

Deep loneliness and pain – Thérèse of Lisieux

Annette Goulden, 7th September 2016

Immersion in Therese

We are here to understand where she is coming from, to get under her skin. We want to see how her experience of loneliness and pain chimes with our experiences, and how her outcome can also be our outcome. What can she offer us? What were her coping methods? How did her prayer develop, her relationship with God? All this is relevant to us today, the petals that she promised she would shower down on us to help us on our own journeys in life.

God of justice

How do we think of Thérèse's upbringing? Loving? Strict? Religious? Easy-going? Spoilt?

Thérèse was brought up with the image of God as weighing and measuring our deeds; with a Jansenistic idea of perfection. A person is born basically sinful and the path to perfection is through renunciation, celibacy, and the sacrament of confession. Only when one was absolved from all guilt, however minor, could one receive permission to receive the Eucharist. God counts up our faults and expects reparation before he will forgive us. It is therefore up to us to earn his forgiveness. This world is misery on earth, an exile awaiting happiness in heaven (if earned). Fear of hell, damnation and punishment was real.

That one is funny sometimes. The other day she asked if she would go to Heaven. "Yes, if you're very good" I answered. "Ah! Mama," she continued, "If I'm not good, then I'll go to hell? But no, I know what I shall do. I would fly off to be with you who'd be in heaven. Then you would hold me very tightly in your arms. How would God be able to take me?" (C, p.247, letter to Pauline, Oct 29 1876)

Do we suffer from this fear? We will look at Therese's life, and begin at the end, for "in the end is my beginning".

God as nurturing Mother

In her search for a way to perfection that would raise her to Jesus:

This is what I discovered: "As one whom a mother caresses, so I will comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you. Isaiah 66:13,12 p208 (written June 1897, three months before her death.)

Preceded by: vv 10, 11:

*Rejoice, Jerusalem,
be glad for her, all you who love her!
Rejoice, rejoice for her,
all you who mourned her!*

*That you may be suckled, filled
from her consoling breast,
that you may savour with delight
her glorious breasts.*

God as nurturing mother – Therese's discovery

Every human being (by definition) must experience being *alone*. No-one can know what it is like to be "me". No-one has experienced *my* life experience. We are created to seek for the other. We are incomplete. We are part of something more than a skeleton covered by flesh.

So we yearn constantly for *completion*. The newborn baby has grown from a few cells to become a human being in the mother's womb. Flesh of her flesh. Then he or she is part of her breast as he feeds and doses off. Where does he begin or end? He sees funny little pink things waving and wriggling just within his focus – and realises he can put them in his mouth, he has control over them, they are part of him. The breast is not – it comes when he is hungry and goes when he is satiated. But it does not always come straight away, so he learns to wait, knowing the breast (or bottle) will fulfil his need. He learns to trust. He learns about hunger and satiation, about desire and fulfillment. We learn to trust by *not* having, by

deprivation. Our faith is formed this way – for why believe in what you can see? “We teach what cannot be seen” says St Paul. St Teresa of Calcutta lived in the darkness of blind faith. Thérèse went through this.

Fears and insecurity: repeated loss

How did she reach this point, of total trust in God?

She was born into a family where death was part and parcel of everyday life: from diseases spread by the new railway and the ravages of the industrial revolution, but most of all, experienced in the deaths of four siblings and a dying mother. Thérèse brought energy and life.

Going back to her childhood in writing the story of her soul, Therese emphasises the *love and security* provided by her mother and then her sisters and father after her mother’s death. The family enfolds her, protecting her from the threats of the outside world. Her world is her sisters, her father and her cousins.

But the image that emerges through her story, reinforced by her mother’s letters to Marie-Céline (her sister-in-law) and later to her second daughter, Pauline, is of an *exile on earth* and a *poor little thing*.

This poor little thing doesn’t want to leave me; she’s continually at my side. She loves to go in the garden... (C 153) But she won’t stay there on her own.

