

THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH



FR MATT BLAKE OCD

SECRET OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH – Part 1
Live-streamed talk by Fr Matt Blake, OCD
4th April 2020 [§]

Fr Matt had been scheduled to give this talk at a conference at Boars Hill Carmelite Priory outside Oxford, but found himself forced by the circumstances of the pandemic to give it live-streamed from St Joseph's Church attached to Gerrards Cross Priory instead. In his opening remarks he explained all this, and then continued.

In these current circumstances, I have to believe that you're there, that we're in communication, we're at one with each other, that we are all gathered here for the one purpose, that all of us share what is most precious to us. We hold it in common that we are people guided by the Spirit of God, we are people searching for God.

These are new challenges that this presents to all of us, so it's in that context that we're spending this moment of time reflecting on our relationship with God, the most fundamental, key relationship of our lives. The context for this talk is that we're just about to start Holy Week, the most sacred week of the Christian year, and it is going to be very different for all of us, but Holy Week it is, and what does not change is the mystery of salvation, all that the death and resurrection of Jesus means for us. That doesn't change; that we are celebrating. And that's the context of this afternoon, so we have to keep both those contexts very much in mind.

To begin: a starting point for this afternoon, and it really forms an opening prayer. I want to read a few well-known lines from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, lines that undoubtedly you're all familiar with, but they give us a starting point, and this is the end of Chapter 3 of St Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name. Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will, with all the saints, have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory be to him, from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen

We can imagine Paul, sitting at his desk, thinking, pondering, what it really means to live by the spirit of Jesus Christ.

We find something similar many times in Paul's writings, but there's a text from the Letter to the Romans* where he writes that there are two very different kinds of lives – there's the unspiritual life and there's the spiritual life – and the person who really

[§] audio recording available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/17v3sOLDTXU92a3vwwqJl2ZNNV59h7CFw/view?usp=sharing>

* Romans 8: 5-8

lives by the spirit of God is alive. So that is our subject this afternoon. What does it mean to live a spiritual life? What kind of a life is it? What kind of a journey is the person on? What needs to be done? What is going to happen? That is our subject – this road, this journey of the spiritual life – and everything I say is taken from St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, but I am not going to be quoting them very much; I will from time to time make reference to parts of their teachings, but this is not the context for going into great detail, I am going to try and take the essence of what they teach us, what is it that they show us and how might that provide us with some kind of a road map for our lives.

We're speaking about life, we're speaking about what it means to live life well, to live it maturely – a grown up way of living – that's what we are speaking about and that way of life comes about through relationship with the Spirit of God. It's the relationship between two spirits – again that comes from St Paul – but ultimately, he said, they become one spirit, that's what it means to become one spiritually with God. Spirit is that deepest place within us, that dimension of who we are that is most true, most real. Every human being has a spiritual life, there is no human being ever created that hasn't got a spiritual dimension. The spiritual is part of what it means to be human, but that dimension must grow, mature, be purified, transformed, if we're really to come alive spiritually and that's what we're speaking about this afternoon.

Another word closely related to that word spiritual or spiritual life and that is spirituality. I would define spirituality as the inner language, the language of the soul, the spiritual language that's being spoken, or more correctly, being sung within each one of us. What language is being sung, what language do our lives sing? What does the deepest place within us, the most true place within us communicate? What kind of a language can we use to express what is most deep, most profound, most true about ourselves? That is what spirituality is.

There are five parts or aspects to the talk this afternoon:

Number one is what I call the beginning, or the starting point. What's the starting point to all of this? Where do we begin?

The second part is conversion, or decision-making time. Many of us might think, well, that's the beginning surely? No it's not, but we'll come back to that a bit later.

The third part I entitle crisis, crossroads, or perhaps another way of expressing it is that something that brings about, that leads to, a deeper level of commitment.

The fourth section I entitle real change, or the journey to inner freedom. That's when God brings about something really great in the person's life.

The fifth section is maturity, the fullness of human and Christian maturity. The life of a person that has been transformed by the Spirit of God. What kind of a life might that be? What kind of a person is this?

