

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

This document is Part One of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

In this session I gave a personal reading of the mystical thought of the French Carmelite Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906). The talk was loosely based on my then recently completed doctoral research at the University of London, where I had been privileged to spend six years becoming familiar with the witness of this truly inspirational woman.

The summary is presented in three parts where each part addresses one of the three main questions that provided the heading for the evening's presentation. They were:

1. Who was Elizabeth of the Trinity?
2. A Carmelite Mystic: what on earth is that?
3. How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

This first paper is primarily addressed to those who are not yet familiar with Elizabeth. If you already fairly familiar Elizabeth's life story you may wish to consider proceeding direct to Part Two, which discusses how we nowadays might understand the term 'mystic' in a Christian context.

Part One: Who was Elizabeth of the Trinity?



Over the last hundred years in the popular mind Elizabeth of the Trinity has often been confused with another great Carmelite saint, Thérèse of Lisieux, as they both lived at the same time, both of them were Carmelite, both were French and both endured painful deaths at a tragically young age. Thérèse is now recognised as a Doctor of the Church having received international attention almost from the time of her death. It is perhaps not surprising that Elizabeth in the meantime should have remained somewhat in her shadow.

My personal suggestion is that after Elizabeth's canonisation on October 16th 2016 it is now time for a gentle correction of this historical imbalance. By this I intend no disrespect to our great saint of Lisieux but seek rather to bring forward what is unique in Elizabeth's own witness. Compared with Thérèse, Elizabeth wrote comparatively little, so the three documents I have prepared are based on my own reading of her life story, which has been interpreted through the diaries and letters that have survived. As a prelude, in Part One of this series of three summaries I set out the main features of her life.

Elizabeth's Family

Elizabeth's mother Marie Rolland came from a military family, the only daughter of a Commandant Rolland and Josephine Klein. Engaged originally to a young cavalry officer in the 3rd Dragoons, her first fiancée was killed during the Franco Prussian war when Marie was 24 years old. On 3rd September 1879 aged 33 she married Joseph Catez, an Army captain who was fifteen years her senior. Elizabeth, their first child, was born on July 18th 1880.

A Difficult Birth

Grace seemed to enter Elizabeth's life from her very birth. Marie experienced a difficult labour for some thirty-six hours and the doctors had already warned her husband that they should not now expect the child to be born alive. Fearing the loss of his wife as well, Joseph asked the camp chaplain to offer a mass for both mother and child. At the very moment that the blessing was offered Elizabeth was safely delivered: 'un cadeau du Ciel' they said, a gift from Heaven.

Elizabeth the Child



Unfortunately for the family, Elizabeth was not born a saint. Indeed as a child she was very strong willed, with a reputation for a tyrannous temper. Neighbours witnessed frequent tantrums as one family friend would later testify:

She was often violent, I recall that one day she had to be locked in the WC, but when inside, Elizabeth just kept kicking at the door.

Another neighbour recalls that they could hear Elizabeth's tirades from across the street. Her mother once even resorted to packing Elizabeth's bags in the hallway and threatening to hand her over to the care of the nuns of Le Bon Pasteur.

Early Tragedy

In 1887 all looked well: Joseph was retired from the Army and Elizabeth now had an adored sister Guite. Tragedy was however to strike twice in one year. In January her much loved grandfather died but worse came in October when Elizabeth's father died without warning and in her presence from a heart attack.

Dijon

The family now moved to Dijon where Marie would have to bring up the children on her own. Despite their reduced circumstances Elizabeth's copious correspondence witnesses to the family being welcomed in the houses of the well connected in both Dijon and the south of France where the family would spend many holidays.

