

## 2. Heart speaking to heart

In this exploration of prayer, as noted in the Preface, I will be drawing on the teaching of two sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite saints, Teresa of Jesus (Teresa of Avila) and John of the Cross. Both have been recognised by the Church as masters, especially in their teaching on prayer, and they will be our main guides as we pursue the most important journey that any of us can undertake in this life: the journey into ever deeper intimacy with God. This journey encompasses every dimension of our lives, for, in the words of Jesus quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy, we are called to love God ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’(Mark 12:30). While the journey does encompass every dimension of our lives, here our focus will be on the interior dimension, on the inner journey to our own heart and so to the Heart of God: the journey of prayer in which Heart speaks to heart. Teresa speaks of prayer as: ‘intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with the One who we know loves us’(Life 8.5). ‘Look at Him’, she writes, ‘He never takes his eyes off you’(Way of Perfection 26.3). John reminds us that ‘the language which God hears best is silent love’(Maxims on Love 53).

From the outset, it is essential that we expect prayer to be mysterious. No two people pray the same. No one can tell us how to pray, any more than anyone can tell us how to love, for prayer is something unique to each person. Each of us has to find his or her own experience of prayer. At the same time there are some general principles which can guide us, and we can learn much from the teaching of those like Teresa and John who have journeyed in prayer and have been inspired to share their experience.

God is encountered at the ‘heart’ of creation, but remains ‘beyond’ everything

God is the Creator who holds in existence every created being. Everything that exists is a limited expression of the being of God. God is the ‘heart’ of the universe. Just as in an orchestra each instrument gives expression in its own way to the music which is heard and enjoyed through its playing, so every created thing expresses some aspect of God. Just as in a stained glass window each pane reveals a different aspect of the light, so each creature reveals something of the Creator. We would not see the window if there was no light. At the same time the light itself is visible only as it is filtered through the various colours of the window. So it is that God is seen ‘through the things God has made’ (Romans 1:20).

To ‘experience God’, therefore, we must journey to the heart of the world and to our own heart. However, we must not forget that we cannot confine God within the limits of the world. There is always more to God than we can experience or know. God is the ‘heart’ of everything, but God is also the ‘beyond’. Our experience of God is always an experience of a mysterious presence inviting us to the heart of reality, but the closer we come to the heart of any person or any thing, the more we find ourselves drawn beyond into mystery. The journey of prayer is a journey to the Heart of God, and so into a ‘beyond’ that is limitless. It is a personal journey, and it is essentially mysterious.

It is important to realize that when we experience movements of thought and feeling that engage our yearning for communion with God it is our own thoughts and our own feelings that we directly experience. At the same time, however, we are experiencing God who communicates with us in and through the movements of our soul.

It is important to realise that when we experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience. At the same time, however, we are experiencing God who reveals Godself to us in them and attracts us through them.

It is the same with the words of the Bible. What we directly experience are the words written by the actual historical people who were inspired to write by God's Spirit. In reading their words, however, we experience the transcendent God who inspired them and who speaks to us through them.

The inner movements of our soul and the outer realities that we experience engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, reveal something of the beauty, and participate in something of the goodness of God. They participate in God, but they are not God. 'God' is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. 'God' is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns to know and to be in communion with this God. However, since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in all these experiences.

Our experience of God will be real only if the communion is between our own real selves and the real God. We spoke of the 'real' as distinct from the 'false' God in the previous chapter. By the 'real self' I mean the person I actually am with all my gifts and limitations, as distinct from the 'false self' that I might identify with because of the expectations of others or the unreal image of myself that I have acquired through often unconscious adapting to the image projected by people who are significant to me but who have not really known me. Sorting out who I really am as distinct from who I think I am is something that goes on all our lives.

We must not limit God to anything smaller than the whole of our experience. The universe is one because it is held together by the 'gravity' of grace, the love-attraction that explains the inter-connectedness of the universe. This means that everything that we experience outside ourselves can become for us a 'Word' of God through which God communicates Godself to us. Our inner communion with God can become more and more a sharing in God's 'Spirit'. When the outer 'Word' and the inner 'Spirit' vibrate together to the same harmony we are in communion with God. This is the experience of prayer.

### The Necessity of Prayer

Prayer is essential, for while communion with God involves every dimension of our being, if we are not in touch with God at our own centre we will miss God's presence in creation and we will find ourselves dissipated and distracted in the whirl of events that happen around us and to us. It is important that our heart be awake and sensitive to the divine presence. Discovering God within and being sensitive to the movement of God's Spirit in our minds and hearts makes possible a more intimate interior communion with God. It also makes possible a closer communion with God in our outer experiences that become for us a 'Word' of God.