So there are the five sections. We have to remember that the spiritual life is not something linear, when you go a, b, c, d, in a line. It doesn't quite work like that, in fact there is no diagram that we can use, there's no instruction in this way or that, but

we have to use something, we need a road map, some kind of scaffolding for this to hang on but we also recognise the limits of that.

What do we mean by a beginning? There's a wonderful line from the Prophet Jeremiah, at the very beginning of the book of Jeremiah, when he is being called by God and God says to him, *before I formed you in the womb, I knew you*. Jeremiah might say, it was when I was out there as a young man and you intervened, that was the beginning, but God said, no, before you were even formed in the womb, this had begun. Whatever it is you are becoming aware of now had begun before you were formed in the womb. God wasn't saying *I like this Jeremiah chap and let's have a chat with him and let's give him some new role*. No, what God was making Jeremiah aware of was Jeremiah's true identity, the purpose for which he was created, that whole purpose – who he is. It was an encounter first and foremost with his true identity – *who am I?* Who are we?

This is what we see at the beginning of St Teresa's *Interior Castle*. It's where she begins her description, or one of her beginnings: *We are people who have souls, who are made in the image and likeness of God, each one of us has within us a soul that is a paradise where God has chosen to live deep within each one of us*. That's who I am. This is the starting point before any question of *what am I to do?* or, *where am I to go?* or, *what is to be changed?* No, identity first, who am I? So that is the powerful statement that Teresa begins with – the beauty and the dignity of the human person.

But then there's another starting point, related to that – and that is the reality of the life that I am now living and the reality of the world, the environment, the *milieu* in which I inhabit and that is not some paradise on earth. So it is what Teresa calls self-knowledge and for Teresa every stage of the spiritual journey is a journey of self-knowledge, it is a learning of self-knowledge, going deeper and deeper into who I am, the truth of my life – the real truth. And why is that necessary? We could be forever explaining why, but I just want to suggest two very common difficulties that people encounter in living a life of prayer, a spiritual life. The person starts off with the greatest enthusiasm. However, one of the issues is – you go to the books, go to the experts, learn that this is what I must do and this is what is going to happen – and of course for most people it doesn't work like that. For some, maybe to a certain extent. The spiritual life of a person might follow the book in some sense, but for the most part no, because it is creating something completely new. Every person is unique and every person's spiritual life is also unique, it is not an imitation of someone else's. So it's not going to go as we think it should go. Therefore it has to be grounded in truth.

The second thing, and related to it, is that there will be all kinds of mixed motives within us as to why we want to set out on this route. There will be all kinds of personal ambitions and goals and desires and agendas and whatever. Even though we might think we haven't – we have. This journey, the spiritual journey, is a stepping outside of both of those. It is always uncharted territory. The spiritual life always entails stepping beyond the boundaries of the map. The map goes so far, that's the real beginning – we're stepping beyond that. That is why, when we pick up the writings of St Teresa and St John of the Cross and we look carefully, (Teresa tells us explicitly, John doesn't but it's as obvious as could be), both of them are writing from experience. Yes, they're using the tradition, the theories, the wisdom of so many

others who have written about these subjects before them, but primarily they are both writing from experience. Teresa tells us that *I only write what I have experienced myself or what I have seen in the experience of other people or what God has shown me in my experience of prayer*. If she hasn't experienced it, she won't write about it. In other words, she's not going to fall into the trap of presenting this wonderful book, rules, this is what happens. It doesn't work, and it didn't work for her. John of the Cross tells us that he's not going to write about what other teachers and writers write about, he's only going to write about those aspects of the spiritual life that others tend to ignore, because, he said, *so many people need this*. So, it's about what's experienced, because that's what we have got.

Let me explain this a little bit. When we think about the spiritual life, our relationship with God. It is God who begins it, it is God who brings about the change and transformation that takes place, all the progress and growth is a work of God, not the work of the person, but of course we can't see or know God, the divine and the human are on two completely different levels. We don't become Gods, we don't think as God thinks or see things as God does, therefore what we have, and what we have to go on is our experience of that. So what we have is our experience of what God is or is not doing, of the presence of God in our lives. What we have is what we experience. So what Teresa and John of the Cross are doing is teaching us how to live that experience, how to live that experience so that we do not become an obstacle to what God is doing, to live that experience that we are open to the unknown, to the incomprehensible, to where God *really* is taking us to, not where I think I should be going or that the book says I should be going, but no, where God is really taking me to, that's what's essential: that the life we live is founded on truth. So the beginning, as you can see, is always a work of God. How it is experienced is going to vary.

