

08. The teaching of Teresa of Jesus on the early stages of prayer

We have just been looking at some ways of praying which may prove helpful as we set out on a life of commitment to prayer. Here we will be covering some of the same ground as we focus attention on the advice given to beginners by Teresa of Jesus.

Prayer, for Teresa, is essentially something very simple. She speaks of it as ‘an exercise of love’ (*Life* 7.12), as ‘an intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us’ (*Life* 8.5). She speaks of the soul, the heart, as ‘a paradise where the Lord finds delight’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.1). ‘In its centre take place very secret exchanges between God and the soul’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.3).

Like every other master of the art of prayer, Teresa teaches that to live authentic lives we must undertake an inner journey, a journey into the depths of our being. We must learn to pray. She sees that one basic reason for our neglect of prayer is our failure to realise that we are held in existence by a God of love and that we can only be ourselves by being in communion with God:

‘Since we do not prize ourselves and one another as creatures deserve, being made in the image of God, we do not understand the deep secrets that lie within’ (*Interior Castle* VII.1.1).

We find ourselves in discovering God, and we discover God in our heart. To discover God we must undertake a journey to our centre. This will enlighten us as to how to journey to the heart of the people and the world that are loved by God, and of which we are part. In prayer we learn to listen to the feelings, the images, the thoughts, the longings that we find in this inner world, and we learn to discern when these are coming from our connection with God and when they are arising from other forces that are resisting the attraction of grace. It is only when finally all our feelings, all our thoughts, all our dreams, all our creative energy, all of loving comes from our own authentic centre, that is to say, from our communion with God, that we experience the full freedom of being ourselves.

There is nothing so personal or so demanding as prayer. We should not expect it to be otherwise. To enjoy profound communion with the Source of our being will require of us much discipline and detachment and a humble and alert listening to the movements of our heart that are being inspired by God. To enjoy communion with God we must set out in a determined way and persevere.

We are concerned here only with the advice that Teresa gives us as we begin our inner journey. In these early stages of prayer we are responding to grace, but we have not yet surrendered to love. Teresa guides us as to what *we* can do to progress in prayer. At a later stage we will listen to her as she speaks of what happens when we allow God’s love to rule our lives.

Before we follow her as she guides us through the kinds of prayer-experiences that are typical of the early stages of our journey let us establish some basic principles.

Firstly, it is important not to forget that, since prayer is yielding to the attraction of grace and allowing ourselves to be drawn into loving communion with God, the best prayer is the prayer which God is offering. Let us gratefully accept and treasure whatever communion God is offering us now, for God knows our present capacity to respond.

Secondly, Teresa reminds us that the value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our humility and especially our love: ‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer’ (*Interior Castle* IV.2.3).

Thirdly, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion. If we continue to respond to God’s offer, we will enjoy this communion.

Fourthly, whatever happens we must not abandon prayer: 'Whatever wrong you who practise prayer might do, you must not abandon prayer' (*Life* 8.5). If we abandon it, we must start again:

'There is no other remedy for the evil of giving up prayer than to begin again' (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

Fifthly, we should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression: 'There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning' (*Life* 13.15).

Finally, while there is some value in studying prayer 'from the outside', we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying. If we are not praying, we can learn what God is doing in people's lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we cannot really understand Teresa (or any other teacher of prayer) except to the extent that she helps to shed light on our own personal experience of prayer:

'As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience' (*Life* 10.9).

With these basic principles in mind let us commence our examination of Teresa's advice to beginners in prayer. Using an image that was familiar in sixteenth century Spain, Teresa likens the soul to a castle. God dwells in the central chambers, drawing us into communion. She pictures the inner journey of prayer as one in which we penetrate from the outer rooms through to the centre, following the attraction of love inviting us to be at home there with God. She speaks in terms of a journey of seven stages. Our concern here is with her first three stages.

