

# **THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER**

a series of eight talks based on St Teresa of Avila's  
four stages of prayer  
(Book of her Life Chapters 11-22)

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## **THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (1)**

*Audio transcript of first talk (18 May 2020)*

The topic is prayer and it is prayer in the context of the very particular world situation that we're in at present. I'm drawing my reflections mainly from the writings of St Teresa and very specific chapters from the Book of her Life (Chapters 11-21) which many of you will be very familiar with. It is a treatise on prayer that could be plucked out and be a book in itself. Those chapters are there if people want to do a bit of background reading. I'm not following exactly what Teresa has there, but I'm using it as a skeleton on which to build, to give these talks some focus.

The context obviously is the situation that we're in at present and how all of our lives have been disrupted, thrown into chaos and so much else by Covid 19, this pandemic that is sweeping our world. How does that affect our prayer lives, our spiritual lives? Everything that happens in our world, the life around us, everything that we experience affects us spiritually and our spiritual lives are very much related to every aspect of our lives. In other words, the spiritual, the prayer life, the holy bits, so to speak, of our lives, can never be in one place and the rest of life be 'over there'. Everything affects everything else and we're all living through a very particular experience at present. And how is that for each one of us at a deep level, at a spiritual level? How it is externally of course, we could give lists and lists of all the different things, and the restrictions we're under and the great suffering that many people are enduring and those who are ill, in hospital etc and all kinds of pressures that people are under, but how is it for us at a deeper level? How is it for us spiritually? That question -what's going on, or another way of putting it – where is God in all of this? What's God doing, not in a general sense but what is he doing in me, in each one of us? Because God is always there, God is always with us, and as I said, the experience varies so much and I'm very aware of what various people have been saying to me and asking me these past weeks and months, and for some people, these are days

where there is far less to do there is more quiet, more leisure and for some of these people that's a time for prayer, contemplation, you can read the scriptures, read spiritual books, a sense of being closer to God.

But there are many others, perhaps far more, whose experience is not as clear cut as that, not as straightforward, in fact quite challenging. Surely with this extra time on our hands we should be able to pray more and pray better and our prayers should be more meaningful and at this time of great crisis, when we turn to the Lord, surely the Lord will make his presence known to us?

Many people's experience is very different to that. It's not like that at all. For many of us the foundations have been pulled out from the edifice that is our spiritual lives. I'm speaking to an absolutely empty church. There's not a person in the church. I have to believe somehow that you're out there somewhere, listening to me; otherwise I'm just going mad, talking about prayer here to absolutely nobody. But that is an image of the disconcerting experience that we are having. And so for some people prayer has suddenly become very difficult. The normal structures of prayer, the prayers that would have been helpful and supportive don't seem to mean anything. *I just can't do them anymore. It means nothing. Or, all this time and I just don't seem to make use of it.* For other people something far more disturbing has happened. Faith is being questioned, *where is God? He doesn't seem to be around the place. He seems to have gone missing.* It's a time of great questioning, of fear, anxiety. For other people things seem to be shifting and there's an awareness of some change. *Yes God is there, yes, there are good things to be seen and experienced, but they're different. I don't quite understand.* So there's a great array of experience and we want to bring that to St Teresa and and we're saying to Teresa, *look, you're the great expert on prayer. Here are we in this particular situation. Can you help us?* That's what we're doing.

From my point of view this is very unique. As I said, there is nobody here, I am speaking to nobody, yet speaking to a whole number of you in different places but

without the opportunity for feedback or questions or any kind of real communication. But if you do have questions, send me an email and I will try to pick them up as we go along over these weeks.

It is a question that somebody has already given me that sparks how I intend beginning this. In the little notice I sent around about these talks I put in that I am drawing from Chapters 11-21 from St Teresa's book of her life. The question that was posed to me was – because this really could stand alone - was this part of Teresa's original book or not or was it put in there at some stage either by her or by someone else? The simple answer to that is that it was part of the book that has come down to us which is of course the Second Edition. Teresa wrote the book of her life first in 1562 and that book has not come down to us. But four years later she re-wrote the book – a much longer book – in very different circumstances and that book has come down to us and these chapters are in it. The question is such a good one because it begs the question what was Teresa's purpose in this? Why? If any one of us was asked to write a book of our life, write a book that says who you are, would we put a big vast section into it explaining what prayer is? Why would somebody do that? For Teresa it was absolutely necessary to do that. And why? Because she's asked to write about her life and she's asked to do this by her confessors. How is she living? Who is she? And the answer to that question she plucks straight out of St Paul's writings. *It is no longer I who live; it is Jesus Christ who lives in me. My real life is Jesus Christ. The old life is gone. That was not real life, now this life I'm living is life, it is Jesus Christ.*

And that's what Teresa wants to tell us and we have this book of 40 chapters and she begins chapter 23 with exactly these words, *now I can begin to write about my life, this is my life, it is a new book a new life the life that Jesus lives in me.* But of course she knows that no reader will understand this. She has to explain this and so the first ten chapters are a background to Teresa's life, her young days, but in particular it is her spiritual journey. However, having told us a certain amount about herself that brought her to this point, she realises that it is prayer that has brought this growth, it is

prayer that has brought me to live, therefore I need to explain what prayer is. And she needs to explain what prayer is because it is prayer that brought her to an understanding of who she is. That's what prayer is. Prayer is an encounter with ourselves, with the truth of who we are. In prayer we stand in our truth, we come before God in truth. In prayer there can be no pretending, there can be no acting. We can't put on a show in prayer; we can't dress up but look a particular way. Prayer is the naked truth of who we are. It is prayer that enabled Teresa to come to know herself and that is going to take a long time, that's a lifelong journey. But from the other point of view, the point of view of the readers and the listeners, if we are to know who Teresa is, we have to know what prayer is. There's no understanding this woman, there's no knowing who she is without prayer. If we don't pray, if we don't know what prayer is, there's no way of knowing this woman, prayer and her own self-identity is so caught up with it. And then she gave a third introduction, chapter 22, which we'll get to a bit later on and that is the place of Jesus Christ in the whole spiritual journey, the spiritual life and he of course is the essential presence in all this.

We come back to Teresa's story. What's her experience? Teresa wasn't just a woman of prayer; she was a woman who was keenly interested in prayer. We could say that prayer was the greatest interest in Teresa's life. She was fascinated by prayer, drawn to it, wanted to pray, did everything possible to enable herself to pray. But prayer did not come easily to her; in fact prayer was very difficult for her. One of the church's greatest experts on prayer in its 2,000 years of history did not find prayer easy, in fact she found it very difficult, but in her very young age she prayed and wanted to pray and desired to pray and prayer became very real and alive from her teenage years onwards. When she entered the convent at 21 we could sum up her experience as something like this. On the one hand she is taught how to pray, she enters into a structure of prayer that was common in a convent in those days and how things were done and what you followed, etc., but her own personal experience, what was going on within her, did not match this. It was like a square peg trying to get into a round hole. It just didn't work for her and that had catastrophic consequences, so much so that it brought her to a point where she makes this extraordinary statement, that the

life she was living was not life, it was a death. *I live under the shadow of death*, she said. She recognised that she was not alive, she was not living but her experience also brought her to another realisation and that the only way to live, the only road to life was through relationships, and through the most important and life giving relationship of all – her relationship with Jesus Christ.

Then she comes to that very famous statement that we so often quote from Teresa, *prayer is friendly conversation with one that we know loves us*. A conversation of friendship with the one that we know loves us – friendship and love, they're the two key words. But when it is quoted out of context we often miss the context. The context really brings out what it means. She gives it at a crisis moment of her life. What brought her to realise this was the absence of that real friendship, the struggle to create that friendship, the struggle to really accept that love, to enter into that love. So she's got to tell us what prayer is and so she gets to the chapters on prayer. She begins by using a very interesting phrase. She says, *I am now going to address those who are becoming servants of love*. That's a very interesting way to begin a book on prayer.

We probably expect *this is how you pray, this is what prayer is*, but it's a becoming a servant of love and that is because she's already given us in her long introduction, shown us what has brought her to this realisation, that prayer is an act of love. In fact prayer is the greatest act of love, because prayer is an entering into a relationship of love with the one that we know loves us, and loves us with a love that is infinite, a love that has no limits - he laid down his life for us, gives us everything. So prayer is friendly conversation and friendly entering into a relationship with the greatest love of all. And it is that great love that gives life, that is life giving, that brings her to life and so she is so transformed in that love and by that love that she can say, *it's now he that's alive in me, he has become alive in me, his love lives in me, I am alive because of his love within me, I am alive because I am a child of his love*. That's what prayer is, that is what prayer does, that is how prayer is bringing to life, and it is in that context that Teresa gives us these 11 chapters on prayer.

As I said in the beginning, you could pluck them out and publish them as a separate book and it would be a very good book on prayer, but we would miss this context, we would miss the essential context in which they come.

So she gives us this teaching on prayer and that's where this evening we could simply consider the image she gives us - the watering of a garden. Prayer is the watering of a garden. Water is life, a symbol of life. If the garden doesn't have water, it dies. Teresa's experience was that if she didn't pray, if she wasn't in a relationship of love with the one who loves her, she dies, it's death. To live is to be in a relationship with the one who loves us, not to be is to die. He is the one who gives this water. Teresa grew up in a house where there was a painting of the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus. And time and time again she tells us how important that gospel episode was to her and she always carried around a little picture of it with her throughout her whole life. She learned to pray by praying, *Lord, give me this water*. As we know Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, *I will give you water that will well up inside you to everlasting life. You will become the well, you will well up to a life that lives and lives forever*. So prayer is watering this garden. Such an important image in Teresa's time in a dry place like Castile where Teresa lived.

There are four ways of watering the garden, four ways of getting the water. The first one is going to the well with your bucket and drawing up the water from the well, which is hard work and in a dry place like Avila, you're going to have to draw a lot of water to water a garden, it's hard work. Prayer can be hard work, particularly at the beginning, it requires perseverance, it requires courage. They're the great two words Teresa uses – courage, perseverance, determination - those words that she uses about prayer. It's hard work, at times; you have got to just persevere.

The second way - it would have been common in Teresa's time to use a water wheel - a pump that would draw up the water and then it would flow through aqueducts and pipes and would be piped around the place. There's a certain amount of work

involved but you got much greater quantities of water and you could water the garden much quicker. Teresa used to draw water that way herself, she was used to that method.

The third way of getting water is from a stream or a river. That, she said, was so much better, as it simply flows and saturates the ground, and you only have to do a little bit, maybe direct it in various ways, but an abundance of water flows to you.

The fourth way is the best of all. God just provides and the rain falls. So you can see that from 1-4, at the beginning there's hard work involved, but God does more and more until God provides everything.

But Teresa makes a very important point at the beginning of this. To begin to pray is to begin watering the garden. But she said *when we begin to water the garden, what we got to remember is that God has already cleared away the ground, God has already cultivated the soil, God has already sown the seeds.* God has already done an enormous amount of work before we begin. Put in other terms, whenever we get the desire to pray, or want to pray, or are struggling to pray, or feel we cannot pray, or are longing to learn to pray, however the thought of prayer comes into our minds, into our hearts, it has been put there by God. It is always a response to his presence, to his love. God is never out there somewhere and we've got to go through a whole process in order to reach him. God is already here and God is already inviting, *come, I will help you, and I will walk beside you, and I am with you.* The person has already received so much. The big work in the garden is already done. But God's grace, but God's mercy, has already done. That's why Teresa, although she never gave a title to this book - we call it *Life*, but that was given by others later – she said it was the book of God's mercy, because what Teresa becomes more and more aware of is this great gift, this great work that God has already done, and she labels that the mercy of God. We are always responding to the mercy of God, that gratitude for God's mercy, for God's gift. So that's how Teresa begins to show us what prayer is.



Now to pick up something else that I mentioned earlier. If we stand back a little bit from what Teresa writes and look at what her method shows us, what her approach shows us, we might be inclined to think that asking a great teacher of prayer to write on prayer for us, she would take a certain approach. Teresa's approach shows us something fundamental about prayer, and I think it is fundamental for us in particular at the time we are now living in, and that is, that prayer, whatever is happening in our prayer, influences and reaches the whole of our lives. Prayer can never be a particular part of our lives, or confined to particular experiences, or particular times. If we are praying, if a person is a person of prayer, if a person desires to pray, if a person sets on on the road or journey of prayer, that person's whole life is changed and transformed by the experience. The change and transformation is going to go to every aspect of their lives, not just the spiritual, but every dimension of a person's life. It's like the water flows everywhere, it's not confined.

It's interesting, in another one of Teresa's books, *The Way of Perfection*, when she's asked to write a book on prayer for her sisters, her starting point is the kind of people that we are, the kind of lives that we live. That's where we start, not with how we pray, or what happens during our prayer time, or what feelings we have about prayer or whether we think our prayer is going well or badly, but how are we living, what kind of a life are we living? That's an important principle in spiritual direction when somebody comes and says, *I'm struggling to pray - well, how is your life?* To help a person with their prayer life, you have got to look at the whole of a person's life, and if prayer is going badly or something fundamentally changed, what's happening in that person's life? Not what's happening in those moments that are called prayer, but what's happening in the whole of that person's life, and that is Teresa's approach – the whole of life – prayer is the whole of a person's life, is going to involve the whole of a person's life. So whatever happens in prayer affects the whole of a person's life. But it also works in the other direction – a person's prayer life is always influenced by everything that is happening in a person's life – whether it be a person's health, a person's happiness, a person's relationships, a person's economic position, a person's culture, everything. We pray as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, in the context of our times,

our prayer lives fit into our whole life and into our context. We now pray as people living through a worldwide pandemic. What is going on in the world around us so affects our prayer lives, we can't protect and put a wall up around our prayer lives and keep everything else that's going on out there somewhere or we can't we living a life over here that somehow is not compatible with the goals and objectives of our lives of prayer, so that when we reflect on our lives of prayer at this time everything that's going on in the world around us, all the issues that are facing humanity at this time affect us, the new circumstance of our lives, the loss, the insecurity, the confusion, the uncertainties, all of that creeps into our prayer and becomes part of our prayer.

Over affects our prayer and over these weeks we will be exploring this and will come back to it in various ways. But our prayer is never an island; it is never a safe place, cut off from the world around us. It is rather, and it leads to, a deeper engagement with the world around us and a deeper understanding of the world around us, and that was Teresa's discovery. And so Teresa, in her life, in her experience, everything she tells us comes from experience, yet she read books, she consulted experts and theologians and spiritual directors and she had so many of them and all the leading people in Spain at the time, she was consulting them and writing to them and questioning them. She did everything she could to learn about prayer and theology and scripture and all of that. But when it came to writing about prayer she will make use of all that, but she will only write what she knows from experience, because prayer is real and we only learn about it through experience, so our experience, whatever our real experience is, that's what we must always look to and bring. Then Teresa's experience and so many others -whoever we feel drawn to - will then speak to ours. She will never made the mistake that so many people make – this should be happening and if it's not happening then you're wrong. It doesn't work like that, if what should be happening in our prayer isn't happening that doesn't mean we're wrong, it just means we've got to look at it in a different way.