There's a lovely paragraph at the beginning of John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle* where he gives us a whole list of possible ways, all based on Scripture, in which people have become aware – and that's the term he uses, the person has become aware – *I've got to do something, I've got to set out on this journey, I've got to take it more seriously, I've got to commit myself more to this, I want this, I desire this*. It's going to be experienced in as many different ways as there are human beings on the planet. But it is always a response to something God has already done. God has already done this. The great principle of John of the Cross is: *whoever is seeking God, God is seeking that person even more* – in fact much more. So when a person decides, or feels the need to seek God, it is because something of God's search for them, God's desire for a relationship with that person, has jumped into their awareness somewhere, it has disturbed something within. Hence, the person must do something.

And that's what gets us into the second phase of these five points that I've been making, the one about conversion, decision-making. What do we understand by conversion? For the purpose of what I'm speaking about this afternoon, I would phrase it something like this: it is saying *yes* to what I can no longer say *no* to. To go back again to Jeremiah, we find this several times in his writings: *I don't want to have any more to do with this God, this is too much, too much suffering involved, they're all against me, nobody understands me*, and then he would say *there's a fire within*. There is something comes up from within him and he can't walk away, he cannot say *no*, there is some power there. John of the Cross describes it as a wound of love; the

person has been touched by love – love has been put right in there in the centre and the person has to respond. They have been touched by love; they must seek and search for the lover. There are so many other images that one could use, but it is saying yes to something.

As I mentioned earlier, often people see conversion as the real beginning, but of course it's not. It's a new entering into awareness and it involves decision-making. Decisions have to be taken, risks have to be taken. We're entering into a deeper level of trust. Things have to be done and decided that won't be understood by others, that perhaps will challenge and maybe break other relationships. It will involve things that might appear rationally to be mad, to be crazy. So it involves a stepping forward, a taking decisions, living a new way of life. What kind of a life are we living? That's St Teresa's starting point when she writes about prayer in her *Way of Perfection*. Her sisters had asked her to write something about prayer. She starts by writing about *this is the type of people that we are, this is the kind of life that we live*. That's a huge statement, because whatever the spiritual life is, whatever it means to any individual one of us, to all of you out there listening to this, it can never be one little part of my life or something I do for a particular time each day, or sometimes I maybe go off on retreat at certain times or come to church. It's going to involve the whole of a person's life, every dimension of a persons' reality. It's the whole person, it is going to penetrate everything because it is, as I said earlier, what is most true, what is most real in the person. That's what it is, and therefore it's going to involve the whole person.

A conversion may be, for some people, like St Paul falling off his horse on the road to Damascus. It's one event, a spectacular change of direction. But for many of us, maybe for most of us, it is something long, slow, maybe over a long period of time, perhaps there are many different conversion experiences in our lives. In the writings of St Teresa there are several experiences that have been given that label *Teresa's conversion experience*, because there have been a number of decisive moments that changed things. So, there might be many of these, because the spiritual life goes up and down and doesn't, as I've said earlier, follow something linear. There's another aspect of conversion that I want to give a little bit of time to. Conversion isn't just about now into the future. Of course it entails that, and sometimes it might entail radical change now, so that everything that comes afterward is going to be very different to what was before, because of a decision, or decisions, taken now. But conversion does something else, and this may take a lifetime, and sometimes it's only people at the very end of their lives that can look back and can see this and it is wonderful when they can. It is just a wonderful moment when they see that the whole of life has been converted, and particularly those experiences that maybe took the person in the wrong direction, perhaps very serious mistakes made, things that damaged or perhaps cut them off from God or from others, serious trauma or crisis in their lives. Again it can take so many different forms, things that one would not want to have in one's story, things I am not proud of, things that just don't fit into what a good life, or a spiritual life, or a Christian life should be. They are also converted. One can look back and see the hand of God in them, see that they are also part of God's blessing, part of the journey that God has brought the person on. There is a reconciliation with the whole of a person's life, every part of one's story, every dimension. Conversion converts the whole of a person's life, the whole of a person's experience. Everything is changed and transformed, but that can be a long, slow

process, one that can be quite painful over a long period of time, but it's in the nature of how God works.