Do you sometimes feel distracted, out of touch, out of sorts, lost? It can be a vague feeling that we deal with, or rather try to avoid, by plunging into some activity that pushes the feeling into the background. The problem is that when that activity is over we have to find some other activity to keep the feeling at bay. It continues to haunt us whenever we are not busy. The truth is that we cannot sort things out by avoiding them. We have to dare to get in touch with our heart and seek the help we need to really deal with what is going on there. If we want to live our life we have no choice but to do this. Did not Jesus say: 'What is the point of winning the whole world, if you forfeit your life? Is there anything which is worth exchanging for life?'(Mark 8:36-37). As individuals and as a culture we can be quite brilliant in our ability to discover, use, and even, to a degree, understand the external world. How good are we at coming to know and stay in touch with ourselves? Our deeds, our involvement, our engagement with the world and with other people are truly ours only when what we do comes from within. To discover ourselves and to live authentic lives we must undertake an inner journey, a journey into the realms of the soul. We have to stop giving in to distraction. We have to stop being too busy, for we will end up destroying our heart. We have to stop heeding the many voices that call us without caring for our soul. We have to stop running away from our soul/heart. In other words, we must commit ourselves to a life of prayer.

### Obedience

Prayer, like any personal communion, does not happen in a vacuum. Hence in Part One of this book we will be looking at the kind of life that is necessary if we are genuine in desiring to pray. However, it is essential to sound a caution. Though we begin here, we must not forget that prayer never begins with us. Prayer is always a response. We would not even want to pray unless we had experienced being drawn to pray by a grace coming to us from God. In the words of Saint Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till it rests in you'(Confessions 1.1). It is for this reason that both Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross insist on the primary importance of obedience. As the word itself indicates, obedience is essentially a profound 'listening' (from the Latin 'audiens') that comes from close contact (from the Latin 'ob').

Obedience is primary because the goal of our life is not prayer itself. Rather, it is communion with God, which is what happens when we respond to God's grace. If God draws us into prayer, it is in prayer that we will experience communion with God. If God draws us into action, it is in action that we will experience and express our communion. Our central concern, therefore, must be to be attentive to God's will in our lives and to obey God's inspiration, wherever it takes us and whatever the cost. Teresa writes:

Jesus does not want us, if we truly love him, to take any other path than the one he took: being obedient unto death (*Foundations* 5.3).

The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our souls so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realise that God wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might (*Foundations* 5.10).

Provided that we are clear about the fact that it is obedience that is fundamental, Teresa insists that it is essential that we spend some time alone with God in prayer. If we find that all our time is spent in doing what we think is God's will, but in such a way that we never have time for prayer, we are certainly deceiving ourselves:

We must be careful, in doing good works, even those of obedience and charity, not to fail to have frequent inward recourse to our God (*Foundations* 5.17).

At the same time, she insists:

Believe me, it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings a soul benefit. When we spend our time in good works, it is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God (*Foundations* 5.17).

We will begin, therefore, in the following chapter, by reflecting on the virtue of obedience. As Teresa reminds us: ‘There are many paths along this way of the Spirit’ (*Foundations* 5.1). What matters is that we follow the path along which God draws us. No prayer has value that does not flow from obedience to God’s inspiration.

#### Love for others, detachment and humility

Teresa insists on these virtues as essential to a life of prayer.

There are three things which are very important in helping us to preserve peace, both inward and outward. One of these is love for each other; the second, detachment from created things; the third, true humility, which is the most important of the three and embraces all the rest (*The Way of Perfection* 4.4).

I cannot see how humility can exist without love, or love without humility, and it is impossible for these two virtues to exist save where there is great detachment from all created things (*The Way of Perfection* 16.1).

She is not speaking of any kind of love that we might have for others. She insists that the love that we offer be in response to grace and in obedience to God’s inspiration. It is the same with detachment. It is not for us to decide what we are to be detached from. We are to attend to God’s call and the many ways in which God reveals God’s will to us. Detachment is to be in response to God’s love. The same must be said of humility. True humility is not discovered by looking down on ourselves. Rather it is the fruit of the self-knowledge that comes through seeing ourselves as God sees us. Teresa devotes chapters 4 to 15 of *The Way of Perfection* to an examination of these three virtues.

The quality of our prayer is in direct proportion to the quality of these virtues in our lives. The discipline that we acquire in exercising these virtues prepares the ground for whatever gift of prayer God chooses to offer us. After reflecting on obedience, therefore, we will look in turn at love for others, detachment, and humility. We will then reflect upon our sharing in Jesus’ prayer, on the relationship between holiness and prayer, and on silence and faith as being essential to a life of prayer. This will complete Part One and prepare us to listen to John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus as they guide us in Part Two in ways of responding to the call inviting us into ever more intimate communion with God.