At eight years old Elizabeth resolved to adopt a new sense of responsibility in the family. Here is the resolution she made to her mother on January 1st 1889:

My Dear Little Mother

In wishing you a happy new year I wish to promise you that I will be wise, very obedient, I am not going to make you angry, I am not going to cry anymore and I will be a model child in order to be a pleasure for you....ADDING....I know that you are not going to believe me!¹

Exactly a year later on New Year's Eve we have this:

Here I am again to renew my vows for the New Year. I am going to be a sweet little girl, patient, obedient, hard working and never losing my temper again. Moreover, since I am the oldest I absolutely must show a good example to my little sister; I will never annoy her again.²

But Elizabeth had coded an important bargaining chip to be added to these wonderful words. She continued:

At last you will be the happiest of mothers and because I hope that I will soon have the good fortune to make my first communion.

¹ Letter 4

² Letter 5

First Communion



Elizabeth had longed to make her first communion and in April 1891 just before her eleventh birthday her wish became reality in a day that was to be a rite of passage for her.

She was so overcome by the experience of receiving the host that she was unable to eat anything at the subsequent celebration. Later she told us in a poem that there had been a mysterious exchange: 'where Jesus made his dwelling in me'.³

On the same afternoon she visited Carmel where the nuns gave her a small prayer card with sayings by Teresa of Avila. In the margin the Prioress had penned a note explaining that the meaning of the name Elizabeth in Hebrew signified the 'House of the God of Love'.

It was a day of momentous change:

She had received her Lord
She had visited Carmel
And she now believed herself to be a house within which the Lord might dwell.

With 20/20 hindsight we might say that the rest of her life would be spent in the discovery of the real significance of these simple words that had been sketched onto her prayer card on this momentous day.

Was this the real start of her vocation?

The matter of Elizabeth's vocation was far from simple. In fact we might call it a real problem.

At the age of seven she had confided to Canon Angles a family friend, that she wished to be a nun. Her mother was far from delighted and initially dismissed the idea as a childish fantasy, however it was an idea that would not go away. For the next twelve years this would become the source of ongoing friction between mother and daughter.

³ Poem 47, 19th April 1898.

During this time Elizabeth was a regular visitor to Carmel de Dijon, which was literally on the opposite side of the street from the house where they had now settled. It is surely a mark of her mother's desperation that she should end by forbidding Elizabeth to visit the convent's parlour or even to attend mass in the chapel.

The record may show Marie Rolland as a stern restriction on Elizabeth's young life; indeed after Marie's death Elizabeth's Prioress would describe Mme Catez as both 'quick tempered and very firm'. Her sister Guite would go further - describing their mother as 'temper itself'. We must however have no doubt that whatever the circumstances Elizabeth loved her mother unreservedly.

We must also note that the teenage Elizabeth was far from a recluse. The evidence of the gay chatter of Elizabeth's letters to her many friends and stories from happy family holidays suggest that she would have much to give up if she were to answer her Master's call.

The Musician

Not least of the things to be given up was her precocious talent for the piano. Enrolled at the Dijon Conservatoire from the age of eight Elizabeth had won a series of awards in public competition and at age thirteen a press report would describe her as 'already a distinguished pianist, with excellent fingers, a beautiful tone and a truly musical feeling'.

Her mother clearly nursed hopes of a career in music for Elizabeth – but as her biographer Conrad de Meester notes 'the real problem for Elizabeth was that her music lay elsewhere'.

Carmel de Dijon



On August 2nd 1901, Elizabeth finally entered Carmel as a postulant. Here we see her on the left in her postulants brown gown, sitting next to Mere Germaine in whose

hand is a copy of St Thérèse of Lisieux *Histoire d'une âme*. This was to be a period of great joy for Elizabeth.



For her mother still at home, the above view of Carmel shows what must have seemed a particularly forbidding reminder of their separation when viewed from the family home, which was virtually on the other side of the street.

Life in Carmel was rigorous. Rising at 4.45 for a full day of prayer, work and choir, ending only at 11 pm (and even later on feast days) this allowed the nuns less than 6 hours sleep. There was no heating in the monastery except a small stove in the recreation room.

The sisters were cloistered, permitted only one 30-minute parlour visit and one letter per month from family members. We might ask: 'Why on earth did she do it?'