Perhaps a little line from the Apostles Creed might help to understand what I'm getting at. After we are told about the death and the resurrection of Jesus, then we say that we believe that he descended into hell. That's an extraordinary statement. Let us just stop and think about it. Hell is the complete opposite to God. It is the furthest one can be from God. There should be no connection between that and God, hell has been completely cut off from him. Yet at the resurrection, that is the first thing we say, that we profess faith in: that's where he went, he descended into hell. When our relationship with God grows and matures, he descends into the hell of our lives. He goes right to the places that are in most need of transformation. He doesn't come along wiping out something. Things are not wiped out, they are transformed, they become part of the journey, the story, they become part of the wonderful love song that's being sung between God and the person. Something wonderful takes place. Conversion has been so often described as new life and it really is a new life. Things begin to change, things begin to grow, things happen in a person's life. Big decisions and small decisions need to be taken. But sometimes they are not even taken, they simply happen because the way that a person thinks is being changed, and there is only one thing that is changing it and that is love. St John of the Cross tells us that the human being is only changed by love, nothing else. No systems, practices, regulations, philosophies, ideas, persuasion, force, anything can change a human being – only love can. They might change a person superficially, externally, but not deeply. The kind of deep transformative change that the Spirit of God brings about in a human being can only be done through love. Only love changes us. And love is going to change our relationships with everything and is going to determine, colour, shape the decisions, the attitudes that we have. So love is going to be bringing about changes in us and particularly in our relationships, not just our relationships with people, how we relate with each other, but also with goods and ideas, ways of seeing things, etc.

The term that John of the Cross uses, I think is a good one. It's the term *appetite*, or *appetites*. Something that we desire, that we want, that we have to have, that we think we cannot live without. Something we think makes us happy, but in reality of course it's doing the opposite, it's enslaving us, we're not free. John tells us that it's not the amount of goods that we have, possessions that we have, prestige that we have, etc. that matters – it's our relationship with it. A person can have all the wealth or power in the whole world and be free from it. A person can be very poor, but can be grasping and holding on to the little that they have. In other words, they are not free. The spiritual life gradually has to set us free and to set us free at so many different levels of our being. It has been described over and over as a journey into true freedom.

And that's what I want to pick up in the next section. We've more or less covered the first two of these five sections. (As you can see, it doesn't really work in a linear way, because we're talking about personal experience – but we need to try and put things into some kind of rational order).

THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH – Part 2
Live-streamed talk by Fr Matt Blake, OCD
4th April 2020 §

Welcome back – I think we're more or less on time. I want to begin by reading a passage from Matthew's Gospel. This is the story of the *Rich Young Man* (there's a similar story in Luke's Gospel also) and it is one that St Teresa uses very effectively in her Third Dwelling Place of *The Interior Castle*, where she's speaking about the place in the spiritual life that we want to pick up now. So this is Chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel, verses 16 to 22.

And there was a man who came to him and asked, "Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is One alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said, "Which?" "These," Jesus replied, "You must not kill, you must not commit adultery, you must not steal, you must not bring false witness, honour your father and mother, and you must love your neighbour as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?" Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." But when the young man heard these words, he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

A great story, that, and it's a story of somebody who has lived a very good life, kept all the commandments, he said, from the beginning. That's good, that's right. But now he finds himself unhappy. There is something missing. Everything that gave him satisfaction up until now – and he has everything, he's living his religion very well, obeying all the commandments and has done very well in business, he is very wealthy and he's young, he's got health and life in front of him, he's got everything, ticks every box – wonderful. But he's turning to Jesus because there is something missing. He has that deep feeling there is something missing. Note the way he asks the question *what must I do in order to possess eternal life?* Two words there give away what the problem is. What must I do? It's *my* achievement, this is *my* kingdom, this is a great work *I* have done, *I* want *my* reward. And to *possess* – possession, hold onto, it's mine. Spiritual life is not mine. This is not *my* work or *my* achievement or *my* possession. The possessiveness, the focus upon self, that's the obstacle, that's the difficulty, that's the wall that has to be broken down, and he's blind to it, he can't see.