Prayer is as personal to each one of us and it is part of our particular experience, and now our experience of life has been profoundly changed. We can't even hug each

other; we can't talk to each other, visit each other. The basic fabric of our lives has been taken away – that changes our prayer, it cannot - not do that - our prayer is also going to be different and how is going to be individual to each one of us. So as we go over these eight weeks one of the things that we all share is that our lives are changed our prayer also is. And God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ are in that change, and God is with us, and God is doing something new in our lives, in our world. So this is a time to have the courage to trust one's experience, that's what Teresa had to learn, and learn in a hard way, in a painful way, over many, many years, with people telling her she was wrong, in the hands of the devil, and that it can't be like that. She had to learn to trust her experience and to recognise that God is in it, and accept that he is in it. So Teresa, in writing from her experience, is writing the books that would have helped her when she needed this help if she had them. This is what would have happened to her, and that's why she is so helpful to so many of us. Teresa is discovering that and we will be looking at this over the next number of weeks how Teresa, as she writes from her experience, begins to see and becomes aware *my listeners my readers are being helped by this, this is helping them, other people need to hear this.*

That is setting the scene for us as we live at a time in our personal lives that is very particular, very unique, and we try, as people of prayer, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to live this experience well. Or perhaps to live it, to see this experience as a life giving one. It is either life or death. There is so much death; the shadow of death hangs over us. But a person of prayer lives not from what's going on around, but from what's deep within. To pray is to live one's life from the deepest place within, the soul - if we want to use that word - the deepest centre, the deepest truth of one's identity, to live life from there, because then one is living life and seeing everything from that friendly conversation with the one who we know loves us. If our lives are a conversation of friendship with Jesus Christ, with the one who we know loves us, then our lives are also a conversation with all the reality around us, which is one of friendship and one that is life-giving and gives life. That's the water – one waters the

garden. As Teresa said, whoever lives a life of prayer helps and supports and gives life to so many others.

Thank you, wherever you are, for listening, watching, and let us pray for each other and know and support each other. Just to know that there are many other people - and there are - as I have had communication from so many people already. There are a lot of people out there who are genuinely praying, people of prayer, who desire to live this time in a deeper and more life-giving way. Let us pray or each other and support each other and may God bless and guide us all. Amen

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (2)

### *Audio transcript of second talk*

Monday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020 at 8pm

This is the second in this series of eight talks. I began last week by setting the scene for this. We live in very unique circumstances. The whole world and our lives have been radically changed by the current pandemic. Everything from the church here, empty in front of me, to our work, schools, our health, the economic situation, we could go on and on. All the changes and difference to our lives – that we are unable to meet with each other and all of that is affecting our spiritual lives, not just the fact that we can't come to church, we can't come together for all the usual supports that we would have. But, because, as I said last week, everything that happens in our lives affects us spiritually, how we are living spiritually is very much coloured by all that is going on in our life. We cannot live our spiritual life in one corner and have the rest of life somewhere else, carrying on, or we cannot be engaged in a whole lot of activities in our ordinary lives and hope that our spiritual life can somehow be protected and kept safe from that. We are one, we are whole people and the spiritual affects every dimension of a person's life and every dimension of a person's life has an impact on how we live spiritually. So that's the context in which we are living our lives and many questions come up for us at this time as to how we live our spiritual lives.

So we're turning to St Teresa and we're asking her, Teresa, can you give us some advice, can you give us some help? Obviously she lived in such totally different circumstances, yet one of the great treasures we have from Teresa is not just that she is one of the greatest teachers on prayer in the history of Christianity, but more than that, her writings give us a great understanding of her own prayer life, her own spiritual journey and in particular her spiritual struggles. We might be inclined to think that one of the greatest experts on prayer that the church has ever known would find prayer easy, that prayer would come naturally to her and that she would be able to pray without much difficulty. The opposite is actually the case, for Teresa, prayer

was particularly difficult and she went through great struggles. It's as if God, in his great wisdom, chose Teresa to be the great teacher of prayer, but in order for her to really become this great teacher, she had to live and experience a great variety of the difficulties and struggles that human beings will go through in prayer. It's the difficulties and the struggles that she herself went through and the difficulties and the struggles that she helped other people through that give her the wisdom; that's what made her the great teacher. So Teresa went through great difficulties, great struggles as many people are now.

Many people I am in contact with have written to me. For some people, having all this extra time on their hands is a great time for prayer, and thank God for that. But for many people, despite having all this time on their hands, more leisure, more peace and quiet, prayer has actually become a lot more difficult, or prayer seems to change, or the usual patterns of prayer just don't work, or something else is going on and for others because so many of the structures have been taken away - where are we? - very deep questions are being asked. If we haven't got the Eucharist, if we haven't got the sacraments, we can't come together to meet each other; if we can't pray together, if we can't have Christian community, then what's going on? That raises great questions. So it is in that context that we want to explore a little bit what prayer is and draw on a certain wisdom from Teresa.

I want to begin with a little passage from her book *The Way of Perfection* – the way, *camino*, journey. This is the beginning of Chapter 21, when she is beginning to speak to the people she describes as the *beginners in prayer*. She has just been talking about the things you need to consider in order to begin this *divine journey which is the royal road to heaven*. What a wonderful definition of prayer - this divine journey, this divine road, this divine way, or this divine pilgrimage, that is the royal road to heaven. There are two things I want to pick from that:

One - that this is a divine road, a divine journey, a divine pilgrimage - not a human one, not an earthly one, not one of our making. To pray is a journey, a road, a way,

*camino* - Teresa's wonderful words - but it's not a human one, an earthly one, it's a God one, a divine one.

Two - In other words, it's not going to work in the way we think it should, it's not going to follow the steps we think we should follow. It's always going to be beyond our understanding, it's always going to follow a logic that is outside of our way of seeing things.

So we're setting out on something. When we begin to pray, we're stepping into another place, stepping into another environment and this world is divine – it is God's glory, the atmosphere of God that we're stepping into. So it's the divine road, which is the royal road to heaven. Now why heaven here? Teresa doesn't just mean life after death - yes that's part of it - but heaven here in this context is heaven on earth and she extensively writes about this in her commentary on the Lords Prayer, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Heaven is where the will of God is done. Wherever the will of God is done, there is heaven. Whoever lives by God's will is living a heavenly life, is living heaven here on this earth. We'll get back to that another time. The understanding of heaven - this is a royal road to heaven - which is here and now. It is wherever God's will is done.

Teresa wants to define the attitude of mind, the inner disposition of the person she describes as *the beginner in prayer*. She says there is no stage in prayer in which one does not have to go back to the beginning, over and over again. Although she says this is the attitude of beginners, it is the attitude of everybody on the road, because we don't know where we are on this road anyway. It doesn't follow an ABC - you don't go from one place to another as you would on an earthly road, it is a much more complex, mysterious road that operates by a very different logic. So we're always at the beginning, we're always beginners. Here is how she defines it, *now, returning to those who want to journey on this road* – and that's the road she has just defined, the divine road, the royal road to heaven - *and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from the water of life, I say that how they are to begin is very important, in*

*fact all important. They must have a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end.* Come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have the courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses - whatever happens, take no notice of it, just have the resolute determination to go on this road. And know two things about the road; a person's attitude of mind at the beginning of this road, their hearts, their eyes, their minds must be set on the end. We're at the beginning, but our minds, our hearts are set on the end of the road - not a third of the way, or three quarters of the way, or ninety nine per cent of the way, the end – one hundred per cent. Teresa would say, don't even start if the end is not your full, total desire, your love, your heart set on the end. That's so important, the heart must be set upon the end, which is the love of God, union with God, the fullness of human and Christian maturity. We will be getting to that at another time, what the end really is.

The other thing one wants and desires – and desires are such a great word for Teresa, she has been described as *the woman of desires*, she lives from the heart – so our desires are for this water. As we discussed last week, the image she bases these four ways of prayer on is that of water, the water of life. There are four different ways of getting this water, but it's the water that gives life, so it's life itself - Jesus Christ - the water that he gave to the Samaritan woman. So, that's what a person's desire is set upon; the attitude of mind of a beginner.

There is a little paragraph at the end of Chapter 11 of the book of her *Life* that I have suggested you read as a background to this. There she makes a very important point, that when you are setting out on this journey, or indeed, wherever you are on this journey, there are two things you must take no notice of, that you must completely ignore and give no importance to whatsoever, and these two things are dryness and distractions. These are the two words she uses. I want to flesh out a bit what both these words mean; just what they might mean to us in our context because they're big;



they were big for Teresa and they are big for everyone of us. There isn't anyone who sets out on this road who doesn't have to struggle with dryness and distractions.

I mentioned last week a little bit about dryness and particularly in the context of the imagery that Teresa was using, because she was speaking about the first way of drawing water when you go with your bucket and you pull up the water and you carry your bucket of water to your garden and you do this over and over again and the plants grow. And then she said that what would happen was that the well would run dry. But, she said, if you keep going to the well and you keep putting your bucket in, and you keep going, you will find that, unlike the earthly garden, in the spiritual garden the plants keep growing. The Lord looks after it, provided we keep doing our bit, if even when the well is completely empty, we keep coming to it. It's a lovely image. So what might this dryness be? It can be a whole variety of different things, different experiences that we have. But it will all come down to something like this; the feeling, the sense, that my prayer is going nowhere, I'm getting nowhere. It was all wonderful last year or the year before, or ten years ago, in the past, or maybe before this Covid 19 crisis came up, it was great. I could pray and I loved to be part of this group or that group and it was all wonderful. All that's gone, I have nothing. Or, I could be in silence and spend time there, I had wonderful thoughts and meditations and now there's nothing. It can take a whole lot of different forms for different people, it's very individual. But it will always come down to the sense that this is getting nowhere. Teresa tells us the worst experience is the sense that we are wasting our time. Why do we waste our time doing nothing and waste our time doing nothing day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year? That, for her, was the most difficult, that sense that this is a waste of time. Teresa said pay no attention to thoughts like that, ignore them completely. It never is a waste of time, it never is empty. We feel that it's empty, we feel that we're getting nowhere, but the Lord is making things grow, the Lord is doing things that we cannot see. So the beginner in prayer, which could be anyone, all of us, are to pay no attention whether we have thoughts and feelings, no matter how long they go on for. Some people, she said, spend a whole lifetime like this where there is nothing, nothing, nothing. Pay no

attention, just keep drawing water, just keep praying in whatever way you can. She does, however, qualify that - don't be rigid - there's no rigidity in Teresa's prayer. Sometimes something may not be working, so pray in a different way, try something else, experiment, do it differently, don't be rigidly tied to it, she's not advocating a stubbornness or a rigidity. There must be a joy and a freedom in our prayer. As long as there is perseverance, the form or the type or the way the situation is for us as individuals, there's a freedom there. There must be an ease; it's not about forcing oneself. Use discretion she said, but pray, as long as one is praying, as long as one is putting in the time and effort, but be flexible and don't be rigid about it. If the well is dry, the well is dry, but God is still there. So that's one thing to which we should give no attention whatsoever.

The second thing we should ignore are distractions. This is again something Teresa suffered terribly from. In her writings there are wonderful images she uses for these distractions, all the things that come into our minds – *some people think*, she said, *they can control their minds and they can put everything out of their minds and their minds can be wonderfully quiet and tranquil and focussed on something. I could never do that*, she said, *and in my experience most people can't*. But she said that she had to learn that prayer is not about controlling the mind, it's not an exercise in self control. The mind can be everywhere. She uses lovely images for this - the *stampede of wild horses*. If you stand up in front of these wild horses they're just going knock you down. There's no point in trying to control these thoughts – *the mad person in the house* – yes, she said, this person will cause a bit of irritation and annoyance, but they're harmless. Or the *lizards*, that can creep in, no matter what we do to keep them out, they will creep in, but, she said, they're harmless. These thoughts are harmless, even what are sometimes labelled bad thoughts, they're harmless, she said, thoughts are harmless. Don't give them attention, don't allow distractions to become distractions, just let them come and let them go, they're not important, because prayer is taking place at a deeper level. It's like the ocean, you can have a battle going on, you can have a storm raging on the surface, but there's tranquillity deep down, because deep down is where God is.

And what is it about these about these two things that we struggle most with? Why is it that they're such a big issue for us? Because fundamentally our difficulty is that we have a great need that prayer be something *I can do*, and both of these realities remind us of what we can't. If the well is dry, she said, there is nothing we can do to put water into it. If our prayer is dry, if we have no wonderful thoughts or wonderful feelings of being close to God, there is nothing we can do about it, only God can, and all these distractions and things that come into our mind, we cannot control. And there's a very painful lesson for us in all of this, which brings us to what terms she would use for the fundamental quality needed for prayer and that is humility. The person of prayer needs humility. To grow in prayer is to grow in humility. But she warns us, and particularly at the beginning, she said - but again that can be any time - there's a real danger of a false humility or a misunderstanding of what humility really is. Humility is not about, *oh I can't do anything, I'm only a little one and I really can't do much of this and I can only do a little bit*. Oh no, she said, humility must never stop us from having our hearts set on the end of the road. Humility must never stop us from being ambitious spiritually, of desiring the fullness of God's grace. Humility must never stop us from putting our entire minds and hearts into our relationship with God. A false humility just becomes an obstacle. Real humility, real and true humility is the ability to depend upon God, but put everything of oneself into what one is doing. Humility is truth, it's about living in truth, the truth of who God is, the truth of who I am, and every encounter with God, every experience of God is a growing in humility. So, living day after day in this dryness, with all of these distractions, yet putting one's trust in God, surrendering to God, doing everything that one can, even and especially when it all feels like a waste of time and instead of going forwards, it's backwards I'm going, that's true humility, that is living in truth. We do what we can, but we depend upon God.

Another word that Teresa uses over and over again - for her it is the first essential on the journey of prayer - and that is self-knowledge. Self-knowledge for Teresa is the knowledge of who we truly are, made in the image and likeness of God, children of

God, destined for relationship with him, with the capacity to relate to God etc. and at the same time, people who are totally dependent upon God - everything we have and everything we are is a gift of God - we are totally dependent on God's mercy. A lovely image Teresa uses when speaking about self-knowledge – that it is the bread of the spiritual life. I remember listening to a talk on this and the speaker commented and said that people who are not from a Mediterranean culture do not get this. Those of you – and there are many of you who are from a Mediterranean culture - will know that there's bread with every meal and no matter what food is there, if there isn't bread, then it's not a meal. The point Teresa is making – whatever spiritual life one is living, whatever kind of prayer life one is living - if there isn't a growing in self-knowledge then it's not a genuine spiritual life. All genuine spiritual growth will entail a growing in self-knowledge. She says that at every stage of the spiritual journey there is a fundamental lesson in self-knowledge. She said in the *Interior Castle* – at every stage of prayer we have to return over and over again to the room of self-knowledge. That's where we face the truth of who we really are, that's where we face the truth of the human condition. And the situation we're in at present in our world is a real lesson in self-knowledge. The sheer fragility of us as a human race, as a world, a world that thought it could control everything, that it had science and finance and freedom and everything, and suddenly we can't travel, we can't do things, we are vulnerable, so many people are sick, are dying. Our vulnerability, our lack of knowledge, our struggles, are a lesson in truth that we're learning as a human race. Prayer is always a lesson in truth. It's a journey of self-knowledge, but of course we pull back from that, we shy away from that because it's going to be painful, there are things we do not want to see, we do not really want a mirror held up to us, the truths of who we are put up there in front of us. But prayer does that for us because that is how we are set free. We cannot do this of ourselves. The humble person learns who he or she really is. The humble person learns what their weaknesses, difficulties, their struggles really are. The humble person learns to accept help, to accept God's help, to recognise that *I cannot do this*. The humble person is willing to walk this road in order to grow in that freedom that is so necessary.