She’s becoming cuter and cuter, but that’s not a little problem, I assure you, because she’s constantly at my side and it’s difficult for me to work. (C 150)

Also, at her mother’s death: “*You poor little things*” (S 34), and observed as “*your poor little girl*” or “*poor little angel*”.

After her mother's death, Thérèse was fearful of causing trouble, of upsetting Maria (who taught her and Céline at home), of failing at her lessons (so would not be allowed to go for a walk with her father), of going to hell and being separated from her mother, of crying and thereby upsetting people, so crying again.

What are our fears? Upsetting some-one? Saying the wrong thing? Getting it wrong? Making mummy, daughter, husband ill/angry? How does it affect us, our family, our relationships?

1. Separations

Thérèse suffered a series of separations in her short life. First, like all warm-blooded animals, from the security of the womb. Three months later she was separated from her mother because she had enteritis from the bottled milk/water mix and was starving. At 13 months she left her surrogate mother Rose Taillé, and barely three years later, her mother died and Thérèse chose her sister Pauline to be her mother. When she was eight, she lost her teacher, Marie, when she started at the Benedictine Abbey as a day boarder. One year later, she returned to school the same day that Pauline, her fourth mother figure, abandoned her for Carmel. Thérèse described this as another death as she felt she had lost Pauline forever.

Before seeing my family reunited around the Paternal hearth of heaven, however, I was to pass through many separations...I had suffered martyrdom getting accustomed to living without her." S 88

When Marie followed Pauline into Carmel, Thérèse lost her fifth mother, at a time of painful scruples which only Marie understood. These would be called obsessional-compulsive thoughts now. Therese's compulsive thoughts were about guilt and the need for constant reparation and forgiveness.

She had moved from one mother to another, always clinging, always seeking the mother she did not have. Only when the last “mother” (Marie) left did she turn, not to her father or Céline, but to her two brothers and two sisters in heaven, and her scruples slid away.

Guilt and failure

Did Therese have a perpetual sense of guilt and failure? Did she constantly blame herself when things went wrong? Do we?

As soon as she makes the slightest mistake, everyone has to know. Yesterday, having accidentally ripped a little corner of the wallpaper, she put herself in a pitiable state. Then she had to very quickly tell her father. When he returned four hours later, everyone had forgotten about it. But she ran up to Marie, saying to her, “Quick, tell Papa that I ripped the paper.” She behaved like a criminal awaiting her sentence, but she has it in her little head that we will forgive her more easily if she takes the blame. (C 232)

Therese’s experience of loneliness as a child

We progress to the eight-year-old little girl and ask ourselves, is there anything worse for a child:

than wandering alone in the playground?

than not being able to understand or join in the games?

than being bullied?

than being labelled as unintelligent or having a weak character?

than feeling invisible, in your family or in your classroom or in the playground?

than carrying around with you an unresolved and inexpressible grief?

After her mother's death, Louis moved the family to Lisieux to live near Zélie's brother's family and sent Thérèse and Céline as day boarders to a Benedictine school in the same town. Thérèse only survived there because her sister was with her.

Miracles of transformation and growth

Settled at Les Buissonnets in Lisieux, Mr Martin took the older girls with him to Paris while Thérèse (now ten) and Céline stayed with their uncle and aunt. Thérèse had been suffering from a constant headache for several months but had carried on with her school work so no-one was worried. She stayed in bed while the adults went to the Catholic Circle, but started trembling and shaking. She became so deluded and frightened that her father returned at once and Marie had to stay with her in their uncle's house as Thérèse was too ill to go home.

Throughout this terrible time, which Thérèse attributed to the devil, she found a deep calm place where the devil "could not approach either my soul or my spirit"; she was able to distinguish the difference between her mind and her soul. Finally, this troubled child found healing in the smile of Mary the Mother of God, a real mother for her.

We have seen that the first ten years of childhood years led Thérèse to being imprisoned by her dependency and fears, like a baby in swaddling bands. She was turning in a circle, as a prisoner in a cell. She needed constant reassurance and affection.