And Jesus points it out to him and we're told he walks away, sad. When he arrived he was sad and he walks away, even sadder. Everything he has, possesses, has achieved, is not giving him happiness, is not giving him peace of mind, is not giving him the inner freedom that he longs for. He's very wealthy, but in reality he is very poor. But Jesus gives him the greatest invitation of all – *come, follow me*. That's the key, that's the greatest of all invitations because to be a follower, to be a disciple, is to be in relationship with Jesus. This man wanted Jesus to give him an answer. In other words he wanted Jesus to serve his purpose: he's someone I'll go and get advice from, or get help from, Jesus is there to serve my purpose – he's not. Following my agenda,

§ Audio recording available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yyftFaxPcf_k8gZIJWHqm_UtdXN9bqWb/view?usp=sharing

my goal, what I want from this. We can't relate with Jesus in this way. Jesus is not going to give him what that something is, because that's not a help. Jesus wants a relationship with this young man. This young man is not interested in a relationship with Jesus. A relationship is the only thing that will give him freedom, that will give peace to his mind and heart. Jesus is offering him that very thing that he most needs. But for now he cannot see it. Who knows, in the future maybe he walked away and thought about it and came back. We don't know. We are just taken to that point, that place.

And in one way or other that happens to everybody in their spiritual lives, and maybe many, many times. So often the spiritual lives that we are living, that we think we are living, are our constructions, what we think we should be doing, what we think is right. There's nothing wrong with any of this, there's nothing wrong with obeying the commandments, it's the right thing to do, but God asks more than that from us. God wants something else from us, something much more, something that will give us real peace and happiness, and that is a relationship. Up until now we could say that it was all about what I can do. In order to really grow and mature spiritually, the foundations have to be pulled out from under that. That's what the crisis is and there will be many, many of these. We think we're going along nicely and suddenly – we fall on our faces, and maybe that has to happen over and over again. But these are moments of grace, real gifts of God. Jesus was giving this man a real grace, a real gift and he couldn't recognise it. Not only could he not recognise it, but he recoiled against it, he put up a big battle, walked away sad, shut his mind, his heart. Jesus wanted a relationship with him. To come back to the words of John of the Cross I quoted earlier, Jesus wanted to love him and if he was willing to enter into a relationship of love with Jesus, things would start to change. And that of course is what happens when we hit crisis, when we live through crisis, when we persevere. This is what happens, we begin to love in a deeper, more real way.

St Teresa puts it very well for us, she said, *a love with no self-interest whatsoever*. A complete contrast to this young man – there was self-interest in everything, he was full of self-interest, he was a slave of self-interest. To love with no self-interest, that is adult, mature love, that is love that is free, that is love that has been purified and transformed. The crisis is the beginning of that. If that is really to happen in our lives we need a lot of crisis. We need to fall on our faces a number of times, maybe many times. Things have to go badly wrong, we have to be set free of our own agendas and goals and all of that. Now real conversion, transformation, takes place. And that is the fourth of our five sections.

And perhaps we could think about the fourth section, the fourth phase of this, in terms of the week we are about to begin – the death and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps we could think about this phase as our own dying and rising. It is very literally a dying to an old way of life and a rising to a new way of life. We are radically set free from all that limits, hinders, compromises, distorts us. This is the entry into real freedom and it is a work that God brings about in us. It is a grace of God and it can only happen if we're willing to let go. This young man had to be willing to be free – *sell all your possessions, they don't matter, they're not important*. They are an obstacle here, though. He cannot follow Jesus and hold on to all of this wealth, possessions and goods. He's not free, he is not free to be a disciple, he is not free to enter more deeply into discipleship. So there must be a dying, a letting go, an entry into something new.