To sum up. The practical advice that Teresa is giving us this evening is to have courage, to have determination, to set our mind and heart on the goal, object, of the spiritual life, which is Jesus Christ, the friend that we are in friendly conversation with and that we have an intimate relationship with him. Look to Jesus Christ, to the gospels and to the kind of life that he lived, there we see what true humility is. And if we listen to him, stay close to him, ignore the dryness and the struggles and the sense that we're not getting anywhere or achieving anything, or that there's no outcome or results to all of this and ignore all the voices, the distractions, the bad thoughts, the disturbances of our mind and the confusion that goes on in our heads and just look to Jesus Christ, persevere and have courage and trust that he is giving us whatever help we need, and trust that we are always in his hands. We may feel abandoned by him, but he never abandons us. He is always with us and let us particularly remember that at this time.

Let us pray for each other, let us pray that the Lord will give us all the courage and determination that Teresa tells us is so necessary. Let us pray that we may be able to walk humbly with our God on the royal road, the divine journey that we're walking on, as people of prayer, as Christians. And by walking on that road we will truly have the peace and the joy and the freedom that only God can give us. May God bless you, keep you well and give you strength.

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (3)

### *Audio transcript of the third talk*

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 at 8pm

I would like to give an overall picture of what we mean by growing in prayer, spiritual growth, the change, the transformation that takes place. First of all I want to begin with a little episode from Teresa's own life, an episode that had a profound effect upon her. It's difficult for us to grasp the historic circumstances in which Teresa was living, but let us think about three things – the Reformation was going on, Christianity in Europe was dividing, in the Spanish church the Inquisition was at its strongest and in Europe we're in the time of the Council of Trent. All of this led to a restricting, a pulling back, a culture of fear and oppression, one of the consequences being a very strong control of books.

In 1559 there was the Index of Forbidden Books and most of the books that were really helpful to Teresa were taken from her and burnt. For Teresa this was a very traumatic experience in her life, at the human level and at the spiritual level. This was a woman who was only happy when she had a new book, this was the woman who was reading and writing from a very young age. As a teenager it is known that she wrote at least one novel that has not come down to us. We can imagine the trauma of that experience and the very direct impact it would have had upon her prayer, because she was so dependent on books for her prayer. For many years she couldn't go to prayer, she said, without having a book and now she experiences this profound loss. In trying to cope with this she has an experience of the presence of Jesus and she hears the words – although she always emphasises that she never hears in a physical sense, or sees, it's spiritual, it's a deep understanding of something that is given to her – and the words that she hears are *I am now your living book*. So the living book, for Teresa, is the presence of Jesus Christ. He is now going to be her book, he is going to be her teacher, he is going to be the source of her wisdom, the source of light and support for her. Of course he has always been there and she's aware that he has

always been there. From now on, out of this experience of great loss, of so much being taken from her, the Lord provides in another way, in a much deeper way and in a way that is going to have great consequences for her for the rest of her life.

The definition of prayer, to quote Teresa, is *a conversation of friendship with the one we know loves us*, and that conversation of friendship that goes on, that's there all the time, is always happening, and now Teresa has got to learn to rely much more strongly on that. With the other supports taken from her, she's got to rely on that continuous presence of Jesus Christ beside her, that conversation that is going on.

So for us at this time, - perhaps in very different circumstances - we also have lost so much, so many of the structures that our spiritual lives depend on have been taken from us. Everything - from our churches being closed to not having the Sacraments - so many things that we would have been involved with, we would be doing, are not happening. We are cut off from so many people who would be helpful and supportive to us and for everybody the loss is going to be personal. There is loss, but like Teresa, let us hope and pray that we may be able to discover and trust in a deeper, more profound, and real way, the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

I want to say something very obvious, for it needs to be said to clarify this and that is that in Teresa's mind, prayer and her relationship with Jesus Christ are the one reality. They are not separate, they can never be separated. Prayer is always this conversation with Jesus Christ. It cannot be something else; it cannot be separated from him. So prayer is always personal, and it is always a personal relationship. If Teresa were here with us and we were to turn to her and say, *Teresa I would like to pray and live a life of prayer what would you say to me?* There are probably many things Teresa might say, but it might go something like this, *OK, you want to set out on this journey, but be prepared for one thing and that is you are going to be changed by the experience. You will be changed profoundly, in ways that you could never imagine, predict or expect, that you will not be prepared for. This is going to change you and your life at every level, at every dimension of your life.* If you're not open to that, stay where you are. Don't come on this journey. This is going to change you. That's why when

Teresa speaks about prayer; she doesn't speak about it as some particular activity in a person's life or some particular practice that a person learns. She can only speak about prayer in terms of speaking about the whole of a person's life. As I mentioned two weeks ago, in the context of Teresa writing about her own life, it is impossible to speak about, explain, teach the process of growth, purification, change and transformation that takes place in a person's prayer life without speaking about the whole of a person's life. What kind of a person is this, how is this person living? What changes, growing and maturing are taking place? So a person is going to be changed by the experience.

To illustrate this, I would like to use a passage from the gospel of John, Chapter 4. It was a favourite passage of St Teresa's; she uses it in many different ways. It is the meeting between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria. Take some time with this passage in the gospel and stand in the shoes of this woman and listen to the words of Jesus as if he were speaking to you. Live this encounter, because here we have got somebody in conversation with the one who loves her. At the beginning she doesn't know that this stranger that she is meeting loves her, that this stranger she is meeting has loved her through all time, from all eternity with a love that is limitless. She doesn't know that this love is going to change and transform her, no more than any of us do when we are beginning. St John of the Cross tells us that this process of purification, growth and transformation is a work of the Holy Spirit and he uses the image of the flame. That's what the Holy Spirit does in a person's life, like a flame that purifies, that cleanses, that heals, that transforms the person, that brings the person to the living of a whole new way of life.

To come back to our Samaritan woman. If we were to describe her life, we would describe it in terms of being restricted, constrained, almost as if she were a prisoner, a prisoner of her society, a prisoner of her past. She has to come to the well at the middle of the day, with nobody else; on her own. In that society the women always went to the well together. It was a social place, it was a social gathering. She's ostracized by society, she's excluded, so she's living a very restricted life. The other



thing that strikes us right from the beginning is her courage, her determination, and we've already seen that these are two things that Teresa talks about as being very important for prayer and particularly for beginners and this woman needs that. She should have run away when she saw this man at the well, she should not have spoken to him, a Jewish man - she should have gone nowhere near him and certainly should not have engaged in conversation with him. So we admire the courage of the woman, the inner strength that she's got. She speaks with him, she's prepared to engage with him and Jesus really wants to speak to her, really wants to engage with her and that of course is what's always happening in our prayer. However tentatively we may approach Jesus, whatever fears and anxieties and limitations we come to him with, he wants to give us so much more than we can ever ask for or imagine. *I want to give you living water*; he says to the woman; *I want to give you water that will well up inside you to everlasting life*. He promises her life, he's promising to bring her to life, to give her the fullness of life, that's the great promise he's giving to her, nothing less than that.

Teresa describes prayer as a journey towards that living water, as a search for that living water, as a commitment to discover, to find, that living water, and we saw in her image of watering the garden the four different ways of getting the water. It's the water that gives life. So Jesus is offering this woman this water. He's always offering us, we're always coming to the one who we know loves us, who is offering us life.

A little bit later in the story Jesus questions the woman about her story, her past, her husband. *He knows everything about me*, the woman will say later. Of course he does. I have already mentioned the self-knowledge that Teresa puts such emphasis upon - this woman has got to face who she is. Again, she could have run away, *how dare this man ask me about my husband. I'm not going there, I'm not going to talk about that to a stranger; I don't even want to think about it, there's too much pain, there's too much hurt*, and obviously there's an enormous amount of pain there - all those husbands she's had - we're not told whether they died, whether they abandoned her, we're not told anything. There must be a volcano inside her, something she

would not want to think about or speak about. Again, we have to admire her inner strength, her courage. She speaks truth, she faces the truth of who she is that is essential for a life of prayer. There can be no escape in prayer; prayer can never be an escape. It's not a nice comfortable refuge we can go into whenever we feel like it. Sometimes prayer will give us great peace and joy, but very often it is the opposite to that, because when the light of God shines upon us, we see ourselves as we really are - we see that everything in us that is in need of healing, that is in need of reconciliation, that is in need of God's mercy and forgiveness, that is in need of change and growth and freedom, everything that is not truthful, everything that is deceitful and hidden - we have to face the truth of who we are. It is put so beautifully in the story about this woman who has to face the truth of who she is. This is not to condemn the woman - Jesus never does that - or to make her suffer more or feel bad; but it is so that she can be healed so that she can be set free; because this is like a prison that she's in, so there's a whole process of healing and setting free that has to take place.

Then this woman raises a question, questions Jesus - she says, *you Jewish people, you go to Jerusalem, you say that's the place where God is and where one should worship, but our ancestors told us it was on Mount Gerizim up there that we've got to worship.* And Jesus says to her - setting her free from all of that - *the day is coming* - in fact it has come already, and of course it is he, standing there in front of her - *when you will worship in spirit and in truth.* It's neither on this mountain nor that mountain, nor in this place nor that place, nor according to this particular way or that. Her narrow, limited perception of faith, of religion, of prayer has to be expanded. She has to be set free from all those limitations. So there are two kinds of setting free you can see here; there's a setting free from her past life, her pain, the tragedy of her life, her whole story, her social situation, her family circumstances. She's liberated from all that personal stuff and now she's being spiritually liberated, liberated from the constraints that religious tradition and practice have put upon her. Her prayer has to be set free; her way of relating to God has to be set free. She now has to learn to relate to God in a real way, *in spirit and in truth.* In other words, her true spirit, the

truth of who she is, speaking to God in a real way as the friend she knows loves her, an intimate conversation, one that's coming from truly within her, from the person that she really is. So she is being set free, so that she can relate with God - an essential part of the process of growth is a setting free, a liberation at a spiritual level.

Now we move on to another part of the story. The woman, we're told - and this is powerfully symbolic - she puts down her bucket and goes back to her village. Leaving the bucket is a leaving behind of the old way of life; it's a dying to the old way of life. She's now going back to her village a transformed person, living a whole new way of life. It's a dying and a rising, it's a letting go, it's a leaving behind, it is, I suppose, what we would call *conversion*. It may be an understanding of conversion that we may be not that familiar with. I remember somebody saying something about St Teresa, that she had the mentality of a convert, though technically of course a convert is someone who changes from one religion to another or from atheism to faith. She hasn't done that, but it's the mentality in the sense that there is a before and an after, there is an old life and a new life. A person with a deep sense of prayer, a person living a mature prayer life will have that mentality. So this woman is now living this new way of life. She goes back to her village quite literally a new person. Or we could put it another way, she goes back to her village, the real person, the real person she was always meant to be. Life up to now was not real, it was a façade, it was not real living, she was not living. Jesus has given her the living water and she is experiencing the effects of the living water. She's alive.

Moving on to the next part of the story, and one that St Teresa was very attracted to, she loved this bit. The woman goes back to her village and she tells the whole village about this - the woman who couldn't even speak to her neighbours at the beginning, who was ostracized. It's not just that she speaks - and this is the part Teresa focuses on - the villagers listened to her, they came to see Jesus, trusting in her word. This woman has the power to influence others; this woman has the power now to bring others to Jesus. This woman is now a leader of her people; she is now a religious leader. This gives a sense of the change and transformation that has taken place. She

is now doing the work of Jesus. She has left his presence in order to do his work among her people. That's real spiritual maturity, human and Christian maturity. This woman has grown, has been purified. She has lived – and this process takes years and years – but here we hear it in a little story, but it shows us what spiritual growth and maturing is all about.

There's something else in the story and this an experience that Teresa speaks so much about and so many others do, for it is the experience of anyone who has lived what this Samaritan woman lived. When the disciples come back to Jesus, they can't understand what's going on. They do not understand what Jesus is up to, they do not understand why he is speaking to this woman and why all these people are coming. People do not understand and often it is the people one would most expect to understand who do not understand. Surely the disciples would have understood very well what this woman was living through and would be rejoicing in it and sharing with this woman, but that's not what happens and that can be one of the most difficult and painful aspects of this journey for people. Others will not understand, particularly those who one would expect to understand. And there can be all kinds of complex reasons for that. Suffice it to say for now that this journey of prayer, this living a life of prayer, is profoundly personal. Each person has to live it true to themselves. To understand one's own journey is a grace of God, it cannot be understood in human terms. To be able to understand and walk beside another person is also a grace of God, a gift of God, because the spiritual is in a different dimension to the human, we can't understand this in human terms. The new life this woman is living is going to present her with many challenges. She can never undo what took place - it can't be undone. There can be no going back, because the old life doesn't exist - the life she was living before she met Jesus no longer exists. It cannot be undone. She has stepped into a new place, stepped into a new way of living, there will be many challenges and difficulties, but she would not want to change it. The following of Jesus Christ, the living of a profound spiritual life is going to cost her and it's going to cost her everything, but she has the strength and the freedom to live it and to recognise that this is what life really is and that other life was not life at all.

To come back to the question I posed early on – if Teresa were here and we asked her what do we need for this journey, she would very strongly put to us, *set your heart upon this water of life, it is going to change you completely*. It is literally a dying and a rising to a new way of life, it is the journey into life, there is no other way to live, there is no other life that is true, that is authentic, that is real, that is fulfilling. This is what it means to live in spirit and in truth.

To go back to the experience I spoke about at the beginning, that experience Teresa had of her books being taken from her, being left bereft and destitute, without the supports that she so relied upon. If we look at that again, all of that was looking at the spiritual life from a human perspective. That action, that tragedy - it cost and it hurt, but it was as no obstacle to Jesus Christ. Just like in the story of the Samaritan woman, all her past, all those husbands and all those tragedies were absolutely no obstacle to Jesus. They're obstacles to us, we're the ones who put obstacles along the way, not God. And so the journey of spiritual growth is about removing these obstacles and if we are to look at Teresa's experience from that perspective, the need or the dependence upon books had actually become an obstacle. Sometimes the need and the dependence even upon good things can actually be an obstacle. It doesn't mean that the things in themselves are bad, because Teresa will be reading books for the rest of her life and she will be writing books for the rest of her life and books will be such an important part of her life, right until the day she dies. There is nothing wrong with books, but freedom, an inner freedom was needed here. Perhaps for each of us in our own lives at this time, in the very extraordinary and unexpected and challenging circumstances we find ourselves living in and in which we find ourselves trying to live our prayer lives and our spiritual lives. Perhaps the Lord is doing something in us here, setting us free in some way, showing us our need for freedom, carrying out something in us that is unexpected. It's not something any of us would have chosen, and it is causing great pain and worry and difficulty for so many of us, but maybe God sees it in a very different way and let us just be open to how God may

be working at this time in us and the kind of opportunity it might be for him to find a way into us at a deeper level.

