



Friday 15 Oct 2021

Saint Teresa of Jesus, Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Gospel

Jn 15:1-8

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

All who live in me, and I in them, bear fruit.

Jesus said to his disciples:

'I am the true vine,
and my Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in me that bears no fruit
he cuts away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
to make it bear even more.
You are pruned already,
by means of the word that I have spoken to you.
Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.
As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself,
but must remain part of the vine,
neither can you unless you remain in me.
I am the vine,
you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,
bears fruit in plenty;
for cut off from me you can do nothing.
Anyone who does not remain in me
is like a branch that has been thrown away
– he withers;
these branches are collected and thrown on the fire,
and they are burnt.
If you remain in me
and my words remain in you,
you may ask what you will
and you shall get it.
It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit,
and then you will be my disciples.'

Homily Saint Teresa of Jesus, of Avila. Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Fr Graham Fullick

Saint Teresa whose Memorial we keep to-day (15 October) was born 28 March, 1515 in Avila Spain. She is venerated as both a Virgin Consecrated Religious of the Carmelite Order and as a Doctor of the Church. Doctors are the theological greats of the Church. There are only 36 of them through history and St. Teresa is one of four women, three of whom (like her) are nuns and one of whom is a consecrated virgin. She is the Patroness of Headache-Sufferers. At the age of 19 she made her Religious profession in November 1534. Various her early commitment and character as a nun is described as “mediocre” or “leading a good religious life [but] certain faults still adhered to her”. This would seem to be damning with faint praise. It tells us that convent religious life, (or priesthood) is not a destination of holiness, but a mere starting point.

St. Teresa certainly launched off from that point in her 40's, but as she writes, it was not by her merits, but by the revelation of Jesus. She was given visions, locutions, raptures, levitations, spiritual marriage to Jesus and the transverberation of her heart. The saint felt the piercing of her heart by God's love. After her death, her heart was removed and was found to have a hole in it. She is called “___ of Jesus” because she was given to be so close to Jesus as to share in His sufferings. On these St. Teresa wrote:-

“A man can bear all things provided he possesses Christ Jesus dwelling within him as his friend and affectionate guide.” (*Life*, Ch. 22, 6-7.14).

“All things fail, but You, O Lord of them all, never fail. Little is the suffering that You allow to those who love You... You seem, O Lord, to give extreme tests to those who love You, but only that, in the extremity of their trials, they may learn the greater extremity of Your love.” (*Life*, Ch. 25).

Oh that to-day we would have this realisation of suffering as not something to be sought in a sado-masochistic way, or willed by God, but as something that God Himself underwent in complete solidarity with our fallen human nature for the perfect salvation of those who would transcend it even as they undergo physical and spiritual travails for our and others' sanctification in the pathos of the human condition.

In a world seeking induced death (euthanasia [*sic*], suicide and murder) as a cure for suffering, the Christian seeks the consolation of God in suffering and death as just a release not from suffering but into God's light and inner life where the soul meets its Originator and Destiny. If God has “abandoned us” as Jesus said “my God why have you abandoned me” on the Cross, He was simultaneously admitting “Father into Your hands I commit My Spirit”. In suffering we empty out all to God who fills all with perfect love and grace. When we have self-detachment, moving from “woe is me, me, me” to “Great is Thou”, then we gain deeper knowledge of God, first in darkness, but then the intellect starts to catch up with the higher intellect of the spiritual and in God's light we see light. The beauty of St. Teresa is that over 400 years from her death she is still teaching us about the meaning and purpose of life as a Saint and Doctor alive in God in the Communion of Saints. Temporal sufferings are little compared to eternal union with God. That is the beatific vision, some of which she was accorded in this life.

One of the most beautiful writings of St. Teresa is on the Blessed Sacrament in the Mass. You may often find it as a reflection, or for prayers after Mass in the back of a large devotional Missal or on a holy card. St Teresa wrote:-

“The Lord had given this person [herself] such a lively faith that when she heard people say they wished they had lived when Christ walked on this earth, she would smile to herself, for she knew that we have Him as truly with us in the Most Holy

Sacrament as people had Him then, and she would wonder what more they could possibly want.” (*Peers*, Vol. II, p. 147).

Perhaps her greatest works (apart from her *Autobiography* or *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* which she wrote under obedience) are *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle* or *The Mansions*. They are certainly on any seminary Spiritual Director’s reading list for those discerning the true meaning of a Christian vocation. *The Way of Perfection* is a reflection to her own sisters in Carmel on the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, prayers and reparations for those who have fallen away from the Faith and on the “Our Father” and three chapters on the sublime Holy Eucharist, her most eloquent prose.

On seeing a holy soul like St. Teresa’s, we are tempted to think that she is beyond us and greater than us. She is however renowned for her common sense. “Common sense canonised” is one of her names. One thing she used to say was “God deliver me from gloomy saints”. I do not know if she read too much from the mouths of Job’s comforters! Whilst the saint was afforded revelations, she observed wryly that “you will scarcely be believed by any confessor...they seem to be less afraid at hearing you say the devil has suggested blasphemous temptations to you than...if they hear you say...that Christ has shown Himself to you on the Cross.” St. Teresa was humble and teachable enough to know her own limitations. While her confessors assumed her to be strong in all things because of the Divine favours she had received, she wrote that she was “as regards virtues and mortification, still quite a beginner”. (*Life*, Ch. 23). Therefore she implored her confessor priests to help her gradually on the path of sanctification of the whole person. We can see a “holy person” and think that it is all easy for them and difficult for us. Spiritual comparisons are never good when we look askance at others. Before God we all need improvement and are offered improvement under God’s gaze of the Holy Spirit. Where a person is afforded a deep spiritual life, the devil seeks to drill deeper and sends jealous people. The devil is jealous for souls just like the Lord is ardent for the salvation of our souls.

There are many mystical writings of this “Doctor of Prayer”. We need then to sum up her life. With the direction of St. Peter of Alcantara, St. Teresa undertook the great task of reforming the Order of Carmelites and restoring its primitive observance. With St. John of the Cross (himself “Doctor of Mystical Theology”), she succeeded in establishing the reform of the Discalced Carmelites. Before her death in 1582, thirty-two monasteries of the Reformed Rule had been established, of which seventeen were convents of nuns.

Blessed be God in His angels and in His saints. St. Teresa of Jesus pray for us.

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