Many of you will be familiar with St Teresa's lovely image that she uses for this – of the silkworm or the caterpillar – this little creature that becomes a beautiful butterfly. It's the same creature, but the caterpillar is very, very limited, crawling around eating the cabbages, but then there's a point when a beautiful butterfly emerges – there's beauty, there is freedom – totally unrecognisable. It gives a sense that there has to be a total change, not just changing a little bit. That's why Jesus says, sell all your possessions not just a little bit, to the man. It must be everything. It's not that he's advocating that he be destitute or anything – I've already quoted from St John of the Cross and it's not the amount of possessions – the man could still hold on to everything that he's got, if he was free of it, but he's not free and he has got to become free of all of it, not just a little bit. The butterfly has to be totally free in order to fly, in order that the beauty may be seen, that's the kind of transformation that takes place.

Or perhaps we could think of a phrase that John of the Cross uses, *it's only love that can change and transform a person*. And so what is happening along this road, this journey, is that we could say that the sunshine of God's love is shining on a person, and just like the sunshine will make the plant grow, bring out the flower, it will open up and it will become beautiful, the sunshine of God's love. Therefore the person is growing in God's love to the point where - and this is the beautiful phrase that John uses at a key moment in his *Spiritual Canticle*, at a moment of transition, change, of union with God – that the person now has the capacity to what he calls *the complete and true yes of love*. That's a great phrase, *complete and true yes of love*. That's what God's love has brought the person to, that's the point the person has arrived at when they have really opened themselves and gone on this journey and persevered. Now the person can make – and the two words are very complete – it's not 90%, not 99%, but a complete yes, and it's true, it has to be grounded in truth. There again it must be 100% truth. The complete and true yes of love, that's what the person now has the capacity to do. That is true, mature, adult love.

That brings us to the fifth part. What might that mean? What might that be? I will draw from John of the Cross and Teresa different ways that they try to express this. The phrase that John of the Cross uses all the time in his writings when he wants us to know the object, the goal, where is this going to? For him, the important thing is that one's mind, one's vision, one's focus is upon the end, the goal, right from the beginning. At the end the goal is always what he calls *union with God* or *union of love with God*. It's a union that's brought about through love, and it goes something like this: God loves each one of us, each one of us is in relationship with God, he loves each person he created, it is not more, or is not less, it doesn't decrease or increase. God is always God, God is always looking lovingly at each one of us. But if we were to go right back to where I started with Jeremiah, when Jeremiah was called by God, God said, *before I formed you in the womb I knew you, now I want you to go and do this, this and this*. Jeremiah had to freely say *yes* to it. God didn't force him or compel him – he had to say *yes*. He was inspired by the fire burning within him, but there must always be a *yes*, a free *yes*, and we haven't got the capacity to do that, therefore the love of God has to work in us, purifying and transforming our capacity to love. That's the change that takes place, the person's capacity to love.

But of course, as human beings, we can never aspire to a love equal to God's love, we cannot be equal to God. That's the fundamental problem when trying to speak about

the spiritual life: the dimension of God and the human are just so apart. But we can know God through faith, and to love is to enter into what John of the Cross calls God's language. When we love, we speak God's language; God speaks the language of love, it's the only language he speaks. So to love is to speak God's language, but in John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle* he goes much further than that, not only does God purify and transform and help us to mature and to grow in our capacity to love, he also give us his capacity to love, he transforms our loving into his loving. He gives us, he puts into us, the capacity to love as he loves, and giving that capacity he is giving the person all that is needed to live as Jesus Christ lived. This is what it means to live a true and mature Christian life – to love as he loves. And John tells us that one little bit of this true love is more important, can do more good, than all the works and projects in the whole world. It's limitless what this love can do, what it can achieve, and of course that's why it is so wonderful to be reflecting upon this in the week that is beginning, because there up on the cross over my head, we see the greatest expression of that. There Jesus can totally give himself, the greatest act of love humanity has ever known, the greatest act of self-giving. The human being is capable of that limitless love. God can put something of that love into each one of us, something of that capacity to love, to love in a way that St Teresa said has no self-interest whatsoever in it.