Next week, I'll explore a little more deeply what this change might be, how it comes about, what the experience of it might be, but for now let us just see that change, purification, transformation, that this great work of the Holy Spirit in us is so necessary and so needed. It is always something that is positive, that is life giving - it's a setting free.

We'll explore at a later stage what it is that we need to be set free of and why we need this deep inner freedom. We'll get to that. But for now let us just see that this prayer is a journey into freedom and into the fullness of life and it always goes on. Let us pray that the Lord will give us this light, this spirit, this courage now at this time, at this moment, in these circumstances in each of our lives.

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (4)

### *Audio transcript of the fourth talk*

Monday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020 at 8pm

When we are at prayer we're all united, so although we cannot see each other or greet each other, we are united.

We're at the second way of drawing water - that is Teresa's description of the pumps, the aqueducts and the pipes. There is more abundant water flowing and though there's a certain amount of work done by the gardener, the principal work is done by God. He brings about this water, this abundance of His grace, of His love. So we are at a transition.

The person who sets out on this journey of prayer is going to be changed by the experience. This is a relationship of love and the love that there is – that's God's love, this dialogue, this *conversation with the one we know loves us* - is going to change the person. I'm reminded of a principle in the teaching of St John of the Cross that only love changes a human being, or a human being is only changed by love. Nothing else changes a person, other things may change the externals of a person or the way a person acts or operates - either coercion, force, manipulation, persuasion, the efforts of the person themselves - but all those changes are external, superficial, they don't go to the very depths of a person. Only love profoundly changes a person, only love can bring about an irreversible change, only love can bring about the kind of change and transformation that brings a person to the fullness of life, that sets a person free to be who they really are, so only love changes a human being. Now we are at the point of the journey where love is beginning to change the person, and what Teresa and so many other writers who write about the spiritual life struggle to explain is how this is experienced by the person, and of course the experience is always going to be unique, personal to the individual.

There's a story in the gospels and although Teresa doesn't use it in the book of her life, she uses it twelve years later when she writes the *Interior Castle*. The Fourth Dwelling Place in the *Interior Castle* is at approximately the same stage of the journey that we are speaking about this evening. This particular gospel passage sums up where the person is, what is happening in the person's life; it's the story of the Rich Young Man, told in both Matthew and Luke's gospel. I will quote from Matthew Chapter 19: 16-22:

*16 Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honour your father and mother; also, you shall love your neighbour as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.*

Now this story so accurately illustrates for us the person of prayer that we're speaking about. It's a person who has been living the Christian life, the life of prayer, perhaps for quite a long time and has a certain level of commitment to it. This man in the gospel, who comes to Jesus, has clearly been living a good life. *I've obeyed all those commandments*, he said, and he has, we believe him, he's a good person. He's good at his religious practices and he lives a good moral life and all of that. But there is something missing, or there's a sense that something's missing and that's what happens to people who arrive at this particular stage of the spiritual life. Things have gone well for quite a while. They believe they have made progress, have grown and improved, they get a lot of satisfaction and fulfilment and there's real commitment to this. But then what gradually tends to happen – a certain dissatisfaction creeps in, they're not quite as enthusiastic as before, not getting the same satisfaction and



fulfilment and enthusiasm from the things of God, the things of their religion, their prayer, their spiritual lives. There's this nagging feeling that something is missing; that's what this man has and that's of course why he comes to Jesus. *Jesus will surely give me the piece of the jigsaw that's missing and then all will be perfect.* This man has clearly been successful in this life, he's still young but he has built up a lot of wealth. He's a good business person, well educated, lives his faith, his religion – his life is all sorted. The mistake that he is making, or, to put it another way, what he still needs to learn, is given away to us in the way he phrases the question - *what must I do in order to inherit eternal life, what must I do?* That's what is now shifting - from *what I do* - to eventually arriving at a place where God is doing it, it is pure gift of God, it is total mercy of God. It is not about me or my achievements, my doing, my success, my building up a spiritual treasury, just as I build up every other kind of thing. Spirituality, prayer, holiness is not a possession - it's a gift. So it's not about what I do. Up until now the person has been doing and doing it very well and made a lot of progress, but now there's a limit to that. He has hit a turning point, a crisis point.

Jesus now issues the great invitation - *come, follow me.* What is Jesus in reality saying to him? He's saying to him – not criticising anything the man has done – he says - *come, follow me, become a disciple, enter into a relationship with me.* That's what Jesus wants with the man – a relationship. The young man has come to Jesus asking for an answer to his question. He was making use of Jesus - *Jesus will provide me with what I need now.* Jesus wants a relationship with him. Jesus wants this man to get to know him, to follow him, to live the kind of life that he himself lived. And tragically, we are told, the man walks away, sad. He cannot see what is happening. And he walks away, sad, because his love for his goods, his achievements, his success, his ego and his own reputation is stronger than his relationship with Jesus. He needs the love of Jesus and only the love of Jesus can set him free from this. The goods, possessions, success – whatever he has – are now controlling him. He is not free. He doesn't have the freedom to say *yes* to the invitation of Jesus. It's this lack of inner freedom - that's where the difficulty is. It's not about having the goods or

not, and again we go back to a very important principle of St John of the Cross. It's not about the amount of goods the person has or the amount of success or achievements or anything, it's the relationship with them. One can have all the goods and success in the world and God wants us to use our gifts and God want us to be successful - if we're free from attachment. It's the relationship with the goods. One can have nothing, yet be craving after something and desiring something and be every bit as trapped by it, so it's the relationship. And this man's relationship with his goods prevented him, didn't give him the freedom to say yes. And it is the way that Jesus words what he says, *if you want to enter into life, let go of all these goods*. It's a matter of life, of living. If you want to enter into life -what does it mean to live?

So, what is happening here, what is happening to the person at this stage of prayer? This is the beginning of real love; it is the beginning of mature, adult love, what Teresa calls a love that has no self-interest whatsoever. That's a long way off yet, there is still so much self-interest, but love is beginning, there are the beginnings here of real love, of mature love. Love is being purified, it's being transformed, it's no longer going to be dependent on the feelings or the self-interest of the individual. A real giving of self, that is what is beginning here and it is the love of Jesus. Jesus loved that rich young man, he gave him the most loving response he could give, he invited him into a relationship of love and that is what the Lord is doing now, inviting a person into this relationship of love, into a deeper love.

There are two words that perhaps can help us to see what is happening - they are more than words - they are realities that are beginning to become visible. The first one is *detachment*. Teresa speaks a lot about this when she is speaking about this particular part of prayer. There is a detachment. That word detachment applies of course to the person who has been attached and who is now being detached. This rich young man is being detached, the love of Jesus is detaching him from all of these goods that he has amassed, the love of Jesus is drawing him. This happens to a person almost without their knowing it. The person can look back and see that something that was very important to them, something they couldn't live without and now they see that

they are OK without it. It's not necessary, it's not as important to them as it was. That's a sign of God. The same satisfaction isn't being got from a whole lot of things that were there before; there's a greater freedom; it's a work of God. Whenever a person is touched by the love of God, though they don't know it's the love of God, the consequence, the result, is that the person is becoming more detached, freer, they no longer have this need of the X Y and Z. So there is detachment, creeping in, slowly, subtly, because it is not coming from the person, it is coming from God and so emerges in a silent way.

The other word is *virtues* – growth in virtue, growth in goodness. The person is truly becoming a better person. That of course is the love, it's the beginning of real love, and that will be seen – the person will be showing greater charity and the love will be coming from a deeper motive, a purer, more truthful motive. Teresa's always the practical person because all of this can sound very vague. We can imagine the question people will be asking - *what do we do?* Teresa's response would be that it is all about love. Wherever there is an opportunity to love - love, whenever an opportunity to love presents itself - just take it, just love. Do everything with love, practise love in whatever way you can, whatever opportunities you have, because the love of God is purifying, is changing. There is the beginning here of some new and real love and it is coming from the presence of God. The experience of that presence, though very hidden, is surprising and bewildering, because the real experience of God is always totally different to anything that you could have imagined or anything you may have construed. That's why it is often not recognised, not seen. What is happening is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the person and God.

Let's think about another passage from the gospels that Teresa uses a few times to illustrate this particular part of the journey. And this can happen over and over again in our lives, it's not just one particular experience, it can happen at deeper and deeper levels and patterns emerge. There's a story in all three synoptic gospels of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes three of his disciples up to the top of the mountain; they have this wonderful experience there and Peter wants to build tents and they want to

stay there and this is wonderful. But Jesus starts speaking about going to Jerusalem, being rejected, suffering, dying, and they don't want to hear about that at all - no, no - please Lord, don't speak about that. But of course that's the real love that he's speaking to them about, that is what real love is. He's starting to speak to them about the greatest expression of love ever experienced on this planet. What we notice, with a careful looking at the gospels, particularly Mark's gospel, is that it marks a shift in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The dynamics of the relationship are shifting. Up until now, the disciples are following Jesus because there's such great enthusiasm around him, there are all these crowds, he has really struck them, and they have been filled with joy and fulfilment and delight. This is just wonderful, they are at the beginning of something so exciting and good - and now it's shifting, it's becoming more and more difficult to follow, to understand what he is doing. Where is this leading to? Is this really what we have committed our lives to? The person of prayer goes through all these kinds of questions. So what is asked of us is a deeper level of commitment.

Teresa when speaking about this takes us over and over again back to the cross - the following of Jesus. The person who is the servant of love is always willing to carry the cross, to follow Jesus. This is the road, this is what it is. It is the living of the gospels; it is a deeper entering into the reality of the Gospels. The following of Jesus is going to take us onto the journey Jesus himself went on, that he took his first disciples on. Now the following of Jesus is on his terms, not ours. But it is always a response to love, the person is always responding to love. Love is going deeper, love is stronger.

I have picked out a few phrases from Teresa's account of this. They perhaps will give us a little more sense of what this is about and how it is experienced by the person because our individual experiences are going to be so varied and individual to each one of us, yet at the same time we need this sense and this reassurance that it is OK. We need these right signs showing that it is OK, that we are on the right road.

The first phrase I have plucked out is *a humble and holy confidence*. That's a very interesting phrase. The person who is being guided by God, the person in whom God is pouring in his love has a confidence, a strength - but it's not a confidence that comes from their own achievements, it's not a confidence that is filled with pride, it's not the kind of confidence that we would normally associate with very confident people - it's a different kind of confidence. It's a holy confidence we are told; therefore it is coming from the grace of God, it is the inner strength that the grace of God gives. We might be inclined to see confidence and humility as opposites – the humble person is so humble because they haven't got the confidence to be like the confident person – no, in the spiritual life, humility and confidence go together. The truly confident person is a very humble person. To be truly humble one needs to be very strong, one needs to have a very clear sense of who one is, because true Christian humility is a living in Christian truth, it is living truth by the power of Jesus Christ. It's a Christian truth, if that's the right word to use. The person is humble and confident, a humility and a confidence that comes from God's grace that cannot be achieved by the person themselves. Nothing can be brought about by the person; it is pure gift of God. It is a gift that takes a long time to be recognised, like the Rich Young Man, who couldn't initially recognise the great gift that he was being given. Jesus was offering him something so much bigger and greater than all the wealth that he had amassed. He couldn't recognise it, but what is happening here at this stage is that the person is gradually beginning to recognise it. God is opening the person's eyes, God is leading the person, so there's humility and there's a confidence – there's a deep inner strength that comes from God.

The second phrase Teresa repeats a number of times - *a little spark of the Lord's true love*. A little spark of this true love. That's a lovely idea. It brings out the sense of the fragility of this pure love. A little hint of it. A little drop of it is being dropped into the person's life, the person's experience. Suddenly, they just sense this spark of true love, and of course it is totally different to any understanding of love that the person has had up until now or any experience of love that they have had. This is totally new - just as the cross is the greatest example of love that there is, beyond

everything human beings have known about love and every way that they have expressed it – this is a whole other way - *God so loved the world so much that he gave his only son* – is that love, is that how love operates? The spark of true love is something new, different, beyond understanding. The whole way that love is seen and understood is changing. This spark of true love, that's going to become a great fire as things go on, but at the moment we're just at the spark.

For Teresa, it's so important that the person must not think that they have arrived, must not make the mistake Peter made on Mount Tabor - *we'll make tents here, we'll stay here, we have arrived, this is where we want to stay*. No, this a place of transition, this is the beginning of something, it's the real beginning of the spiritual life, it's the real beginning of a true and real relationship with Jesus Christ. It's not the end; it's only the beginning. It's only the first spark of a great inferno, but it's the first spark.

What about the person's experience of prayer? This phrase sums it up very well for us. Teresa tells us *it is not with the noise of words, but with the longing that he may hear us*. The person's prayer perhaps would have contained a lot of words. There's nothing wrong with words – words are good, we need words, that's how we express ourselves, but it's no longer about the words, or the quality of the words, or the right words, or the quantity of the words or the effectiveness of the words – either the words spoken or the words received. It's no longer about having some wonderful insights or knowledge, though if one has these things, that's wonderful – Teresa is not in any way criticising any of that – but there's a silence now, there's a deeper silence coming in and a deeper listening - and that's always a response to the presence of God.

Whenever a human being has a real experience of God they have no concept of the experience of God - they can't imagine it, because God is a total mystery. But the person will have this desire for solitude, to be alone - the pull towards solitude, toward quiet. And that's why for this stage of prayer the term Teresa uses is *the*

*prayer of quiet.* Prayer is getting much quieter in many senses of being quiet. And the prayer is a longing that they might hear – Jesus, God. It is the prayer of the heart. The prayer has gone from the head into the heart. It is the heart that is praying, not what's going on up here, but what is happening down there. It is coming from the deepest place of love within. So prayer is changing, it's becoming quieter, more silent, less words, a deeper listening, a more real listening.

We are coming back to love. *Now with these souls it is love that has increased and it is love that is at work.* Love has increased, the person's capacity to receive love and it is love that is working, it is the love that is received and therefore the person will have a wisdom, an instinct, will recognise the needs of others, will know what the right thing to do is. They won't know how they knew, they won't know where it is coming from, but there will be an instinctive, loving, reaction. They won't understand it themselves and so often other people won't understand it either, or recognise perhaps the way they react or do things as love. But because real love has increased, has become alive in these people, their actions, their attitudes become more loving. It is God's love that is communicating through them and of course the person doesn't understand that and therefore it is an entering into a much deeper mystery.

If we could sum up the particular stage of prayer that we're reflecting upon. If we see prayer as a growing relationship, a relationship that is leading and guiding the person towards the fullness of life. *If you want to enter into life,* Jesus says to the Rich Young Man - that's what you want, because that's the only thing that is worth wanting. It's what every human being longs for; it's the deepest desire of every human being. What this stage of prayer shows us is that this is possible; we cannot live unless we can change. We do not grow into the fullness of life without changing. Prayer changes us, prayer is a journey to the water of life, it's a journey into life, into this garden that will be beautifully watered. It's a journey into that, and change is so necessary.

