‘without me you can do nothing’ (Jn 15:5). Thérèse echoes this when she describes what she considers to be the greatest grace of her life: ‘I prefer to agree very simply that the Almighty has done great things in [me]...and the greatest thing is to have shown [me my] littleness, [my powerlessness]’ (SS, p. 210). St Paul takes up this lesson of Jesus, saying: ‘when I am weak then I am strong’ (2Cor 12:10). Paul even says that he ‘rejoices in his weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon him’ (2Cor 12:9). Thérèse shares this joy in discovering her weakness: ‘I’m resigned to seeing myself always far from perfect,’ she says, ‘even glad, in a way’ (SS, p. 158). And she prays: ‘What does it matter, my Jesus, if I fall at each moment; *I see* my weakness through this and this a great gain for me’ (LT 89). Here, too, she is a faithful daughter of Teresa who says these rather startling words:

'I consider one day of humble self-knowledge a greater favour from the Lord, even though the day may have cost us numerous afflictions and trials, than many days of prayer' (F 5:16). And she has this advice for beginners: 'The path to God begins and ends in the room of self-knowledge' (*). Teresa would have us walk the whole inward journey of prayer humbly in the truth about ourselves and our weakness.

But that journey is one that we must also walk in the truth about our *friend*. Teresa writes: 'Christ is a very good friend because we behold Him as a man and see him with weaknesses and trials – and he is company for us' (L 22:10); 'I saw that even though he was God, he was a man who wasn't surprised by the weakness of [others]; that He understands our miserable make-up, subject to many falls' (L 37:5). Teresa could identify easily with the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses... He can deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness' (Hb 4:15; 5:2). 'I could read the whole account of the passion without shedding a tear,' Teresa said of her early years (cf. *). But meeting her Friend who 'emptied himself' in the weakness of his Passion was to mark a great turning-point in her life. It happened one day as she entered the chapel and saw a statue of the wounded Christ. 'I threw myself down before him,' she tells us, 'I was very distrustful of myself and placed all my trust in God' (L 9:1.3). It was her great moment of conversion. Unlike Teresa, Thérèse always had a tender devotion to the crucified Saviour. A sermon on the Passion was the first she could remember. The cry of Jesus on the cross, 'I thirst' (Jn 19: *), ignited in the young Thérèse what she called 'an unknown and very

living fire' (SS, p. 99). But later, she would discover the weakness of her crucified Friend in an entirely new way, as we shall now see.

At first, devotion to the Holy Face itself had no special appeal for Thérèse. But her discovery of it coincided with the mysterious mental illness of her father, who had always radiated for her the beauty of God's love. That experience now gave way to the image of her father as a man of sorrows: 'Until my coming to Carmel,' she said, 'I had never fathomed the depths of the treasures hidden in the Holy Face' (SS, p. 152). It was, however, through the Servant Songs of Isaiah that Thérèse really entered deeply into the mystery of love hidden and revealed in the human weakness of Jesus her Friend: 'There was no beauty in him... no comeliness...' (Is 53:2). She confided to her sister Pauline, 'These words of Isaiah...have made the whole foundation of my devotion to the Holy Face, or, to express it better, the foundation of all my piety' (LC, p. 135). Thérèse would continue to contemplate the love of God in her 'gentle and lowly' Saviour, his radiant face now distorted by pain, like a beautiful object reflected on rippling water. In the infirmary where Thérèse lived out her final agony, there was a picture on the wall representing Jesus in Gethsemane. There, he accepts the pain and suffering, the sorrow and confusion, the fear and loneliness, and surrenders to love: 'Abba, Father!... not what I will, but what you will' (Mk 14:36). It is all part of the mystery of God's infinite love revealed in human weakness.

Teresa designated the fruit of all prayer as ‘the birth always of good works, good works’ (IC VII:4:6). Carmelites, she says, ‘must be occupied in prayer...so as...to have strength to serve’ (IC VII:4:12). When she had heard of the havoc wrought by the Lutherans, she confessed: ‘It seemed to me that I would have given a thousand lives to save one soul out of the many that were being lost’ (WP 1:2). Teresa affirms that her sisters must ‘be occupied in prayer for those who are the defenders of the Church and for preachers and for learned men who protect [it] from attack’ (WP 1:2). This was her special affirmation of an apostolic dimension to contemplative prayer. On her deathbed she often repeated, full of gratitude: ‘I am a daughter of the Church’. She wanted her Carmelite communities of prayer, penance, silence and enclosure to be groups of strong and close friends of one another in the service of their great Friend who said: ‘Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest’ (Mt 11:38).

Thérèse, too, shared this missionary outreach of Teresa. She longed to be part of the new monastery in Hanoi, so as to live as a Carmelite on the mission fields of distant Vietnam and, as she said, ‘to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil’ (SS, p. 192). But ill health was to render her departure impossible. Instead, she was to realise her zeal for the missions within the closed walls of the Lisieux Carmel. She had chosen a life of prayer and sacrifice ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Col 3:3). She had embarked on a way of self-giving love for her Friend and had found a model in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah – forgotten, hidden and unknown. For her, a life of sacrifice meant taking up her cross daily to follow this Jesus. It was love for her friend translated into action. For Thérèse, to love

Jesus was to love his friends also: the whole Christ, body and members, the universal church.

Today she stands beside St Francis Xavier as joint patron of the missions, as well as being a Doctor of the Church, like Teresa of Avila. Thérèse continues her mission today with her writings, and the greatest welcome we can show her is to take them up and read them. ‘I feel that my mission is about to begin...’ Thérèse said just before her death, ‘my mission of teaching my little way to souls’ (SS, p. 263). This ‘little way’ is her own discovery: a way to holiness that she had once described as ‘very straight, very short, and totally new’ (*). She explains it as ‘the way of spiritual childhood...* the way of confidence and total [surrender]... to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father’ (LC, p. 138). This message is the gift of Thérèse to all of us today, as we welcome with joy and gratitude the arrival of her relics in England and Wales.