

A Reflection on the Teaching of Teresa of Avila

October 15th



For many of us, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is a source of great inspiration. Because of the way she wrote about her experiences of spiritual discovery and about how these related to the realities of her ordinary life, it is possible to know her as a *close friend*. For some of us she is one of the most dependable friends of all.

She lived during times of great *conflict*, not least in the Church. Witness to the values of the Gospel was often *compromised* and *confused*. This makes her an especially valuable friend to those of us who continue to seek God *now*.

One of the comparisons which Teresa likes to make is between our own selves and the characters of Mary and Martha in the Gospel (Luke 10.38-42; John 11.1-44; John 12.1-8). We tend to think that some people are like *Martha*, always busy and with a tendency to become worried and stressed; others are like *Mary*, reflective and able to find the peace of God even in the midst of anxiety. The two sisters do not always *understand* each other: sometimes they are *deeply antagonistic* against each other. We witness this in our own interactions, especially with those who are more like the *other* sister from the one who resembles our own self. But Teresa thinks that we have elements of *both sisters* within our own self: all of us can be productive and busy, sometimes hassled and anxious; all of us have the capacity to quieten ourselves and to know the stillness of God (think of Psalm 46.10). Teresa encourages us to befriend both *Martha and Mary*, especially as they represent tendencies within our own selves. She urges us to hand over to God our capacity for worry, nurturing a spiritual equilibrium within ourselves which is guided by Jesus' friendship with the sisters in the Gospel. This way we begin to know God's comfort even as we attend to all the things which need to be done, and which might otherwise distract us or overwhelm us.

Teresa encourages us not to be unrealistically hard on ourselves. Some of our struggle is because we live in difficult times: it is nothing to do with

any weakness within our own selves. Teresa knows that it is a deep-rooted human tendency to be self-critical: but she knows that we make excuses for ourselves too – and one of Teresa’s main themes is our growth in self-knowledge, self-understanding, and honesty about ourselves. In this way she reflects a strong tendency in the spiritual life of her time: Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) similarly commends a meditative reflection on the text of the Gospel itself so as to nurture within ourselves a sense of *being present with Jesus Christ* in his interactions with the people amongst whom he lived. It is a way of allowing the Gospel to become *real* to us – and especially for our *living friendship with Jesus Christ* to be real.

All of this takes place in ‘the real world’. Neither Teresa nor Ignatius are writing about dreamy escapism or a denial of the realities of our day-to-day lives. Another focus of Teresa’s advice is that we must be patient with ourselves, understanding of our own foibles, as well as those of other people. This is the beginning of a genuine *humility* of spirit (consider the *Beatitudes*, Matthew 5.3, 5, 8): the whole of the moral and spiritual life can be understood as an increasing *simplicity of spirit*, as we become less and less preoccupied with the complications of *our own selves*, and more and more *open to God*.

This process of gradual spiritual *sifting and refinement* will require us to face things within ourselves which are uncomfortable. ‘*When the soul is strong,*’ Teresa says, ‘*God will lead it into the desert.*’ This is not something for us to fear, but a sign that we are being weaned off *immaturity*: we are being *tested and stretched* so that we become truly reflective of the beauty of God. When things seem hard is precisely the time when our greatest spiritual awakening and progress can take place. It allows us to perceive the Love of God *here and now*, instead of longing for things to be other than they are; it is a recognition that God is with us *come what may*.

All of this is summarized in a famous prayer which puts Teresa’s spiritual understanding in very simple terms. For some of us, this prayer guides the whole shape of our lives:

‘Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on the world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.’