1. At the entrance to the outermost chambers, we are beginning to be open to God's grace and to take both prayer and the spiritual life seriously, but we are still basically self-centred. We still think in terms of what *we* want and what *we* can do and how *we* can respond to grace. We have not yet surrendered to grace. Our love is still weak. We still have very little insight into sin or grace and so we have little self-knowledge or knowledge of God. We are spiritually quite anaemic.

To begin the journey we must turn away from serious sin. We must listen to our longing and resolutely open the gate of the castle. Teresa speaks of the absolute horror which people who are beginning to pray should have of living in sin, for it blocks out the light of God and leaves our souls lost in darkness. To move on we will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back. This will vary from person to person and according to each one's state of life.

Teresa insists:

'The gate of entry into the interior castle is prayer' (*Interior Castle* I.1.7).

Once we decide to enter the castle we find ourselves in the first stage or outer chambers (called 'mansions' or 'dwelling places') of the castle. People who are at this first stage are still leading very distracted lives, caught up in the pursuit of trivial pleasures, concerned with their own reputation and honour. Their lives are rather superficial, with a lot of pretence. But

'they have good desires and once in a while they entrust themselves to the Lord and reflect on who they are, though in a hurried way' (*Interior Castle* I.1.8).

The light coming from God, who is in the innermost mansion in the centre, reaches these outer rooms, but is very dim and rarely can we either hear God speaking to us or experience ourselves responding to God.

In the early stages of a genuine prayer-life (indeed at every stage of the journey), Teresa would have us

'set our eyes on Christ, our good' (*Interior Castle* I.2.11).

This is why Gospel meditation (see the fifth reflection) is so important. Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge through love. He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our true selves (we will return to this in reflection ten). In Jesus we see what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. We see also who we are called to be. We see, by comparison, how sinful we are. This acts as a warning. It nurtures humility and safeguards us from thinking that any value we have comes from ourselves. It reinforces our longing to gaze on God, the sole source of all good. Teresa also insists that if we are serious about beginning the inner journey, we must be attentive to loving others.

2. Teresa has advice also for those who have passed through the gate into the second of her seven stages. She is speaking here of those who are committed to prayer and are beginning to be sensitive to God's word coming to them in the events of their life, through sermons and other people's sharing of their spiritual experiences, through spiritual reading and the joys and the trials of life. At this stage, however, we find that we are still not avoiding occasions of sin and we find ourselves slipping back.

She stresses the importance of trying to live a virtuous life in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence. We must be genuine in wanting to resist temptation to sin. We must not be looking for consolations, but learn to embrace the cross. Teresa's advice includes a warning to be very careful not to be too self-reliant. This does not mean that we should be overly reliant on others and fail to appreciate the gift of God that we are, as well as the gifts that God has given us, but it does mean to keep alert to the truth that all we are and all we have is gift. We are to listen to Jesus reminding us to become like a child in recognising our dependence on God and relying on God's grace:

'Trust in God's mercy, not at all in yourself' (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

Teresa describes a method of prayer that is suitable at this stage (see *Way of Perfection* 26.1). She suggests that we examine our conscience and express sorrow for sin, and that we make the sign of the cross and remember that Jesus, our companion, is beside us. 'Look on Him and reflect'. We cannot love what we do not know, and at this stage there is still a lot to discover about Jesus and about the values lived by the saints as well as the teachings of the Christian community. Teresa accepts the appropriateness of applying our mind at this stage, but has the following advice:

'At this stage people work almost continually with the intellect, engaging in discursive thought and meditation. And they do well because nothing further has been given to them, although it would be good if they engaged for a while in making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in God's goodness, that God is who God is, and in desiring God's honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakeners of the will. Such souls would be well advised when the Lord gives them these acts not to abandon them for the sake of finishing the usual meditation' (*Interior Castle* IV.1.6).

Different temperaments need to find different ways to meditate. In every case she insists that what matters in prayer is our love:

'Not everyone has the kind of imagination that makes meditating possible, but everyone is capable of loving ... Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much' (*Foundations* 5.2).