What this particular stage of prayer shows us is that change is possible, real change, change that is beyond the strength, ingenuity, capacity of the human being. This is change that we cannot bring about in ourselves, it is change that only God can bring about in us, it is change that only the love of God can bring about. And therefore the person has to be brought to the limits of what they can do themselves. And now there has to be a great handing over to God. Trust Jesus, *come follow me*. Yes, let's come and follow him, let's take the next steps. It is possible, it is possible to take this risk, it is possible to make this step of trust, that's what this stage is all about. Now, with God's help, with God's grace, with the person free enough to let God do in him or her what he or she cannot do with their own capacity, ingenuity and efforts etc. That's what this is about, the beginning of love bringing about the true change in the person.

Now God can start doing in the person what up until now the roadblocks that the person had put there had not allowed to happen. But now the person has the capacity to let God do this.



## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (5)

### *Audio transcript of the fifth talk*

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020 at 8pm

We have been following Teresa's four ways of drawing water, four different ways the grace of God reaches us. We are now at the third way of drawing water, described by Teresa in Chapters 16 and 17 of the book of her Life. We have spoken about the critical change that takes place, or another way of putting it -- it's a time of crisis -- other people may prefer to use the term *conversion*. What all of these terms indicate is that there is a before and there is an after. There is an old life and a new life and the person is now living this new life and what has brought this change about is love. I have mentioned that famous line from St John of Cross, *only love changes a person*. It is only God's love that can bring about this deep interior irreversible change in a person. It's only the person who has been touched by God's love, transformed in that love, who is changed from the deepest place within and who is now living a new way of life.

In the last talk we came to the point where the person is learning adult, mature love that is no longer self-centred or coloured by self-interest. There is both a freedom to give love and to receive love. The person is now learning a new language.

I am coming back to Teresa's fundamental statement about prayer being a conversation, a two-way conversation between the person - the soul - and the one who we know loves us - Jesus Christ, God, Trinity - however we want to put it. For much of the time it can appear to us that we're doing all the talking and there is nothing coming back, nothing being said. Where's the other half of the conversation? Of course that's not true, we would never have even taken the first step on this road if the grace of God hadn't drawn us. Nobody would even think of prayer if the grace of God had not drawn them, but now and only now, is the person really in a place where they are starting to hear God's language, or are learning God's language. We've got

to remember one thing - a human being can never have direct contact with God. When God touches a person, speaks to a person, makes himself known to a person, what the person actually experiences is the result, the consequence, the aftermath, the fruits of that experience, not the direct happening - it has already happened - because the divine and the human are on such completely different planes. The person is becoming sensitive to the consequences, the result of what God is doing - God is making himself known - and this is something new, surprising, and challenging to the person.

I want to give a flavour of this by using some phrases that I have plucked out from Teresa's writings, because she is trying to articulate something that cannot be put into words. She knows it's real, she knows it's happening, she knows she is in a new place, a new land, a new culture, a new way of thinking. She says the person is *bewildered* by what's going on; she calls it *a glorious foolishness*, the person is *inebriated, drunk with love*. Another term she uses, *a delightful disquiet*, or *a delightful distress*. To us this will seem contradictory. *Madness, holy madness, heavenly madness*, or another expression, *folly, in a thousand holy ways*. These are just a few expressions in which she's trying to get across that this is new, this is bewildering, this is beyond understanding, we just can't put it into any kind of comprehensible language - every word we use doesn't make sense, because the person has stepped into this new life, this new way of living.

Teresa tells us that five or six years prior to writing this she was getting this prayer regularly, but she didn't understand it and she couldn't put it into words. Now she tells us there are three aspects to this. It might be tempting to think that this is for others and doesn't apply to us at all, we are not anywhere near what Teresa is talking about. Teresa tells us no, that most people have these experiences, but what far fewer people are able to do is to recognise them for what they are, to recognise that this bewilderment, confusion is actually a sign that this is from God. She tells us this is a grace of God; it's a gift of God to have the experience in the first place and it's another gift of God to know it, to recognise it, to understand it, to know that this is

what it is – a gift of God. And thirdly, it is a grace of God, a gift of God to be able to speak about it, to be able to explain it, and Teresa had to grow into all three of these. Over a period of time she grows into them, but now when she is writing this, she knows she is having these experiences and in fact when she was writing Chapter 16 – a wonderful piece of writing - she says she is living it as she is writing it. It is as if we are brought into her prayer, we are there beside her as she is praying, she's letting us see from inside what her prayer is like - *after receiving communion today, the Lord has given me these gifts.*

Coming back to her image of water she says *the person is now up to their necks in this water; in the grace of God, in the gifts of God, drowning in God's grace.* She is able to recognise what this is, that this is truly of God. Most of us can't do that and therefore we need Teresa's writings and the writings of others like her, who can put words on what's going on within us. The third aspect is to be able to speak about it, to teach it, to write it. That is the gift that so few have, but Teresa had. She had to go through many years of not being able to do that, of not being able to find somebody who could, but now God has given her the grace of being able to help others, to write the book that would have helped her when she needed it. How does she describe this new life, this new situation that the person finds themselves in? Put very simply, the person has died, she said, to everything in this world and is now living a new life. It is quite literally a dying and a coming to life.

At the beginning of Chapter 17, Teresa writes that God takes over the role of the gardener. To pray is to water this garden, to take care of this garden, but now God almost totally takes over the task. The person's task now is to give their consent to the favours they are enjoying; to say yes. The person now has the capacity, the inner freedom to say yes to everything that God is doing. Prior to this the person couldn't do that. Remember the story in the gospel of the Rich Young Man and Jesus gave him the greatest invitation, the greatest gift he could ever have given him, *come follow me, be my disciple*, and the poor man did not have the inner freedom to say yes to that. He had not died - to use Teresa's words - to all those goods, to the old life of acquiring

goods and building up wealth. He did not have the freedom – not that there is anything wrong in having the goods or the wealth – once the person has the freedom to say yes to the Lord, then person can have everything - provided they are free of it, they can have everything. He was not free. But now the person is able to give their consent, totally - the yes of love, the yes to God - that's what the person is able to do.

Teresa writes, *so now the person's task is to give their consent and they should offer themselves to all that the true wisdom – that's God - desires to do in them, because courage is certainly necessary.* So they must say yes to everything that God, in God's wisdom, desires them to do and it takes great courage, she said, to do that.

She expands on this and gives us a sense of what this is. The person abandons themselves completely into the hands of God. *If he - that's God - wants to bring the soul to heaven, it goes; if to hell, it feels no grief since it goes with its God; if its life comes to an end, this it desires; if it lives a thousand years, this too it desires, because the soul no longer belongs to itself.* So, to heaven, yes, that's great – everyone wants that - that's the object of the spiritual life. But hell, that would be shocking; in Teresa's day that would have been a very shocking statement. You only have to look at the art of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain to see how hell was depicted, how terrible a place it was - it was death, cut off from God. But now the person has such freedom - if that's what God wants, one goes, because one is going there with God, walking beside God. There are no limits to what the person will do, where the person will go, what they will say yes to, because what the person now has is this freedom, this inner freedom that I have been mentioning. Teresa tells us that is pure gift of God - it's not like any other kind of freedom, any understanding of freedom that we might have in this world. This is a true freedom, the freedom that Jesus says in the gospel nobody can take from us. If the Son of Man sets you free, you really are free and it is that freedom the person now has, that deep inner freedom and that freedom is a freedom to truly be oneself. There are no limits to where that freedom can take a person. The person lacked that freedom earlier on in the spiritual journey, because there was still so much self-interest, self-concern, focussing upon self, focussing upon what a person

is doing, what a person is achieving, where a person wants to get to. Now they are free of all of that. What we really have to be set free from is ourselves. The person is set free from themselves and is living this new kind of freedom and that's something so wonderful.

When you read Chapter 16, you notice in the second half of the chapter that Teresa speaks first of all very directly to the person who asked her to write the book, Fr Garcia de Toledo, a Dominican priest. She tells him that in such a short time he now is receiving the water in all four ways and what took her more than twenty years has happened with him over a short time. What she doesn't say is that's mainly thanks to her and the guidance she has been giving him; she has become the teacher of the person who was meant to be teaching her, but that was common in Teresa's life. She then goes on to speak about *the five of us, who are now united*. Who are these five? Commentators speculate; undoubtedly Garcia de Toledo was one of them and probably Dona Guiomar de Ulloa, a widow living in Avila, someone who helped Teresa with her first foundation - Teresa speaks about the *holiness of this woman*. Another one is probably Francisco de Salcedo, whom Teresa describes as a saintly layman, one of the first people to whom Teresa turns to for spiritual direction and who was involved with Teresa throughout her life. There are one or two others, one of them was probably Alvaro de Mendoza, the Bishop of Avila. Whoever the five were, they were certainly very significant in Teresa's life. They are also there for a symbolic reason, they are a community, a Christian community and they are learning to relate to each other in a real, mature, truthful way.

Twelve years later when Teresa writes the *Interior Castle*, the Fifth Dwelling Place is more or less the equivalent of what we are speaking about now. And it is in the Fifth Dwelling Place that Teresa speaks at length about love of neighbour. By this time she has had much more experience of herself and of so many other people. Now that the person has the freedom to say the *complete yes of love to God* - that's a phrase from St John of the Cross - and has that freedom to respond to God in a loving way in whatever love may ask of them, they are also learning what true love of neighbour

really is. To love God and to love one's neighbour go together and the more the person matures in their love of God, the more that the love of God changes and transforms the person. Now they have the freedom, maturity and the capacity to love their neighbour in a way that is real, in a way that is founded in truth, truly free, without any self-interest. That is not easy, it can be very difficult, because not only are they free within themselves, but they cannot be manipulated or controlled by others. These people can be quite difficult at times, because they are living with a freedom that not only do they themselves not fully understand, but others won't understand either. So it's a very different kind of freedom that they are bringing to all their relationships. Teresa is reflecting here on very specific ones in her life, the good relationships in which she is seeing the value, the fruits of this in a very real and concrete way. We have to remember that Teresa has also written about relationships that were not healthy, that were not life giving and the damage they did to her. So now it is wonderful that she can see that these good relationships are the fruit of her prayer life, the fruit of the growth and maturing that has taken place in her relationship with God. So those two things go hand in hand; the growing and the maturing of her relationship with God and her capacity to build significant, mature, free, human relationships.

Two of the things that strike us in Chapter 16 are the joy and the celebration that are running through it. The prayer is certainly one of joy, of thanksgiving. There are two Biblical figures that Teresa draws our attention to; one of them we find in Luke and Matthew's gospels - the woman who loses the coin and finds it and wants to have a great big celebration. This woman's desire is that all her neighbours and friends share in this celebration. Teresa tells us that the person who receives the gifts that she is speaking about wants to share them with others, wants everybody to share in this joy and this celebration. But she puts in a caution here - it must only be at God's doing - it must not be a person's own initiative, it must be in response to God and what God is doing. It is God who works through the person, but that desire is there, that all share in this celebration.

The other Biblical figure that Teresa picks is King David. Teresa would have believed - as everyone did at the time - that David wrote all the psalms, not just the psalms but also the stories about David celebrating, David playing music and David singing and dancing that we find in the Bible, that sense of celebration. Praying the psalms, the psalms of joy, giving praise to the Lord. This is the prayer that the person prays. Pray the psalms; keep praying these psalms of joy, that's what Teresa feels called to, pulled to, at this time.

When Teresa writes, and we find this over and over again, she writes in a very personal way. You can almost feel the people there with her and if she was sitting here now at this table, writing, she would have, over there perhaps, the five people she spoke about - Fr Garcia de Toledo and whoever else; over here her Carmelite nuns, the community she is with and other people; and there, God will be there, and effortlessly she would switch whom she is addressing and of course there would also be all of us, the wider public, because Teresa always wrote with the intention that this would be for a wide audience, so she is also addressing us, but she keeps switching whom she is addressing.

I want to mention one little paragraph (para 5) in the middle of Chapter 16, in which Teresa turns to God and addresses him directly. She speaks directly to him and sums it all up in this prayer. She writes, *oh true Lord and my glory, how delicate and extremely heavy a cross you have prepared for those who reach this state. Delicate, because it is pleasing; heavy because there come times when there is no capacity to bear it and yet the soul would never want to be free from it, unless it were for the sake of being with you.* Here we seem to find a contradiction. She is putting together all the time things that seem contradictory to us – the cross and joy. Here there is no contradiction between them - pain, suffering and the greatest of joy. She uses the terms *delicate* and *heavy*. It is delicate, she said, because it is so pleasing, so joyful - the person would not change this for anything, would just want it and want more of it – but it is heavy, because the person does not have the capacity to bear it, but of course the person is bearing it. It is the fulfilment of that line in Matthew's Gospel,

*come to me all who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest, because my yoke is easy, my burden is light.* His burden is light - it is the fulfilment of that. The cross is always there in the spiritual life; there is always pain and suffering, but now the pain and suffering are not a destructive pain and suffering, as is usually the case. Pain and suffering do not make a person holy, or make a person a better person, but here the person has become a better person, has become holy through God's grace and therefore with the new freedom that the person has, with the total freedom from any kind of self-interest, the person can carry the cross, they can do whatever it is God asks of them. They can love without any limits, whatever pain and burden it may be; it is being carried by the God who is within, so it is not a burden. The joy and the sorrow, the burden and the freedom, the pain and the celebration - all go together, are all part of one reality and the person would not want to change this for anything; that's the conviction that the person has. They do not understand - they know that they have not done this themselves - but they would not change it; there is a sense that it's right.

The second part of this; *when it – that's the person, the soul - recalls that it hasn't served you – that's God - in anything and that by living it can serve you, it would want to carry a much heavier cross and never die until the end of the world.* The person recalls they haven't served. Service is a very important idea in Teresa's writings. It comes up in all the gospels, but particularly Mark's – to serve. The person now at this stage of prayer has the sense that not only are they receiving superabundant gifts and joy and grace from God, but they also have the sense that they have done absolutely nothing to deserve this. If the person has the sense that they have earned this - *look at all those years I have done this and that and tried and struggled and persevered and therefore I deserve this reward* - the person has not arrived at this stage of prayer. The person who is at this stage of prayer has no sense of what they have done themselves as having any value, but rather what they have is the sense that they have not served God in their life and they want to, they need to. There is this great desire to serve, to do whatever they can, however little or inadequate or limited that may seem to them. The person would live a thousand years, would carry a much



heavier cross, if it was of any little bit of service; so the desire to serve, to serve both God and do the work of God, in the service of others, that's very strong. They sense they have not done anything up until now and they really want to do something.

The last part of the prayer, *it doesn't know what it wants, but it well understands that it wants nothing other than you.* So the person doesn't know what they want, but they only want God. They don't want anything else because anything they want is beyond their understanding, but they want God - they want whatever it is that God wants.