What kind of a person might this be? How might this person be living? Most importantly, this person is true to themselves. One of the things we notice when we look around at the saints, those great figures that the Church has picked out for us as the models, the examples of Christianity – each one of them is different, each one of them is unique. None of them is a carbon copy of the other. But not only are they unique, there's an originality to each one of them. Somehow there is something new, there is something fresh, something new is being created here. We touch something of the divine in these people's capacity to do real good. The phrase I would use, first to describe what it is that I am trying to speak about at the moment, is *the fullness of human and Christian maturity*. As human beings we grow through relationship, our relationships are essential to our growth, from the time we are tiny little babies it's through relating with others that we grow, but the greatest relationship the human being is capable of, is given the capacity for, is a relationship with God, and it is God who has to put that capacity into us. We can't make it ourselves, we can't invent it ourselves, we can't put up our ladder to heaven as they tried to do in the Bible, no, you can't do that. God gives us the capacity to relate to him, it's a grace of God; it's a gift of God.

It is beautifully put at the beginning of John's Gospel, in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, *To those who did accept him, he gave the power to become children of God*. Note how that is put: to those who accept Jesus Christ, who enter into a relationship with him, he gives them the power, the capacity to grow into being children of God. We grow into it, there is a growing, there is a maturing that has to take place. The relationship with God is the greatest relationship any human being can enter into and as it requires gifts that are beyond just what it normally means to be human, then this must lead to a level of human maturity that is otherwise unobtainable. Dimensions of the human emerge here, and the Bible and so many spiritual writers down through the centuries have tried to express this in different ways, because it is elusive and it is unique to each individual. But there are certain things that one sees, so I am going to pick out a few of these characteristics. The most obvious and fundamental one is the

person's capacity to love, and that capacity to love is without limits. Upon the Cross, Jesus expressed it, *Forgive them Lord, they don't know what they're doing*. In other words, he was looking at these people who committed such a terrible crime against him and caused him such terrible suffering, he can see them as God sees them – they don't understand, they are to be forgiven. He can reach out in love to them, *Today you will be with me in paradise*. He can love, that is the greatest of freedoms, that is this limitless capacity to love, that's a characteristic of these people. There is a selflessness, a capacity to reach out and relate to others, to forgive. The saints never condemn another person. Not only does the saint always forgive and have an infinite capacity to forgive, they also see themselves as sinners.

We see this in the writings of St Teresa. She is forever speaking about herself as a sinner. But where are the crimes? What great crimes did she commit? None. It's not about the size of the crime, it is the sense that this is God's mercy. When she's writing the *Book of her Life* she describes it as the Book of God's Mercy. The saint knows that this is not an achievement of theirs, it is total gift. There is this great sense of gratitude, they're always giving thanks, there is always so much to be grateful for. Gratitude, a wonderful characteristic of the person who is living a mature Christian and spiritual life. Gratitude, a love for all, and particularly for sinners. You will never hear the saint condemn another person or judge another person. St Teresa and indeed so many others tell us that the saints have a particular love for those who do them harm or persecute them, just like Jesus on the Cross. They seem to have a particular love for these people, and St Teresa tells us it's not rational, it doesn't come from something the person has thought through – they discover it, it's like another gift that is discovered within. Only through the situation they're in do they discover it, this capacity to love.

There is a humility in these people. They don't set out to stand out, though sometimes we might get a glimpse of something in somebody, might just get a sense of something, but they're not out to stand out, they are humble people, they are the most human of people, because this is what God has called us to be, to be human. St Teresa tells us we are not angels, we are not called to be angels, we are called to live human life well, that's what God has created us for and called us to and that is what Jesus Christ tells us and shows us in his life. What does it mean to be human? What is human life about? We become more human and more engaged in human life. That's what one finds about these people. A lovely phrase that John of the Cross uses, that these people have the wisdom, or they can penetrate the deep secrets of God and human life. They understand human life, they are the people of great wisdom, people who understand what it means to be human, not in some intellectual sense, but they have just got an instinct. They are at peace with who they are, at peace in their own lives, in their own skin, they are at peace with this world, they are at peace with the people around them, they're not judging or looking down on people, they're at peace.