For Elizabeth there were no such doubts. She adapted to the regime almost immediately. Indeed, so exceptional was her demeanour that the sisters voted to allow her to enter the novitiate after only three months rather than the customary six. On December 8th 1901 Elizabeth took the white veil of a Carmelite novice.

The Novitiate

This early joy was however to be short lived. During her novitiate Elizabeth underwent intense difficulties when her initial high ideals gave way to being plagued by scruples. Her prayer, previously so natural, had now become dry and everything that she had dreamed of for so long now seemed to be darkness.



With hindsight we can see the tension plainly in the above photo taken just before her first profession. Elizabeth with her scruples, her mother convinced that Elizabeth was making a catastrophic error, and her sister Guite somewhat uncomfortably holding the middle ground between them.

Her deepest crisis would finally come on the very eve of her profession when she suddenly felt unable to make her vows. At this critical moment she had a lengthy meeting with her confessor, Père Vergne, who concluded by telling her that he would advise Mère Germaine that she was not yet ready to make her profession the next day.

How are we to understand it when fate intervenes? Is this mere coincidence -or is this what Christians call Grace?

Somehow during this fateful night Elizabeth not only surrendered her scruples but also came to an inner peace that allowed her to make the decision to proceed. At the same time there was a further 'coincidence': Père Vergne somehow forgot to advise Mère Germaine that the ceremony should be delayed or cancelled.

So on 21st January 1903 Elizabeth was formally professed with her first vows.

A Nun at Last

The extraordinary thing is that during this taxing novitiate year Elizabeth had completely internalised her trial by fire, which went unremarked by any other than the novice mistresses and the confessors in whom she confided. What is more remarkable is that the cloud lifted immediately that she was professed and would never return.

The next three years would pass with a rapidly deepening spiritual insight. We might speculate that during this fruitful period of spiritual growth Elizabeth was being conformed to be ready for what would be her personal Calvary: her final illness.

Elizabeth ill

Sometime during 1905 Elizabeth was diagnosed with Addison's disease. Although nowadays this is routinely managed with drugs, in Elizabeth's time it was a slow sentence of death. A failure of the adrenal glands leads to a slow deterioration, culminating in violent sickness, an inability to eat, and raging thirst. Elizabeth would at this time describe herself as being consumed by fire. Initially she refused to compromise, insisting on maintaining the disciplines of monastic life despite the

pain. Finally in March 1906 she was admitted to the convent's sanatorium, where she would remain until her death nine months later.

Crippled by her illness, the paradox was that her spiritual insights would now come to deepen in direct proportion to the acuteness of the pain she suffered.

Three months before she died and now very ill, Elizabeth felt the need to write the four short treatises that record for us the heart of her spiritual doctrine. As a contribution to Christian Mystical Theology these pieces are a gift beyond measure.

Elizabeth dies



Elizabeth finally died on 9th November 1906.

Elizabeth of the Trinity was beatified on November 25th 1984 and canonised on October 16th 2016.

Briefly then, this is the story of Elizabeth's life. It is without doubt an exemplary life but her importance as a teacher must be evaluated in terms of what she is able to say to us today. My own personal reading of Elizabeth is that she makes an important contribution to the ongoing Christian mystical tradition, a tradition that arguably speaks to all Christians at all times.

Before we can evaluate her contribution to this tradition we must first be clear about what we really mean when we use the word 'mystic' in a Christian context.

This question is the subject of Part Two of these notes to which you are now invited to turn.

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

Part Two: A Carmelite Mystic: but what on earth is that?

This document is Part Two of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

We now move on to the second question in the list that I set out at the beginning of Part One.

To start thinking of this ask yourself this question: When you hear the word mystic used to describe someone what is the picture that comes into mind? Is it:

1. Someone a bit psychic who claims to foretell the future?
2. Someone who gets a bit carried away with religion?
3. Someone who is just a bit arty and poetic?
4. Someone who lives in a bit of a different world?
5. OR IS IT SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT AND IF SO WHAT?