This gives us a little sense of this new life the person is beginning to live. Another way of looking at it is that this is some kind of profound, deep inner experience of Holy Week and Easter in a person's life. They are living at a personal deep level the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is an entering very deeply into the level of experience of Jesus, because spiritual life, the life of prayer, is always a living of the gospel. It is a following closely of Jesus Christ; it is a following closely that always takes one to where the life of Jesus Christ leads one and that is to the cross - that is both a dying to an old life and a rising to a new way of life.

We pray that the Lord truly protects you and gives you that water of life, that grace of God that Teresa is speaking about.

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (6)

### *Audio transcript of the sixth talk*

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020 at 8pm

We are at the third and fourth ways of drawing water. To use Teresa's imagery, the water is now falling from the sky, when the garden is being watered by the rain or previously by the vast rivers. As Teresa writes – God now becomes the gardener. God brings about this growth, this maturing, this flowering, this bearing fruit that's taking place. What I want to speak about centres around three words that are used to speak about or define this new reality, this new life that the person is now living, this new life that's brought about through the growth and maturing of their life of prayer.

The first word is *contemplation*. Let's just for now see contemplation as the new way of prayer, or the new experience of prayer that is being experienced by the person. Let that word simply define prayer. It's a completely changed reality.

The second word is *mysticism* or *mystical*. Mystical experience, mystical theology – all number of variations on that word *mystical*. Let's see it as the new way of knowing, or the new way of understanding. There's a new knowledge, a new wisdom, that's what people call *mysticism*, the mystical way of knowing and experiencing.

Our third word is one that we find dotted around Teresa's writings in these chapters and it is the word *union*. Again, if we look at Teresa's writings, she is using the word in various ways but let's see it as the new way of being, the new way of seeing oneself, or the new way of knowing oneself - one's new identity, the new life that is being lived. Who am I? Who does the person see themselves as being? Who is the person now? It's best defined in the famous words of St Paul, *it is no longer I who live but Jesus Christ who lives in me*. Or as Teresa put it, *it's a new life from now on*. Everything that has gone before is dead, is gone. Everything that has gone before was

me, was the I, now it's the life that Jesus Christ lives in me. So this new way of being, this new identity, is union with Jesus Christ. That new word, *union*, that very important word that we've got.

So these are the three words that I want to explore. I want to do so because by exploring these three words we get a sense of this new reality, this new land, this new territory that the person has been brought into by God. The person is brought in; the person doesn't go in by themselves. This is a gift -- this is a work of God, can only be brought about by God, by God's grace. The person cannot do anything to bring it about, apart from preparing and disposing themselves to it. It is brought about by God; God brings about this new reality, brings the person into this new place. An image Teresa uses for it - and she's taking this from the *Song of Songs* in the Bible - is that God has brought the person into the wine cellar. In the scriptures wine is the symbol of God's generosity, God's grace. God has now brought the person into a place of abundant grace, where the person is abundantly receiving the generosity of God.

The prayer of this person is defined by the word *contemplation*. There can be many ways of understanding this word. I'm sticking to the tradition of Teresa and John of the Cross and so many others. In more recent times its understanding has been broadened, but I'm sticking to the way Teresa and John would have seen it and they would have seen it as being the part that God plays in the life of prayer. When a person moves from meditation into contemplation, God takes over, God is now taking the initiative. It is God who is bringing about what is happening; the change and the transformation that's taking place.

I will quote a few words from John of the Cross that defines this best for us. John defines contemplation as *an inflow of God into the soul*, and then he goes on to say, *when it is not hindered it brings about purification and transformation*. As you can see, there are three dimensions to that. First of all it is *an inflow of God into the soul*. By the soul John means the whole person, but as it is a spiritual experience it is in the deepest place in the person. *An inflow of God* - an inflow of God's grace, God's light,

God's glory - whatever word we want to use; God enters. Of course God is always there, but now there is a much deeper experience of that presence of God. This now is where the person does have a part to play. John says, *if it is not impeded*. In the people we are speaking about now, the contemplatives, who are experiencing the third and fourth ways of receiving the water, the impediments have been taken away.

But remember in chapter 4, the Rich Young Man in Matthew and Luke's gospel, where there was a great impediment -- all the riches that the man had. He could not say yes

to the call that Jesus to *come follow me*. He was impeded; the inflow of God was there, Jesus was there, giving this great invitation, but the person couldn't follow it. But now it's not impeded, now there is no impediment to the inflow of God. What does this bring about? It brings about healing, purification, cleansing, transformation and that is a whole process that the person is taken through. For John of the Cross, when he elaborates on that, he includes effectively the whole spiritual journey, and all of that, John tells us, is a work of the Holy Spirit -- that's a work of the Holy Spirit in the person. This whole process of change; purifying, healing, transforming the person.

From the point of view of the person - and this may happen over many years - there will be a whole variety of experiences; from experiences of the very strong presence of God to a sense of the total absence of God, to the bewilderment of what is God doing? Where is God? What's going on here? - when the person cannot pray, doesn't know how to pray, doesn't know what's going on. There will be a whole variety of experiences, a whole variety of ways in which this is experienced, this process of change, growing, healing, transforming that the Holy Spirit, that the grace of God, that this great inflow of God into the soul brings about. It's all a great work of God that is there, deep within the mystery of who God is and who the human being is. That we can relate to God, or that God can relate to us, is an immense gift and a profound mystery, and both of these things are foremost in the contemplative person's

mind. A gift is being received from God, a free gift. Contemplation is always a gift of God; the person has not brought it about and the person knows this.

Now we come to our second word – *mysticism*. A new way of knowing, of understanding and it is unlike our normal ways of knowing and understanding. It's a very different kind of knowing, a very different kind of understanding. There is a certainty to it, the person just knows - they don't know how they know, they don't know where this came from, how it came about, but they know it. The person knows it and knows it with a certainty.

We might think that mysticism, the mystical way, is for a few rare people, but not for most of us - most of us are not mystics. That's not true. There's a famous phrase of Karl Rahner's, a theologian of the first half of the twentieth century, *there will come a day when all Christians will be mystics*. I think that day has already come; in fact it has probably been always the case. Why are we Christian? Why are all of you listening this evening, wherever you are around the world? If I were to ask you, you would probably give all kinds of different reasons. But in each person there's a deeper reason, there's a reason that goes deeper than all the external reasons. It is that something that says, *I can't not do this, I need to do this, I must do it*; there may be many other important things each of you could be doing this evening. There might be many things waiting for you, but... *I must do this, I need this, this is necessary*. If we were to go round asking people in our churches, why are you doing this? People would say, *I went to school, I grew up with this, this is part of our culture, part of our tradition*, but that doesn't sustain people. With people who really persevere, who grow in this, there is a deeper reason, something they cannot say no to, something that cannot be put into words, that cannot be explained, that cannot be articulated to themselves and certainly not to anybody else in a way that's comprehensible, yet there's a certainty to it. That's mysticism, that's mystical knowledge, mystical experience.

There's a lovely conversation that Teresa recounts in the book of her *Life* when she is trying to explain to her spiritual director how she is absolutely certain that Jesus Christ is beside her, and is beside her all the time. And he asks her *how do you know?* and she says *I know, I don't know how I know, but I know.* He then asks her, *did you see him?* - *No* - *Did you hear him?* - *No, but I know. I know and I can't say how I know, but I know and I know with certainty.* Nothing can talk her out of it, she just knows. Over and over again we hear these kinds of phrases from her. Something else that she also says that might help us understand a little what mysticism is. Every now and again Teresa would say things like, *I think this is explained very well in what they call mystical theology, but I don't understand any of that; I don't know what they are talking about but I understand the reality behind it.* Of course Teresa understands the words better than any of the theologians understood them, but she's putting that in for her readers. She is saying that although we do not have the language of theology, the language that these experts use, we can know and understand the reality and we can know and understand it much better than these experts do, because it is something that is known from experience. Or, as St John of the Cross puts it, *ordinary knowledge we can know intellectually, but the mystical knowledge is something that is both known and experienced. It is knowledge through love.* Love is perhaps the closest we can come to it. It would be as if somebody appeared from outer space and asked someone, *why are you in love with that person and not these other millions over here and why have you chosen this person to be your husband or wife and not all of those although they look the same. What's the difference?* The person knows that it is only this one in all the many millions and billions of people in our world it is this one and nobody else and there is a certainty to that. The kind of certainty that comes from mystical experience is even more than that; these people know there is a knowledge of God that is very different, very new, that is real and is more real than anything else.

The third word that we've got is *union* – again it's a word that is saying an enormous amount. It's putting a label on this new way of being. I've been speaking about prayer as this *friendly conversation*, this friendly conversation between two entities, two persons, but now what takes place is something much more profound; the two

become one, become one in God. To quote St Paul, *no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*. They become of one spirit, the two become one spiritually but of course it's not some kind of a combination of the two but it is God, knowing and loving as God does, seeing things as God does. It is God who is the real life of the person, anything else is not life. But we must not misunderstand this, and we could easily misunderstand this and see it in terms of being absorbed into God, or becoming less oneself and somehow being taken over in some way. The opposite is actually true – the more the person is taken over by the love of God, the more that God lives in the person, the more the person becomes their true selves, the unique individual that the person is. Perhaps to demonstrate this, we could think about the saints that we know, that we are familiar with and just look at them, look at their lives, not so much the external realities of their lives that will be unique, but look at what kind of people they are, what kind of spirit did they have? What we notice is that they are all unique – they are not carbon copies of each other, but rather as they grew and matured they became much more themselves, their spirituality reflects their personality, the unique people that they are. Reflecting upon St Teresa, as we look at her life and the journey of her life, we see she becomes more uniquely herself as she grows and matures, she becomes more truly the person that she is, the person that she is meant to be, that she was created to be.

We grow through relationship and that's what's happening in prayer and that's what the three words we are reflecting upon are speaking about. It is the most important relationship in our lives and it is this relationship that brings about the greatest growth, the greatest maturing of the person. How has the person got here? The person has grown and matured through their relationship with Jesus Christ, the person who has arrived at this union with Jesus Christ has become most truly, most fully themselves, the person that they were created to be. That's why everything in Teresa's teaching is focused upon this, is going toward this, this is the direction, the aim, the goal of the whole life of prayer, the whole spiritual life.

Taking these three words together and all that they set out to define for us, what are we saying? St John of the Cross tells us that no one can describe or express the experience of a person who has been taken over by the love of God. Not even the person themselves can express it, but, he tells us, there's a great need to express it; therefore poetry, imagery, art, metaphors, allegories, stories are much more helpful to these people than teaching, because everybody can draw from it what is right for them, whereas if we narrow it down, it will not be helpful to everybody nor be right for a person at a particular time. The workings of God in each person are something very unique, very precious and very delicate. Each person needs support and help to live this, but it is very difficult to find this, and to understand themselves or to be able to express it to others or to find others who will understand them. So John of the Cross says that he is always going to speak in very general terms so each person can draw from it what is right for them at a particular time.

What else can we say about this new reality, this new place that these words define for us? They are chosen and used to define the reality of the person in whom God's grace is now at work - the person who is bearing fruit. Contemplation is prayer in which a person primarily receives. The person's main work is one of receiving. That does not mean the person is passive, that the person isn't doing something. The person is receiving - a great work of God is happening in them, a great work that God wants to bring about and a great work that God wants to make known to them, because God wants us to know his work. God want us to know what he is doing in our lives, hence he gives a new way of understanding, he gives a new experience of himself in prayer - whatever form that might take - as God is taking the lead in prayer and God is making that known through this wisdom that he is giving, this knowledge that he is giving. It is something that the person may have no conscious awareness of, or very, very, little. This is something that can be very difficult to explain to people, because it doesn't make rational sense, but it's the experience of people. A person can set out on the spiritual road, on the journey of prayer and faith, and get very enthusiastic about it - filled with joy and experiences and the Holy Spirit is with them. That's wonderful, it's a gift of God and that's great. Then, that is taken is away, and the



person might believe or feel they are further away from God. Of course the reality is that they are getting nearer to God and the person might have some sense of that, yet the closer the person gets to God the less sense they will have at the level of feelings, emotions, ideas, knowledge, at any physical, intellectual or psychological level. The closer the person comes to God the greater the mystery of God is, or the more mysterious God becomes, because God gets bigger and bigger. Whatever the person thought was God, or thought was the experience of God, was only something of their own physical, psychological or spiritual make-up. So the closer a person comes to God, the less there is of what we might call feelings, or those kinds of experiences. There's another kind of experience and that is what these words are trying to express for us. God hasn't gone away, God is more present than ever, God is bringing about something great. This must not be misunderstood; the person must not go off in some other direction. The person who is truly on the contemplative road, on the road of prayer will not go off, and they will know, they won't know how they know, but they will know. That's what mysticism is. Therefore the person can be put into the most challenging of circumstances and yet will have that inner strength, that perseverance.

There's a lovely phrase that St John of the Cross uses to describe this knowledge. He uses this term - *a ray of darkness*. A total paradox; you have a ray of light – how can you have a *ray of darkness*? We notice so often that the language mystics use is a contradictory or a paradoxical language – how can you have a ray of darkness? How can darkness be light? But of course it's a way that he has of saying this comes in a completely different way. The person doesn't see this at all and yet it's there, the knowledge is there. It cannot be seen until some moment when it's needed – somebody comes and asks a question, or a situation arises, and the person just knows.

Where has the knowledge come from? Where has this answer come from? Total darkness, no way of seeing, but it's there.

These three words open up for us a vast treasure. Each one of them is used extensively and in such different ways, because they are trying to get across to us this

new reality. Contemplation – a new way of experiencing the presence of God - unfamiliar, challenging, bewildering; not only very real, but the person cannot change it, the person cannot go back to the old ways. The person can't choose another path. There is nowhere else to go; not only that, but there is nowhere to go back to. Prayer has simply become something else and that something else - at the level of what the person is doing - might be nothing, nothing happens. Just stay with it; God has taken over here; the person just stays with it. The person knows and understands things without knowing how they know or understand them. Not only do they know and understand them, but they can trust this knowledge more deeply than any other knowledge. It is more certain than things right in front of them, and it doesn't go away, it doesn't change. It's there and the person has a sense of living some new reality. They maybe only get the slightest glimpses of it, but there is a strength there, a strength that's not coming from themselves, but is coming from somewhere else deep within them. They know that, they know the life of Jesus Christ within. They can put their trust in that. It is love that has changed and transformed them. That's what the *inflow of God* does; it changes and transforms the person. I have already quoted before St John of Cross; *only love can change a person*. Now we are speaking about people who have been changed by love, not just changed by love, but transformed into love, who have become someone else, have become a whole new identity through love, because of love, because they have been taken over by the infinite love of Jesus Christ.

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (7)

### *Audio transcript of the seventh talk*

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020 at 10am

We are now looking at the fourth way of drawing water - the rain falling, the abundance of God's grace, God's blessing falling upon the person, being given out of the generosity of God. We now come to a particular stage of the spiritual journey, the highest, deepest, most profound, mature, advanced – whatever words we want to use to describe it.