And there is a joy in them. Again this is something that so many of the saints comment upon and it's not rational, but it's real. They can be in the midst of the greatest suffering and be experiencing and living the greatest of joy at the same time. Edith Stein tells us that that is the life of the Christian, that is what it means to live a true Christian life. To be able to be in the midst of human suffering wherever it is, to be able to walk the roads of this world, to walk alongside suffering, broken humanity

and be filled with joy all the time, to be filled with that joy. It's a paradox, it's a contradiction, but it's what she tells us the real life of the Christian is. That's what human and Christian maturity is, being at peace with what it means to be human, being at peace with every dimension of human life, to have that peace, to have that joy, to live it and to be able to communicate it. That's a sense of what Christian maturity is about.

But there's another word that is also critical to all of this and the first place that this really comes to us is in Mark's Gospel, the first of the gospels to be written. And there, Jesus tells us over and over again and shows and demonstrates to us that he has come to serve. We see this on Holy Thursday with the washing of the feet. Saint Teresa in the Seventh Dwelling Place of her *Interior Castle* tells us that the whole purpose of prayer is works, works, works; to be able to serve, to serve like the one who became the servant of all, Jesus Christ. To have that capacity to serve, that freedom to serve, that generosity, that love – that's the Jesus of the Gospels, *I came to serve and not to be served*. That is something that people with real human and Christian maturity seem to instinctively understand, not in some rational way, but as an instinct. Because a person with this kind of maturity, they don't know they have it, they don't think about this, they don't advert to it. It's wonderfully put in Matthew's gospel in that great story of the Last Judgment, and Jesus says to them, *You visited the prisoners, you looked after the poor*, and they say, *When? we never...* but of course they did, but they never even thought about it, it just became natural, instinctive to them, they were just being themselves. And that's what spiritual maturity is about; it's just being oneself. When one really is oneself, when a human being is the person God has created them to be, then there is no limit to their capacity to love, to serve, to reach out to the other, to listen to the other, to forgive, to accept, to be open, because their way of thinking is that of Jesus Christ, which is what it means to be Christian. So we get a sense of this kind of grown up, adult, human and Christian life, that God has created us, – to use the words he spoke to Jeremiah – before we were formed in the womb we were created for this, destined for it, it is our identity, it is who we are.

We set up obstacles. Only with the grace of God can these obstacles be pulled down. We can't do it ourselves, we try to, and we need to try to, but it's only with God's help, it is only with his grace, with his mercy, with his forgiveness. So, this journey of spiritual growth is a journey of growing, of healing, of forgiveness, purification, transformation. It is a complete change of life, of attitude; it is living life in a whole new way. And to go back to the prayer that I began with from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this is what Paul wants for the Christians of Ephesus, what he wants for all of us. For Paul it was tragic for someone to become a Christian but never really see what Christianity was about, never really see the potential that there is here, the invitation that this is, the wonderful deep, mature, free, joyful, peaceful life that we could be living.

We're only at the beginning, but it's not a difficult road, it only requires a person to really want it, desire it. Of course that desire itself is put down by God. It requires a person to say *yes*, to have that level of commitment, a commitment to prayer, a commitment to really seeking and searching for God, an openness to what is really happening in our lives, to become real lovers and seekers of truth. God will help us to pull away all the masks and the false lives that we live. We have to have that courage, that sense of adventure to really walk the walk that he is bringing us on, not

the one we think we should be on, or the one that we think is the best one or the right one. The life that God has given to each one of us is the right life for each one of us, the families he has given to each of us are the right families, the gifts and opportunities he has given to us are the right ones for us. None of us is in the wrong place. We are in the right place and he is calling us to be in an even more right place. God has given us everything that we need, without exception, to grow into the fullness of who he has created us to be. There are no exceptions. The fullness of human and Christian maturity is not some elite place, it is not some rarefied atmosphere that only certain people can breathe in and live in. It is the most down-to-earth, the most authentic, most true, natural way to live human life. Not only is it within all our capacities, but it is the one source of real freedom, joy, peace, happiness well-being – everything is there that we long for. We can be filled with the utter fullness of God.

So that's what we conclude with. We pray, in the words of St Paul, that we may all be filled with the utter fullness of God, that the grace that God has given to each one of us may not be ignored, may not be left there, but that it may become more and more alive in us, that we may grow, that we may mature, that we may become great human beings, great Christians, people who can do great good, that can really make this world a better place. Amen