As someone once said: trying to define mysticism in the 21st Century is about as elusive as trying to catch water in a colander!

The truth is that if we cannot exactly say what mysticism IS - it might at least be easier to say something about what mysticism is NOT.



Bernini's famous statue of Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy can be found in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. It is undoubtedly a great work of art but it has come to define (for better or worse) what many now understand by the term mystic. The problem for this paper is that the emotion it suggests has little to do with the specifically *Christian Mystical Tradition*.

To understand why this should be so it is necessary to go back over a bit of History.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA and THE PRE- MODERN WORLD

What may be described as the Christian mystical tradition arguably starts with St Paul who underwent a dramatic personal transformation on the Damascus road. But it was not this that was the 'mystical life', but what came after, because Paul then spent the rest of his life calling the early Christians (and ourselves) to share into this same transformation that he had himself experienced. We might note two features:

1. Firstly, that this personal transformation becomes *the* central objective of the mystical life.
2. Secondly, that the royal road to this transformation was through coming to a true knowledge of self, and that this was to be brought about by emptying ourselves of all that is not God.

Most Christians, whatever their denomination, could probably agree that to be Christian is to be called to a new life in Christ; however if we are to ask *how* this actually comes about we might get some very different answers. I therefore ask your patience in noting that what now follows is a summary of the answer that might be given by someone from **the Christian mystical or contemplative tradition**.

Clearly the call to transformation issues from our Lord's teaching. From there the tradition traces a continual thread which first issuing via St Paul, then runs through the desert fathers, - through St Augustine, - through the various monastic traditions, - through the Rhineland mystics, - to reach Teresa of Avila's reform of the Carmelite Order, the order to which of course Elizabeth herself belonged.

It may come as a surprise to hear that in the early days of the Church the word mysticism in the sense that we *now* use it did not exist at all. So where did it come from?

A Greek word *mustikos* had certainly been around since the earliest day. In the Greek mystery religions that came before Christianity *mustikos* implied a sort of 'magical secret' that was disclosed to the initiate in a formal ceremony of initiation. Within early Christianity this 'magical secret' became re-focused around the idea of the revelation of meaning, which was understood to be hidden within Scripture or hidden within the Liturgy. It was understood that participation led to coming to understand something, which led to some form of transformation of how we are.

So why did this emphasis on **transformative change** evolve and change?

THE MODERN ERA

By the time of the modern era from about 1600 onwards things were changing rapidly. For religion, increasingly the challenge came from debates about Reason, when it began to seem important that the arguments presented for religion should increasingly be seen to be rational. In this new environment mysticism, with its colourful and imprecise language, seemed to be the anything but rational.

From a Reformed Protestant viewpoint mysticism did not seem to be Biblical -and was not thus constituent to their understanding of Faith. In the more eclectic Catholic and Anglican traditions theologians had by now moved from monasteries into Universities and were no longer immersed in the contemplative life. Their ideas of God were thus now being increasingly being framed in the language of the intellect.

KANT

During the period of the 18TH Century Enlightenment matters suddenly became even more complex. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant produced a consensus that became accepted amongst the 'thinking classes'. What he stated was a perfectly reasonable proposition. He said that if we could not experience something through our five senses, - seeing, hearing, touch, taste and smell – then we could have no verifiable way of KNOWING that any such thing actually existed at all.

When Kant said that God is not available to be known through our five human senses, he did not necessarily mean that God did not *exist*. He simply argued that any human talk about KNOWING or EXPERIENCING an ineffable God could not in effect be verified. So mystical literature that had so paradoxically and poetically described the process of the 'experiential knowing' of an ineffable God, was in effect talking of a process that (for followers of Kant at least), could from now have no meaning.

WILLIAM JAMES

And there it might have stayed but for William James, an American philosopher turned psychologist. In his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University in 1901 he suggested a way this dilemma might be resolved. James proposed to take this 'immeasurable/ineffable/unknowable' God that had so troubled Kant out of the equation. Instead he switched his attention to the *phenomenon* of what the mystic appeared to be experiencing.