What I want to explain now is rather difficult, but it is essential to our whole understanding of prayer and our understanding of the spiritual life. When we look at Teresa, or many of our great authors on prayer, and how she has written this treatise on prayer, what we notice is that this is what they really want to get to. Teresa really wants to get to this fourth way of receiving water, receiving God's grace; the rest is an introduction, a setting of the scene. There can be a variety of reasons for this, one being that this is what she is living at the time of writing; also she recognises that there are many people who really need to hear what she says here. But there is a more fundamental reason and this is something we can miss. People have often said to me, *I'm nowhere near that, I'm just a beginner. That's not really for me, that's for other people. Just tell me what the basics are.* That's an understandable reaction, but it's a huge mistake, because wherever one thinks one is or isn't on the spiritual journey is not really relevant, we don't know anyway – that's in the hands of God. But more importantly than that, what Teresa and John of the Cross and others would want to really impress upon us is that in order to understand the spiritual life well, in order to understand Christianity well - what the life of following Jesus Christ is really about - this is where we need to stand, this is where we need to look from. If we look at the spiritual life from the perspective of the person who is living now this fourth way of drawing water, having their garden nourished and nurtured and given life, then we get a true, authentic, healthy, life-giving way of seeing and understanding the spiritual

life. That's why it's so important. If we look from below upwards we don't really see it, but if we look at it from above downwards, if we look from this perspective, we begin to see what Christianity is really about, we begin to see what its potential is, the possibilities that are there.

One of the words we have begun to explore is *mysticism*, this new way of understanding and that's what we've got to see. We have a way in our world, in our way of thinking and operating, that sees things in terms of stages or growth – you go from this stage to the next one – but spiritual life doesn't work like that.

Teresa put this in a paragraph where she's directly addressing Garcia de Toledo, for whom she is writing this book – *this person now receiving the water in all four ways*. There is progress and growth, but all the different ways are there within the person. All the different ways are a reality of a person's life because this is a conversation between God and each one of us – we are conversing with the one we know loves us. Therefore God is there, present and loving us all the time, right from the beginning, from long before we ever began, and he doesn't change, he doesn't get bigger or smaller or more present or less present or more loving all less loving. He loves us completely all the time, therefore his presence is always bubbling up. Let's think about our lives; whenever somebody feels called, feels compelled to love, to love in a way that goes beyond the expected, something of the grace of God is at work there. When somebody puts the interest of another person before their own, when there's no obligation or need to do so, it's a pure act of generosity. Whenever a person feels that they must do something, must take this initiative, or when a person understands something but don't know how they understand it - *how do I understand this? How is it possible that this actually makes sense to me?* Or a person is in the midst of very difficult, painful and challenging circumstances and yet within them there is a peace, there is a joy that is not coming from them, but there's a sense of *where is this coming from? How is this possible?* Or a person has to face a very difficult situation and yet there's a strength that carries them through it - *how did I get through that, where did that strength come from?* Whenever this happens in a Christian's life, the person is

dipping their toe into this great sea of God's grace, we're dipping in, we're visiting this place. Teresa may be speaking about people who are habitually living from this place and hopefully we might all get there sometime. But, from the very beginning we are dipping into this place, and it is from this place that the inspiration, the strength and the light – however little or great amount of it we think we have – is coming from. This place is very relevant to us, very important to us and it is from there that we receive our true and authentic understanding of what Christianity is about.

So what is it about? Teresa, at the beginning of Chapter 18 of her *Life* was to write, *I need God's help to speak about this and I really didn't feel like speaking about it at all*. Because we are speaking about something that we can't speak about, that cannot be put into words. Indeed, if we put it like this, the reality is a profound mystery that we cannot put into words, rather what we can speak about are the effects, or the fruits, the change that this brings about, that's what we can speak about.

I have picked out a few aspects from Teresa's writings to give a flavour, because it is impossible to give a full explanation because each of us have our own experience of this, even if we think we haven't. What Teresa describes here are very strong and real experiences that are beyond explanation, that are powerful and real in people's lives. Therefore many things happen and I could describe here two extremes to our way of thinking, but they are not extremes when we examine the reality behind them. The two extremes are: – a powerful experience or sense of God's presence; for some people that might be visions, a belief that he is really present, a real strength of God's presence. At the other extreme is a very profound sense of God's absence. Where are you God? Why have you abandoned me? Being abandoned by God, being completely cut off from him. Teresa tells us about her experience of being in hell - nowhere possibly could be further from God than hell. So everything from the most exalted experience of God's presence that we could ever think of or imagine to the furthest experience of his absence, of being cut off from him, being rejected by him. To our thinking these might seem to be two extremes, but here they are not extremes,

but they are both manifestations of the same reality, they are both manifestations of the presence of God. The paradox is that we can only miss somebody if there is love. To be able to feel the absence of God in such a strong, profound way, that these people do, that's the fruit of love. One can only mourn, feel absence when one has felt presence, when one really knows God. So the experience of being cut off from him, of his absence, is a sign of the presence of God, of the powerful experience of God that the person has.

Let's pick up a few things that Teresa tells us. She tells us that the experience of prayer of these people is always one of glory. That's a biblical word. What is that? Glory, we could describe as the atmosphere of God, breathing in the air of God. It is as if one is living in a different atmosphere, drawing life from a different kind of air, spiritual, of God. Therefore one has less sense of what it actually is, because it is outside the level of our physical, human, psychological, intellectual, feelings and emotions - it's outside of all of that. What's being experienced is in the spiritual realm, totally. Something that happens in the spiritual realm affects the whole person; it's an experience of the whole human being, every dimension of the human being and it can only be spoken about in physical, human language. To use an example, there is an expression that is used when a person has gone through a deep, emotional, traumatic experience – the person's heart is broken. But if a doctor were to look at this person's heart they would say that the heart was fine, perfectly healthy, yet we use a physical expression to say the person's heart is broken. It makes no sense, yet it is the only language we can use to express something that's beyond the limits of our language. So the prayer we are dealing with here is beyond the limits of our language. It's glory – glory is beyond the limits of our language. All the prayer of this person is in the realm of glory. It's going to affect the whole person, every dimension of the person - who the person is.

Teresa tells us this person rejoices without understanding what they are rejoicing. The person has no power to communicate this joy. I have mentioned this joy already and of course it's a joy that's different to our usual understanding of joy. It is put very

well in John's gospel when Jesus says, *it's my joy I'm giving you, my own joy, it's not a joy that the world can give you*. Nothing in the physical, worldly experience of a human being can give one this joy. As Teresa tells us, we cannot communicate this joy, we cannot explain it, it doesn't make sense. Sometimes it's in the most unusual, most unexpected circumstances that this joy is experienced. Where is this joy coming from? It's not coming from the person; it's pure gift. So the person receives joy, has that inner joy that is pure gift of God. The person is living something that is beyond what can be understood. And yet Teresa said the person has a great need to explain what they feel; they know they're living through something and there's a great need to explain it. This joy, this peace that the person feels that is beyond explanation yet needs to be expressed, it needs to be celebrated, it needs to be put into words or imagery in some way.

Something else that the person is very aware of. What Teresa calls *these grandeurs and favours* that God is giving to the person, that the person is becoming aware of. What has changed is the awareness – the person isn't just aware of the grandeurs and gifts that they're receiving, but they are becoming aware that these are for the profit, for the benefit of many people. The gifts of God given to an individual are never just private gifts or rewards given to a person, or some personal favours or private possession. They are given for many. Jesus Christ gave his life for many, we're told, and indeed we can interpret many as being all. This is for the profit of so many, this is for God's work in this world and that's something the person is very aware of.

The way that Teresa so often writes about this is in terms of service, the desire to serve. One phrase that she uses is that the person becomes obsessed with service, doing things, serving, doing the work of God. That's something that the person cannot not do. They have this sense that this is for everybody. This is not confined to them. What God is doing in them – these are very profound personal experiences - but the benefits, the fruits, reach the whole world, they bring real good to the whole world.

The person has now this sense of detachment and has this deep, inner freedom that they are now living. The real growth in the spiritual journey is always a journey into a deeper freedom. It's a freedom now in all things, but Teresa tells us that it's a freedom that's often not understood or allowed by others, a freedom that other people might find quite threatening. It can be a very difficult freedom to live, because it's a freedom that this world finds challenging, finds threatening. The life of Jesus Christ is the great example of that; Jesus lived by a freedom that just became so threatening that he had to be crucified. The world couldn't cope with, couldn't deal with this kind of freedom. These people are touching something of this kind of freedom.

Perhaps the most difficult area to try and make sense of is the one right at the heart of Christianity, and it makes perfect sense here, and that is suffering. Suffering is the most difficult thing to explain from a Christian perspective, and now, here, it makes perfect sense. The cross is always there. Teresa, in Chapter 20 of her *Life*, writes, *this cross, the pain, cross, martyrdom; at the same time great happiness and delight*. She writes, *the experience resembles the death agony; with the difference that the suffering bears along with it such great happiness that I don't know what to compare it with. It is an arduous, delightful martyrdom, since it admits no earthly thing representable to the soul, even if this is what is usually more pleasing to it. It clearly understands that it desires only its God. It doesn't love any particular aspect of him, but loves him altogether and knows not what it loves*. So this paradox of suffering and great joy is like the presence of God and the absence of God – here they are no longer opposites or paradoxes but they are one profound experience of God, so it is with pain and joy, suffering and peace, death and life. Most suffering does not come into this category. Most pain and suffering is destructive; it destroys the person, destroys life. Suffering and pain do not make a person more holy or make a person a better human being; most times it does the opposite. But now the very suffering itself is transformed into something else. Not only that, but the person desires it, wants it, cries out for it, and that's something that we can find very difficult to understand. But now the person can see that right here, they are coming closest to Jesus Christ, to



what was his experience, to what was his greatest manifestation of love. Now the person can understand that, can see the wisdom in it.

Teresa tells us that there is the cross at every stage of the spiritual life. There is always the reality of the cross; it manifests itself in different ways, different forms of suffering, of struggle, of carrying one's cross, of being burdened. But now there is the full reality of the cross because this is where the life of Jesus arrived at, this is where it went to and because this is also the fullest manifestation of love, of joy, of peace, etc. The person now can see this; another way of putting it is that the person now understands what Christianity is really about.

I want to quote a passage from somebody who understood that, Edith Stein, the great Carmelite saint. This paragraph best sums up what I'm trying to say. Edith tells us that *being one with Jesus Christ is our sanctity, our holiness*. We have seen this all the way along, Teresa saying, *it's no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me*; I spoke about union, being one with Jesus Christ; that's our lives as Christians. So Edith Stein here is speaking about the person who is now at one with Jesus Christ, *progressively becoming one with him is our happiness on earth*. Here Edith is telling us that this journey that we've been speaking about is our happiness. Happiness is not out there in the future, happiness is from the very first step of this journey; at the very first step of prayer we're stepping into what true happiness is. *Being one with Christ is the end of the road; the whole journey is our growing in happiness. As a consequence of this, the love of the cross in no way contradicts being a joyful child of God*. So when we hear people like Teresa of Avila and so many others saying, *I want suffering, I want the cross*, they are not asking for some dour, dark, negative spirituality. This is actually an expression of the joy of being a child of God. Explained wrongly, in the wrong context, this can be very misleading. But Edith is showing us here that those who have understood this have grasped what Christianity is about. To ask for suffering - which we often see the saints doing - to ask for the cross, that is an expression or a manifestation or a sign that this person truly is a joyful child of God, living the joy of Christianity. Anybody who isn't doing that

shouldn't be asking for it, because it would be something unhealthy, it would be something destructive. Edith is setting it out so correctly from a psychological and spiritual perspective. *Helping Christ carry his cross fills one with a strong and pure joy and those who may and can do so – the builders of God's kingdom – are the most authentic children of God... To suffer and to be happy although suffering, to have one's feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father's right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly sing the praises of God with the choirs of angels, this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth.* Here she is defining what Christianity is, that's what the person is living, what Teresa is now speaking about, knows, understands, can see. They know, they understand, they can see it - not from something that has been explained to them from outside - because nothing here comes from outside, it comes from within, it comes from their own experience. Teresa tells us she is always speaking from experience.

There are two further things I would like to say about this that we see all the time in the experience of these people - there's a very strong pull towards silence and solitude - the person desires that very strongly. Whenever a person reaches a different stage or is going deeper, the desire for solitude and silence grows, increases. But that does not mean that the person is living a life of silence and solitude. The experience of these people will appear to us, looking from a distance, to be the opposite and Teresa's own life story shows us that so well. We can read Teresa's life, we can follow the whole story of her sixty-seven years of life and we can see her progress spiritually. The more she grew spiritually, the busier her life became; the more she grew spiritually, the more troubled and pained she became and the greater the struggles she had in her life. There is no contradiction or paradox between these. The person in this place will have a strong pull or desire for silence and solitude, but it can often be that there will be very little opportunity, if any, for that and even when there is an opportunity for that at an external level, it may not be how they are feeling interiorly; they can be feeling very disturbed and distracted and can feel that God is very much absent rather than present, they can be feeling totally abandoned by God. St John of the Cross so

beautifully shows us Jesus upon the cross, totally abandoned - *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* - and his comment on that is - this is the moment, the time, when God is doing the greatest work in Jesus, that greatest moment of spirituality, of union between Jesus and his Father, when the whole world was being saved, for the profit of many, the whole world is benefitting from what's taking place. In the most profound spiritual moment in the life of Jesus, he feels totally abandoned by God. So the person's exterior and interior life might be the complete opposite of what we might think of as silence, solitude, peace and tranquillity, though the person might have a strong pull and desire for that.

The second thing is; how does a person live through all of this? What does a person actually do? They are doing all sorts of things, but in their prayer they will have a strong desire, Teresa tells us, to praise God. It's interesting when Teresa is writing about this and John of the Cross, again, when he's writing about the most difficult parts of the spiritual life - both turn very much to the psalms - we see how important the psalms are; the psalms seem to be ever-present. It's not just them, there are so many others as well – those great songs of praise of God, of thanksgiving, of petition; the prayers that millions and billions of generations of people have been praying. There seems to be a great need to stay close to those prayers and many other biblical prayers and many biblical figures. The word of God, and often it is the more difficult parts of the word of God - challenging parts – Job, Jeremiah, people like that, people who have lived this experience and have expressed it and give us a way of expressing it, give us a way of putting it into words. So the scriptures, the psalms, are very important and they give Teresa and John of the Cross a way of speaking about this, a way of expressing what needs to be expressed.

I have said this before and I'm coming back to it again; there's a great need for the person to express what it is they're feeling, even if what they feel is beyond understanding, even if what they're feeling is total emptiness, loss and abandonment, there's a great need to express it and whatever it is that the person is experiencing, we will find it in the psalms. The psalms speak many times of being abandoned by God -

*God where are you? - and God, I can't find you - and God, I am searching for you - and God, you have treated me very badly - and God you have caused me all this distress...* The psalms express it - a way of expressing it will always be found in the psalms. They are the word of God; they are the spiritual experience of the Bible, of the people of Israel, the people of God. So there seems to be a spiritual instinct here to turn to the psalms, to use the psalms to pray.