As a child, Therese had absorbed *knowledge* of God, Jesus and Mary. She had been taught a book-keeping religion, an exchange system of earning points to gain the reward of heaven, for oneself or for those who had died. From a rock-bottom

place of utter hopelessness, she left behind these childhood fears (when Mary smiled at her) and, in Carmel, discovered the God of mercy and her Little Way

When she entered Carmel aged fifteen, Therese was freed from her fears but still very vulnerable; she would never lose her yearnings, her sadness at separation. This is what makes her near to us today: close to all who have been abandoned, hurt, rejected and who suffer the consequences: aggression, sadness, discouragement, and guilt.

Carmel

This place of longing brought physical imprisonment and spiritual freedom. No longer could she be abandoned. The fifteen-year-old teenager was no longer separated from humanity.

Thérèse speaks to those who are lonely because they are different: through being ill, a carer, disabled, poor, tall, brainy, living in hotel rooms, living in a mansion or high-rise block of flats.

An adult loneliness may arise from a history of sexual abuse, alcoholism, being a foreigner, being depressed, isolated, imprisoned and many other early experiences.

At the time she entered it, the convent at Lisieux presented a picture of community or family life – dysfunctional, various ages and abilities, jealousies, joys and relationships. It brought Thérèse psychological and physical pain which can be summarized as:

Psychological:

- Preventing herself seeing Pauline and Marie
- Being seen as the “pet”
- Inadequate in housework, sewing, choir, gardening
- Her father’s dementia and the burden on Celine and Leonie

Physical:

- Chilblains

always cold
 indigestion
 tiredness and lack of sleep
 TB and its terrible treatments

Spiritual:

Arid
 Rosary difficult
 Loss of faith – no heaven

All this led to patience and raw prayer: “search and you will find”.

Thérèse became a saint though being with people far from perfect. She has given us an example of love as something we can give God in each moment, without which our “works” are but *a gong booming or a cymbal clashing*. (1 Cor 13,1)

In this environment, perhaps she became a child for the first time! She could get dirty, make mistakes, laugh and joke, be a mimic, write and act in plays, be useless at housework. She could stop counting her good deeds and her faults with her “chaplet”; she had no need to dress beautifully or curl her long hair.

Suffering was not reparation, not earning points, not even just sharing in Jesus’ Passion. Thérèse, through her own experience, developed her understanding of this mystery as a school of abandoning oneself to God. we can also experience

- Guilt – constant awareness of something we have done in the past which will not leave us alone until we have made up for it in some way
- Divine judgement – unpitying God who dictates strict moral precepts which we must observe in order to be saved
- Undefined sense of guilt, that everything is our fault and no-one can like us. Total lack of self-confidence and a feeling of oppression and persecution
- The anxiety born of pride and egoism which makes a person always afraid of not being recognised, of losing their power and sense of control
- Of losing everything, of losing someone we love, of being abandoned

- Existential anxiety: loss of taste for life, it makes no sense, has no goal. Dreams are unrealised and excitement is replaced by monotony.

Development of trust through waiting and searching = prayer

- Trust from rooting for the breast, and from waiting. This is the summary of Therese's life: finding God as a child and losing him. Finding him as a novice and losing him in the dark night, finding him in death. Her life was one of searching:
 - for perfection
 - For another mother
 - For haven after this "exile"
 - For her vocation in the Church
 - For her fast track to God
 - For the God of mercy
 - For Papa

The person who is searching is on the move, is living in hope. Like the man who finds a treasure in the field, the woman who finds her gold drachma, and the merchant who finds a pearl of great price.

The searching is the thing, not the finding. It is not all hardship, for it brings hope and joy. For Thérèse, family brought joy and fun into her life: cuddling up on Papa's knee, walking in the countryside with him fishing, garden gifts, opening presents, delighting in the ritual of New Year slippers. Community brought recreation, a brilliant mimic, plays, poems and, even on her sick bed, Thérèse made everyone laugh!