James' approach is potentially attractive for the academic mind because the answer he sought did not have to belong to or validate any one particular religion (Christian or otherwise). He was merely trying to explain a phenomenon that was clearly observable as an aspect of human experience: in this case ECSTASY. James' had a liberal style of writing, he distrusted institutional churches and he disliked

intellectuals. It is not difficult to see why his thought became popular throughout the 20th Century and indeed remains so for many today.

BUT THE PROBLEM FOR MY INVESTIGATION OF ELIZABETH AS A *MYSTIC* WAS THAT JAMES DIDN'T REALLY HELP AT ALL...

SO WHY NOT?

James' phenomenon of ECSTASY does not work as a proof test for the Christian Mystic because it really belongs to a different territory. It is true that ecstasies of the sort investigated by James are occasionally mentioned in some of the accounts written by others *about* mystics, but ecstasy was never previously understood to be a *necessary* part of the Christian contemplative journey, nor was it seen as valid evidence of actual participation within it.

RE-EVALUATIONS IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In the last 40 years some important theologians have been looking again at mysticism and they have argued that to correct this misunderstanding it is necessary to go back to the worldview of pre-modern times. In other words we must go back to the period before all the changes of the modern era happened and ask how the mystical journey had been understood up to this time.

They noted several features that mystical writings of this earlier time broadly shared:

1. That the meaning of the language of mysticism is located within a mind-set that is significantly different from the way we generally see things in our habitual consciousness.
2. That the mystical writings we have inherited were the outcome of the **practice** rather than **theorising** of some form of transformative journey.
3. That if we are able to come to understand these writings they are designed to have a transformative effect on ourselves, the reader.

Bernard McGinn is a leading academic working in this field and is the author of the magisterial *The History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Here is his tentative definition of the mystical component in Christianity in the opening pages of Volume 1:

*I identify that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the **preparation for, the consciousness of and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God***⁴

⁴ Bernard McGinn, General Introduction, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Vol. I, (New York: Crossroads, 1994), p. xvii.

So returning to the question where I asked: 'What on earth was a *Carmelite Mystic*?' I want now to look briefly at how Elizabeth of the Trinity lives out what I have been talking about above.

If we take McGinn's definition we can certainly say that Elizabeth's life story was a '*constant preparation for the consciousness of God*'. In her case this preparation was an ongoing movement towards a complete change of perspective, what we might call a change in the way that she saw things.

How did this come about?

So did Elizabeth have the sort of ecstatic experiences that William James claimed to be one of the defining marks of the mystic?

On the day of her first communion at the age of eleven Elizabeth certainly *experienced* herself as having entered a deeply personal relationship with Christ. There was certainly no doubt about the *reality* of this relationship for Elizabeth. However nowhere does she speak of visions, locutions or any other supernatural phenomena. We cannot of course know what she chose not to tell us, but in her extensive writings we must believe that she did not omit anything that she saw as important. Visions were not included.

To explain the *process* of transformation we can return to a model frequently found in medieval mystical literature:

The so-called *Via Triplex*, more commonly known as the Three Ways.

In medieval mystical literature, this is a metaphor used to name three formative stages in the process of transformation. We might say that these stages are the signposts or the milestones along the mystical pathway.

1. Firstly there is the Purgative Way, which cleanses the soul of all that is not conducive to the religious life.
2. Secondly there is the Illuminative Way, which prepares and conforms the soul for the reception of the divine.
3. Finally the Unitive Way finally opens up to the graced outcome, which is often described as the mystical marriage between the soul and God.

So getting back to Elizabeth's life story set out in Part One of this series, How does this story look when viewed through the lens of the Three Ways? My suggestion is as follows:

- **Purgation Stage One** for Elizabeth is the personal struggle that she has with coming to terms with her mother's absolute refusal to accept her vocation to be a Carmelite nun. She initially experienced this as an exclusion from access to her 'Beloved'. At this stage she was not therefore seeking her God *within*

herself, because at this time she believed God only to be found *somewhere else*, in this case in Carmel, where of course she was not allowed to go.