Teresa describes her prayer when she found that she was unable to engage her mind. There are close parallels here with the kind of imaginative entering into a Gospel scene described in an earlier reflection.

'This is the method I then used. Since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good - in my opinion - to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and

afflicted, as someone in need, He had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these. The scene of his prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me. I strove to be his companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but I recall that I never dared to actually do it, since my sins appeared to me so serious. I remained with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me' (*Life* 9:4).

'If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul. Having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces by the great love He bears you. So much suffering: persecuted by some, spat on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone that you can console each other. Or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn't even let Him take a breath. He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears. He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours, merely because you yourselves go to Him to be consoled, and you turn your head to look at Him.

'O Lord of the world, my true Spouse! Are you so in need, my Lord and my Love, that you would want to receive such poor company as mine, for I see by your expression that you have been consoled by me? Well then, how is it Lord that the angels leave You and that even Your Father does not console You? If it is true, Lord, that you want to endure everything for me, what is this that I suffer for You? Of what am I complaining? I am already ashamed, since I have seen You in such a condition. I desire to suffer, Lord, all the trials that come to me and esteem them as a great good enabling me to imitate You in something. Let us walk together, Lord. Wherever You go, I will go; whatever You suffer, I will suffer' (*Way of Perfection* 26:5-6).

3. In Teresa's scheme, the third stage of prayer is as far as we can go in response to grace while

'reason is still very much in control. Love has not yet reached the point of overwhelming reason' (*Interior Castle*, III.2.7).

She speaks of those who have won the battle faced in stage two of their inner journey

'through perseverance and the mercy of God. They have got through the first difficulties ... They long not to offend God, even guarding themselves against venial sins. They are fond of doing penance and setting aside periods for recollection. They spend their time well in carrying out works of charity towards their neighbours ... There is no reason why entrance into the final [the seventh] dwelling place should be denied these people, nor will the Lord deny them this entrance if they desire it, for such a desire is an excellent way to prepare oneself so that every favour may be granted' (*Interior Castle* III.1.1 and 5).

One of the trials that can be hardest to bear is that of distractions and lack of feeling in prayer. We will return to this subject in the next reflection. The trials of life, including the struggle with the disappointments of distractions, have brought these people to a high degree of self-knowledge and so to humility and fear of the Lord. The distress that accompanies this self-knowledge is a sign that those at this stage are still a long way from being perfect. Self-love needs more purifying (III.2). We are to be like the silk-worm, working to die to ourselves. We are to 'care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord' (III.2.8). Teresa continues to insist on the importance of conforming our will to that of God: 'What matters is to strive to practise virtues, surrender one's will to God in everything, bring one's life into accord with what God ordains for it, and desire that God's will not ours be done' (III.2.6). 'Study diligently how to be prompt in obedience' (III.2.12).

She recommends a very simple form of prayer, the kind of prayer that we touched on earlier:

‘Collect your faculties [memory, imagination, mind and will] together and enter within yourself to be with your God’ (*Way of Perfection* 28.4).

‘I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning your eyes towards the Lord? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him. God never takes his eyes off you’ (*Way of Perfection* 26.3).

‘It is good to reflect for a time ... but we must sometimes remain by his side with our minds hushed in silence. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble ourselves before him. Delight in him’ (*Life* 13.22).

‘You need never withdraw from this loving communion ... Go within yourself even during your ordinary occupations’ (*Way of Perfection*, 29.5).

It may not be at all easy to recollect oneself in this way and it will require discipline and persistence. However it is important to remember that recollection cannot be forced. ‘but must come gently’ (*Interior Castle* II,1). As soon as we find ourselves alone we should seek Jesus and converse with him. Teresa suggests that an image of Jesus might help:

‘You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of the Lord - one that you like - not to wear around your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to him. He will tell you what to say’ (*Way of Perfection*, 26).

This Prayer of Recollection can extend over the entire day, helped by little reminders, by reflective spiritual reading, by vocal prayers, by participating in the liturgy and by meditation.