Conclusion

Perfection consists in doing his will, in being what he wants us to be. He does not call those who are "worthy", but creates each of us as a uniquely beautiful person. Therese saw this truth in the flowers of the field, each different and each beautiful. The sun shines equally on each. But the flower does not pretend to be anything

other than what it is: it neither suffocates its splendour nor hides its head in false humility.

We discover that we are not created in other people's image and likeness but in God's. Thérèse was "formed" by her older sisters but broke free to find out who she was. On discovering that she was weak and fragile, she rejoiced with St Paul in saying, when I am weak, then I am strong. She would be lifted up but not by her own strength.

To have poverty in spirit, to be poor, is also to accept that we may not feel that God is close. *Oh Jesus, your little bird is happy to be weak and little.* (S199)

Only God can fill the empty space within us. Our sins are like grains of dust in front of the mountain of mercy. When our sufferings strip us down, we can ask ourselves: what place does Jesus occupy in our lives?

If, in contrast, we put "me" in the centre, or the idol which we venerate and give things to, the result is ill ease, unhappiness, anxiety, depression. Putting God first, we feel an interior strength, like the keel of a boat which keeps it steady in the heart of a storm.

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? [...] But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us (Rm 8, 35-37)

Like Thérèse, we must make the distinction between our feelings and our belief. She did not *feel* God's presence within her at all, but *wanted* to believe. In the deepest absence, her soul was in peace.

We too offer ourselves to him as we are, without any reassuring feelings, without enthusiasm, even if we feel no-one understands, we offer ourselves however we are.

The experience of loneliness and pain brought Therese this knowledge of Jesus hidden in her depths, “closer to me than I to myself”. It can for us also.

Therese’s poem:

To live in Love, is to guard in yourself
 A great treasure in a mortal vessel.
 My Beloved, my frailty is extreme
 Ah, I am far from being an angel in heaven!
 But if I fall in every hour which passes
 Lifting me up, you come to my help
 At every second you give me your grace
 I live in Love.

Describing her Profession retreat Aug 2 to Sept 8 1890 as a time of great aridity, she wrote:

He nourishes me at each moment with a totally new food; I find it within me without my knowing how it is there. I believe it is Jesus Himself hidden in the depths of my poor little heart: He is giving me the grace of acting within me, making me think of all He desires to do at the present moment. (S 165)

Thérèse’s life-line

Jan 2 nd Thérèse born	1873	
Age ten weeks: Rose Taillé	1873	loss of Mum
Age 13 months: returns home	1874	loss of Rose and her 4 children
Age 4y 8m, Zélie dies 28/8	1877	loss of mother
Move to Lisieux 15/11	1877	loss of house and maids
2/10, age 8y 9m day boarder	1881	loss of Marie as her teacher
2/10 Pauline enters Lisieux Carmel	1882	loss of Pauline her “mother”
25/3 to 13/5 Thérèse very ill	1883	
Oct. Celine leaves the abbey	1885	loss of Céline at school
March Thérèse leaves the Abbey	1885	
7/10 Leonie enters the Poor Clares	1886	loss of Leonie (until 1/12)
15/10 Marie enters Carmel	1886	loss of Marie
1/5 Father suffers first paralysis	1887	loss of father’s health
10/1 Thérèse receives the habit	1888	
12/2 father hospitalised at Bon Saveur	1889	loss of father’s mental capacity
25/12 end of lease on les Buissonnets	1889	loss of family home
5/12 Mother Genevieve dies (foundress)	1991	loss of mother figure
29/7 father dies	1894	loss of father
2/4 first haemoptysis	1896	loss of her own health
30/9 Thérèse dies	1897	
S	<i>Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux.</i> ICS Publications 1996	
C	<i>A Call to a Deeper Love: The Family Correspondence of the Parents of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus 1863 – 1885.</i> St Pauls, 2011	