- **Purgation Stage Two** was the very real 'Dark Night of the Soul' experienced during her novitiate. She had longed to be a nun, but when the initial delight had worn off, she now had to face the reality of her choice. We saw earlier how her novitiate was a challenging interface that nearly destroyed her vocation.
- **Moving on to the Illuminative Way.** With her dark challenge transcended, from January 1903 to mid 1905 she lived a period of quiet internal preparation that appears to be very akin to how the texts describe the Illuminative Way. For three years there was little of external remark in her life, but her writing of this time witnesses how her whole self-understanding shifts. The radical stimulus for this in her case was her intuition of a very personal mystical reading of the letters of St Paul.
- **So to the final stage, the union of the soul with God.** Was this union for her? It was certainly the period of the gruesome deterioration over some eighteen months from Addison's disease, which presents us with an unfathomable paradox. Coincident with what might outwardly appear to be her darkest hour, this was also the time when she received and recorded her deepest insights into union with the Divine.

But if, as Elizabeth did at the end, you feel 'inhabited by the Trinity', how do you talk about this union with the Divine, this 'seeing or knowing God' without invoking all the problems discussed earlier under Immanuel Kant?

Elizabeth's answer would be that the transformation brought about by this contemplative journey did not mean that she came to see different things –but rather that she came to see *the same things differently*.

We can summarise this into three main areas by returning to the markers that we defined earlier...

Firstly, following this pre-modern understanding of the mystical, when she says that her eyes have been opened to a new way of seeing, she means what was previously *hidden* was now made new and made clear to her. Thus scripture and contemplative texts now opened up to her, giving her a changed perspective for the understanding of her life.

Secondly, from within this new perspective when she comes to talk about the Divine she is not now referring to any sort of object that we know in our normal way. Instead the terminology used in her writing is more suggestive of a *participative relationship* to describe what she experiences.

Thirdly, like many mystics, she is consistently calling for the diminishment of self: a state of being brought to nothing. If she had previously read about this *anéantissement* elsewhere in mystical texts, for her this was now being lived out in the painful reality of her self-wasting illness. Indeed it was whilst this was destroying her physically that she came to experience a real sense of personal nothingness. She said at this time that it was only at the point of surrender to her terrifying situation that she finally became fully open to the infinity of divine love.

In a final testimony that only came to light some 30 years after her death, she told Mère Germaine what she had seen, and literally begged her to join her in seeing the same thing too. This was her advice...

Dearly loved Mother...you are uncommonly loved...just LET yourself be loved! That is without fearing that any object will be a hindrance to it. This is because He is free to pour out His love on whomever He wishes.⁵

This brings us to the third question in this series: How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

⁵ Elizabeth of the Trinity, *The Complete Works*. Vol. One, *Major Spiritual Writings*, (Washington: ICS, 1984), pp. 175-177.

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

Part Three: How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

This document is Part Three of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

We now come to the third of the three questions posed at the beginning of Part One. How can Elizabeth speak to us today, or perhaps this might be better phrased as: *How are we able to understand Elizabeth talking to us today?*

The first problem here is the question of language

We now live in an apparently secular culture. Yet despite this the popularity of 'Wellbeing' and 'Mindfulness' suggest that many perceive something to be missing in their lives. Elizabeth has much to say to this *lacuna* but unfortunately she does not express herself in a language that is still familiar in our own times. There are two aspects that pose problems for contemporary audiences:

1. The language of 19th Century French Spirituality often appears to express a desire to suffer. For many nowadays this is uncomfortable.
2. The language of pre-modern mysticism presupposes a world-view and self-understanding that is very different from our own.