The subject in this chapter is not an easy one, it's a difficult one, but one that is so essential to understanding the whole of Christianity and understanding the whole of Christianity as a following of Jesus Christ, a walking in his footsteps, a journey in which he walks beside us. The place of Jesus Christ in our spiritual life, our spiritual journey.

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER (8)

### *Audio transcript of the eighth talk*

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020 at 10am

We have been reflecting upon prayer, what prayer is, what we understand by spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, and we have been using primarily Chapters 11-21 of St Teresa's *Life*. This is a conclusion. However, whenever we think about or try to draw any series of talks of this kind to a conclusion, there's a sense that we're only at the beginning. This doesn't go on in a linear way but rather it is much more around concentric circles, going back and forward. It's a very complex journey, so there is a great sense that we're always only at the beginning. We're getting a first glimpse of something that is far bigger than we could ever imagine or understand.

There are two passages from the gospel that I want to discuss that Teresa uses a number of times to illustrate what she is trying to say. The first passage is in Luke's gospel – the story of the Pharisee and the publican – that is, two people of prayer, two people who are clearly at different stages of the spiritual journey. The first person is the Pharisee, who is the person of prayer, but he has not reached the advanced stage that the publican has reached. The Pharisee says, *thank you Lord that I am not like those other people*. He still hasn't come to the point of that inner freedom that I have already gone into. He is still tied up in the attitude of *what I'm doing is something very good and it is something that others don't seem to be doing, therefore I am better than them*. He hasn't got beyond that. He will, hopefully; this is part of the journey. Then we come to the publican, a man who is at a very mature stage of prayer and we see in him certain characteristics that we have already mentioned. What comes across most strikingly is the humility of this man. He just gets down; he doesn't even raise his eyes. He is humble. He knows who he is, he knows who God is. There's a profound level of self-knowledge. Humility – Teresa always tells us that that is the sure sign that somebody really is in relationship with God. If that's not there, it's not genuinely an experience of God that the person is living, it's something else. The

publican's prayer has become such a famous prayer over the Christian centuries, *Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner*. These are the words, *Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner*. The book that I have been basing this on is Teresa's book, which we call *Vida - Life*. That title was given to the book later, by others. Although it's a very appropriate title, Teresa never called it that; she never gave it a title. In the covering letter, when she was sending the book to Garcia de Toledo, she described it as her soul - *I'm entrusting to you my soul*. But elsewhere she refers to the book as *the book of God's mercies*. That's a very good title, a very appropriate one. A characteristic of somebody who is living a very advanced stage of spiritual maturity is their awareness of God's mercy, of their total dependence on the mercy of God; that everything they are and have received is a gift of God's mercy. God has been merciful to them. God's mercy is very important in our understanding of what spiritual maturity is. These people do not have any sense that *I have achieved something, I have got somewhere, I have advanced, I have matured*. No – what is growing in them is a sense of *how I depend on the mercy of God, how I am the recipient of such undeserved mercy from God; God has freely bestowed this great mercy upon me*. That's what the publican is so aware of in that passage of the gospel, *Lord have mercy, I need your mercy, I so depend on your mercy, I cannot live without your mercy, I will be nothing without your mercy*. So it's an act of God's mercy.

The other word that he uses in this little prayer is *have mercy on me - a sinner*. This is something that again we need to understand rightly. In the writings of Teresa and so many other saints, we find over and over again that they refer to themselves as sinners; *I am a great sinner*, like the publican in the gospel, *have mercy on me, a sinner*. What crimes has he committed? Probably none. We can be pretty sure he has committed no major crimes any more than Teresa had. She tells us all the time she's a sinner, yet never once does she mention any crimes that she has committed, because she hasn't. A sinner here does not mean someone who has committed some crimes, done something wrong; rather what the word sinner means is somebody who has the sense that they are sinners. Jesus meets many sinners in the gospels, but what they all had in common is that they receive the mercy of Jesus, they are healed by

him, they are given new lives - *your sins are forgiven, go and live a new life* – it's the beginning of a new life. So when Teresa or any of the other saints say *I am a sinner, a great sinner*, it's a sense that it's somebody who has received God's mercy - *my life has been changed and transformed by him, I have been healed, restored, given a new life, I am living something new*. So to be a sinner in this understanding of the word is to be living a life of grace, of the grace of God, living a life that is pure gift of God, that is pure act of God's mercy. So the idea of the mercy of God, of being a sinner, helps us to get into the mind, the outlook, the mentality of somebody who is spiritually mature in the Christian understanding of what that means. In addition to that, the idea of a sinner brings in something else that's very important – we see it in St Paul so strongly – their sense of being a sinner gives them a very strong love and identification with all who are sinners, with all who are sinners in the sense of having committed crimes. They never, like the Pharisee in the gospel story, see themselves as separate – *they're over there, I'm not one of those*. The true sense these saints have is actually *I am one of those, I am right amongst them, I live in solidarity with them, I love them*. So there is this sense of being at one with everybody else, with all of humanity.

There is another gospel passage that is very important to Teresa in the way that she tries to explain all of this. It is the famous gospel story when Jesus is in the home of Martha and Mary. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to him. There's a lot of other people gathered around, listening to Jesus, and Martha is trying to serve the meal and she gets frustrated that her sister won't help her. Jesus takes the side of Mary, and says that Mary has chosen the better part. That has always been interpreted down through the centuries as Jesus saying that it is better to sit and listen to him, to live a life of prayer and contemplation than to live a life of service. Teresa never accepts that traditional explanation, though for a long time doesn't know how to reconcile that, how to understand it when all these theologians have put in an interpretation of a passage of scripture that she just instinctively cannot accept. She comes back to it over and over again in her writings. Eventually she comes to see it in a very broad sense, that Martha and Mary are the one person, and that every person

must become both. That conflict that went on in Teresa's life is also one that goes on in everybody's life, with so many different demands and being pulled in this direction and in that direction and how can one really spend time listening to the Lord if one has x,y and z to be done? Teresa had that in her life and we all have. But she comes to the point of reconciling it; yes, we must listen to Jesus and spend time with him, but we must also cook his meal - he needs to be fed. Teresa said it would never be right to sit and listen to Jesus and let him go hungry; that would never be right. So the two become one, there's a reconciliation. Martha could not have served had she not already listened; only the person who has spent a lot of time listening can serve, can serve in the right way, that knows how to serve with the right attitude.

So Martha and Mary become one. And there's a wider message in that; when a person reaches spiritual maturity, when a person is living a right relationship with God, a mature, healthy relationship with God, there's reconciliation with the whole of the person's life. The whole of the person's life seems to come together. We all have complex areas in our lives; we wouldn't be human if we hadn't. If we were to write our life stories, there are bits we would like to omit and bits we would like to play down and bits we would like to present in another way - there are so many inconsistencies in every human life. But when a person comes to a spiritual maturity, there's a reconciliation of these inconsistencies; somehow life seems to come together, every aspect of a person's life is seen in a new light - God is in this, this is right, this is where I was meant to be, the Lord has worked through this, I have grown and matured through this experience. There's a reconciliation of the whole of a person's life. The conflicts and turmoil and inconsistencies somehow are resolved. This story of Martha and Mary helps Teresa to bring together the whole of a person's life; things now fall into place.

Teresa writes Chapters 11-21 of her *Life* as a treatise on prayer. As I said in the first talk, part of her motive for doing so was that she was asked to write about her life and she recognised that there was no understanding of her life without understanding what prayer is, and it was only through prayer that her life could be understood. So it is for



all of our lives, they can only be understood through prayer. Only the person who is spiritually mature, who has grown spiritually, can have a right understanding of their own life and the whole of human life. St John of the Cross has a lovely expression for people like this. He said *they have a wisdom, they know the secrets of God and of human life* - an understanding of both.

Looking at Teresa's book, before she picks up again to write about her life, or what she calls her real life - the new life that she is living, the life that Jesus Christ lives in her - she gives a chapter on the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life, or more specifically on the humanity of Jesus Christ. There is a very important message being given to us here and it is something I have mentioned in one of the early talks – the place of Jesus Christ. If we were to ask Teresa about prayer and the place of Jesus Christ in her life, she would say they are the same thing. *Prayer is friendly conversation with the one that we know loves us*, it is friendly conversation with Jesus Christ. A lovely expression I heard used by somebody speaking about Teresa: - from *the very beginning to the end of the spiritual life, that whole journey of spiritual life, it is a journey we go on, held by the hand of the humanity of Jesus Christ*. I think that is a very good expression - *held by the humanity of Jesus Christ* - the human Jesus. Remember, Jesus is human in every way that we are, including a human spiritual life, so if we want to know what spiritual maturity is, we look to Jesus Christ; if we want to grow in spiritual maturity, we look to Jesus Christ.

When Teresa begins to write *The Interior Castle* in 1577, twelve years after she's written the book of her *Life*, she is by now a much more mature person. In the *First Dwelling Place*, she writes, *fix your eyes on Jesus Christ*, not on yourself. The spiritual journey is never one of introspection, looking at myself. That of course is what the Pharisee was doing - *look at me, Lord, I'm better than that lot, look at me Lord, all the good things I'm doing* – forget that from the very beginning, Teresa said, don't be looking at yourself, don't be saying, *where am I? or, how well am I doing? am I making progress or not?* Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ, don't take your eyes off him, he is the certain guide; and in particular, she says, fix your eyes upon the

gospels, the Jesus of the gospels, those gospel stories. Jesus lived, as I said, a human spiritual life, as we all do, and when a person lives a healthy, mature, grown up, right Christian spiritual life, that person becomes more and more human. For Teresa, one of the great mistakes in the spiritual life was to think that somehow when we get more spiritual, we get less human. Teresa said no, God made us to be human beings; if God had wanted us to be angels, he would have made us to be angels - he didn't. We're human beings, she said, the spiritual life makes us more human. Jesus became the most human of human beings; so by relating with Jesus, fixing our eyes on him, being one with him, we become more human. The essential place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life - the most human of human beings - that's what we become.

Teresa exercises a lot of her mind in trying to understand what that might mean. What does it mean to become more human? What kind of a human being is the person who has grown spiritually? The only guide we have got for what that person might be like is Jesus Christ. The closer that one comes to Jesus Christ, the closer one's life is like the life of Jesus Christ. That's what spiritual maturity is, a life like the life lived by Jesus Christ. Certain questions will arise here, as they did for Teresa. What kind of a person is this? One of the questions she asks - can this person sin? The person calls themselves a sinner – *have mercy on me, a sinner*. Teresa will give a very emphatic *yes* to that question, and she will because of human freedom – the most mature human being is the most free human being - therefore of course the person has the freedom to sin, more freedom than ever. But, she said, the power of love – the person now loves - and therefore because of love, the person will do everything to avoid sin, to avoid hurting the one he or she loves, because that is the very nature of love. When we love someone we do everything to avoid hurting the person we love. The capacity to sin is there, the freedom to sin is there, but because the person is now living a life of love, love is everything that the person does - all the person's actions are love, the person's sole motivation is love - and therefore the person will do everything to avoid sin. Another characteristic of these people and the way Teresa puts it, is the love they have for those who persecute them, those who do them harm, those who falsely accuse them, etc. That, of course, is Jesus Christ on the cross -

*forgive them Lord, they do not know what they are doing.* She said they have a profound love for all those who persecute them. In addition to that, they fulfil the gospel command to *love your enemies*, and it is interesting that only now can the person really fulfil that command and of course that shows us how right psychologically Teresa's teaching is. To love one's enemies - that is something that is beyond the capacity of a human being, particularly to love someone who has done one great harm, great wrong, great hurt. But now these people can, because they are doing so with the grace of God, with the love that God has so changed and transformed them with, so they have been transformed in love. So when we speak about the fullness of spiritual growth, we are speaking about the most mature, the most free and most loving human beings, the greatness of humanity. Jesus came into the world to teach us how to be human; to show us what it really means to be human. A person of prayer, a person who grows in prayer becomes more and more human and has a love for humanity, a love for all humanity; something like the love that God himself has for us.

I want to look at two passages from Teresa's writings to help us to enter into what this means. They are both from her *Spiritual Testimonies*, documents that are very personal and that she wrote a few years before she wrote the book of her *Life*. She recalls the words of St Paul, *it is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me. For it seems to me*, she said, *I neither live nor speak, nor have any desire but that he who strengthens and governs me might live in me.* So everything that she lives, everything that she says and everything that she desires is the life of Jesus Christ in her - that's what she wants. Her whole life, everything that she says and desires; that is him. He has so taken over her life; she is living the life of Jesus Christ. The other passage is from the very last of her *Testimonies*, written about a year and a half before she dies, when she is saying that she is now completely free of everything. *It seems I only live to eat and to sleep and not suffer in anything, and even this doesn't bother me.* So whatever life throws at her, whatever life brings her, that doesn't bother her. She says *I fear I might be deceived but I know I can't be.* Then she goes on to say, *I am certain that there doesn't reign in me any strong attachment to any creature or to*

*all the glory of heaven...* So there's no attachment to anything, either in this world or in heaven, that total detachment, that total inner freedom... *but rather to loving this God of ours. This attachment to loving God doesn't diminish, instead, in my opinion it increases along with the desire that all serve Him.* To loving God and desiring that all serve Him, that is the life that she now lives, that is the life of the Christian, that's what she is living – just the love of God and the desire only that she serve Him, but that everyone serve Him, and that of course is the whole purpose – that all serve Him - to make Him known, to do His work.

Teresa has so often been described as the *woman of desires*, and prayer ultimately is about desires – we express our desires. There is something very human about it. To learn how to pray is to learn how to desire, to learn how to desire in the right way, to learn how to desire in an unselfish way, in an un-self-centred way, to learn how to desire in a way that is going to bring out the best in the person. Learning to pray is learning to desire, and Teresa who writes that statement has learned how to desire, learned to desire in a real and free way, her desires are only love, the love of God and because her desire is only the love of God, she then desires the one thing that God desires – that we all know Him, love Him and serve Him - that's her desire. So prayer brings Teresa to that place where she desires, knows how to desire, desires what Jesus Christ himself desires, has learned how to desire, has learned what true desire is. That's what prayer is, that's what she has learned, that's what she teaches us, that's what she wants for us, that is the purpose of her writings, of her teaching - the mission in her life.

And for us now, at this point, at this stage in each of our lives, each of you who have been listening for the past eight weeks, each one of you has come with this somehow, with some desire deep within, a desire that often cannot be put into words, a desire that goes beyond whatever words we may be able to come up with, let our prayer be for each other and for all of us here; that we learn to truly desire, that our desires may be purified and set free, that our desires no longer burden us, but will be a source of real peace and liberation; that our desires may be set on God and all that He desires,

because then we will all have a real and true peace, a real and true freedom and the capacity to really be the people that we're meant to be.

Desires are where it all began and where it is all continuing to be. So let us pray for each other at this particular time of our history. All this has come about because of COVID19 and the situation that we find ourselves in. Let us pray that we may truly fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and grow and mature in His spirit. We entrust each other to God; may we be kept safe and may we grow and mature and may we through our prayer, through our witness, help to lead the people of God, the people of our world through this experience to something new, something more life-giving, something better. Amen. May God bless you all.