To take these in order:

HER LANGUAGE OF SUFFERING

When we reflect on what Elizabeth says to us from the depth of her suffering we must not allow ourselves to misread what she is saying. For me, it is clear that she is not saying that we ourselves must all suffer in order to get to where she has come.

I read her as saying that to understand anything in our life properly, we have to navigate our own way back from the highly separated and individualised world-view that is the inheritance of what Christian tradition calls our fallen humanity. Now this was clearly an urgent realisation for Elizabeth at the turn of the last century, so how much more should it be so for us today when we live in a world so focused on 'Me', 'My Lifestyle' and 'My Needs'? She says that if we are to do this we must somehow re-discover and re-establish this lost perspective. We must move our priorities away from the self and re-establish ourselves within the Divine. It is only here that we can also experience what she was told at her First Communion: that it is *we* ourselves who are the house within which God lives. She tells us that when we see the events and relationships that form our life from this radically different viewpoint and our whole being will be changed.

I must re-emphasise once again that I do *not* hear her saying that we all have to suffer horribly, as she did, in order to see what she has seen. She is saying that we must find *our own way* to come to this change of perspective. In her case it was not the *suffering* that brought this about, in fact it was actually the other way round. It was through her changed perspective in Christ that she would finally come to see the pain of her illness in a completely different way. In the words of a text that she quotes some 24 times, we can arrive at the point where St Paul says:

*'It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me'*⁶

HER LANGUAGE FROM THE PRE-MODERN WORLD

If Elizabeth is inviting us to come alongside her, how then are we supposed to get there?

To answer this we must turn to her mystical writing. Along with most other mystical writers Elizabeth does not of course set out a sequential to-do list, because the world of action plans is fundamentally different from that of mystical writing. Throughout her letters and texts she has much advice to give but for me there are three things that particularly stand out:

Firstly: Contemplative Prayer

Elizabeth demonstrates that the practice of a contemplative prayer life does have the effect of shifting how we see things. Thus if at first mystical writing appears to be no more than pious text, the practice of contemplative silence will in time make the text begin to speak to us. In other words it will begin to disclose its '*mustikos*', the so-called hidden meaning that was introduced earlier in Part Two of this series.

In my own reflections I have come to see that this is a view that she shares with many other mystics. I would paraphrase this view as something like this:

We have a natural home that is within God but somehow we have separated ourselves from this unity that is our birthright. In the Christian story we call that 'somehow' the Fall, where 'sin' is the resultant ongoing process of turning away from God; however this God is a loving God who is constantly calling us to return to reclaim our lost unity...*if only we will hear Him.*

Now the Carmelite route to experiencing this hidden truth is made real through interiority and silence. It is not through exemplary virtue or heroic struggles to conquer the heavenly heights but, as Teresa of Avila insists, it is developed through

⁶ Galatians 2:20.

the constantly deepening life of prayer which she likens to being 'an intimate sharing between friends'.⁷

Of course Christians must strive to find their own way to achieve this and Elizabeth as we have seen certainly experienced her own struggle. However at the end of her life she wanted to underline the importance of what she had finally come to realise. At this time she would write to Soeur Marie-Odile:

*It seems to me I now see everything in God's light, and if I started life over again I should not want to waste one instant.*⁸

Adding in her penultimate letter that she addressed to the doctor charged with her care:

*I wish I could make souls understand and tell them the vanity and the emptiness of anything that is not done for God.*⁹

Secondly: She asks us to share into her vision of the Trinity.

The concept of the Trinity remains difficult even for the most committed Christian. Whichever way it is rationalised, the idea of there being One God who is actually Three Persons and yet somehow remains mono-theistically one God, does not lend itself to understanding through our standard intellectual processes - but Elizabeth did not turn to the intellect.

Elizabeth does not fall into the trap of thinking that the Trinity is a *thing* as such (or even Three Things). For her it was more like a participation in an ongoing eternal relationship, that is entered through our becoming conformed to the image of Christ. Given the many things that Elizabeth and St Paul say about this, we too should be thinking in terms of something that we ourselves could also participate in. She situated this in what she enigmatically describes as the 'eternal now'. Words here are of course highly inadequate but the process she sees runs something like this:

1. God the FATHER, the creator is infinitely different from us who are his creation. There is thus no logical way, for us, the creation to actually participate or share in this creator God because he is by definition infinitely different.
2. Now Jesus the CHRIST as the SON participates in the TRINITY and is a fully divine part of this infinite God.
3. And yet, paradoxically, it is insisted that Jesus of NAZERETH was also fully human.
4. We as part of the creation are also fully human.

⁷ Teresa of Avila, *The Life*, 8: 5.

⁸ Letter 335.

⁹ Letter 340.

5. It is thus through this shared humanity that we can become conformed to the image of Christ. Thus it is through his life, death and resurrection that we too now have the potential to participate in the SON's divine relationship with the FATHER.

The Gospel of Luke 17:21 says clearly that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us.¹⁰ Elizabeth quotes this passage with joy saying yes, this is so, because it is the Christ who lives within us. She says that it is not our self-made imaginations that animate who we *really* are: it is this Christ within us. Furthermore, she says that if we can make this relationship with Christ conscious, then even now in our own lifetime we are able to become included within the life of the Trinity.

Thirdly: she invites us to learn from her reading of Scripture

Given that it was only after Vatican II that Catholics were actively encouraged to interact with Scripture, Elizabeth's intuitive understanding of the Word of God is simply extraordinary. In this, what I have been describing as her natural mystical sensitivity was drawn like a magnet to the letters of Paul almost to the exclusion of all else.

So why was she drawn to St Paul?

Here are some of her most quoted passages:

Romans 8: 29. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (23 quotations).

Corinthians 3:16. Do you know that you are the temple of God and God's spirit dwells in you? (7 quotations).

Galatians 2:19 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me (24 quotations).

We might paraphrase these few verses into one paragraph to say:

Our whole purpose in life is to become the image of Christ, where our baptismal vocation in Christ is also a baptism into his death, a death that we must share with Christ. If we do (in our own different ways) share in the suffering of his death we may also be reborn and thus share in his new life. In this transformation, by the death of the 'old self' we are returned to a state where we begin to partake in Christ's way of being in the world because our whole being is now in relationship with God.

¹⁰ Or 'in our midst' depending on which translation is preferred.

In her best-known prayer *O Mon Dieu Trinité* Elizabeth states the 'mission' paraphrased above quite clearly. She says that we can become transformed members of a community that is able to carry on doing the work of Christ in the world, begging God therefore:

To create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the WORD: that I may be another humanity for Him in whom he can renew his whole mystery.

It is worth quietly reflecting on the full implications of this request. What she asks here is surely a staggering request and a challenge for all who would seek to lead the Christian life.

So how does this speak to me?

So, at the end of this third and final piece about Elizabeth it is finally time for me to come off my theological high horse and risk explaining what I understand Elizabeth to be saying to me personally.

For me, when Elizabeth talks of being crucified with Christ, putting off the old man, being hidden in Christ I understand her to be talking of the death of that individualistic selfish side in our personalities, that part of us that does not love our neighbour as ourselves, that part of our personal makeup that is not yet ready to be conformed to the will of God.

When she is talking of our being conformed to Christ what I imagine is that slow process of the lived Christian life where all the personal hopes and fears that we cling on to, must be gradually and painfully submerged into the will of God.

This process includes therefore the surrender of all our cherished personal ambitions, but these are the very ambitions that we just don't realise are responsible for keeping us from seeing the true path. This true path is the way back to the divine birthright that Elizabeth says we must all work to recover. To use another metaphor we might say that these very personal ambitions are actually our false gods, the false gods that meantime we cherish so much that we initially experience the process of letting them go as nothing less than pain and suffering.

What I believe that Elizabeth is assuring us is that if we can ever cross that threshold, painful as it may be - and even if only briefly - then we will find for ourselves immeasurable peace, acceptance and love on the far side of it.