

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

St Teresa of Avila says, in the reading we have at Vigils for her feast on the 15th of October: “I can see clearly... that it is God’s will, if we are to please Him... that this should be done through Christ’s most sacred Humanity in whom, His Majesty said, He is well pleased... it is by this door that we must enter, if we wish His Sovereign Master to show us great secrets. Therefore... even if you reach the summit of contemplation [you] must seek no other way: that way alone is safe. It is through this Lord of ours that all blessings come. He will show us the way; we must look at His life - that is the best pattern.” (Autobiography ch.22).

I would like to juxtapose to this passage of the Autobiography of St Teresa a passage from Julian of Norwich’s Revelations of Divine Love (ch.19). “In this time I would have looked away from the cross; yet I dared not. For I knew well that whilst I beheld the Cross I was sure and safe; therefore I would not consent to put my soul in peril. For apart from the Cross was no surety against the fear of fiends. Then I had an offer in my reason: it was said to me as though by a friend: ‘Look up to heaven to his Father’. Then through the faith that I felt I saw well that there was nothing between the Cross and heaven that could have dis-eased me. Here then I must need look up, or else answer. So I answered inwardly with all the might of my soul and say: ‘Nay, I cannot, for Thou art my heaven.’ Thus I said because I would not. For I would rather have been in that pain until doomsday than have come to heaven otherwise than by Him... Thus was I taught to choose Jesus as my heaven, whom I saw at that time only in pain. No other heaven than Jesus pleased me, who shall be my bliss when I come there. And this has ever been a comfort to me, that I chose Jesus, by His grace... and that has been a lesson to me that I should evermore do so - choose only Jesus to be my heaven, in weal and in woe.”

The strong emotion evident in these extracts alert us to a subtle and dangerous temptation undergone by both these holy women. Subtle, because they had a choice presented to them between good and better; dangerous, because self-congratulation and hubris might have been the cause and the result of the less good choice. St Teresa explains herself.

She had been influenced for a short time by books which maintained that all corporeal things, even meditation on Christ’s Humanity, would impede pure contemplation of the divinity. Immersed in enjoyment of the prayer of quiet, Teresa comes to think likewise. Later she suffers great remorse over her short-lived illusion. ‘O Lord of my soul and my Good, Jesus Christ crucified! Never once do I recall this opinion which I held without a feeling of pain: I believe that I was committing an act of high treason, though I committed it in ignorance.’ Compare this with the extract from Julian, who, fully aware, experienced the invitation to look beyond Christ and His passion as a temptation which she refused. St Teresa’s choice, recounted humbly, in her usual fashion, was not culpable but only mistaken and used providentially to guide future

generations of her readers into Christocentrism. She herself believes that such a choice - to dispense with Jesus - leads to lack of progress in the spiritual life and prayer and that the reason for this is that it is based on a certain lack of humility. The unspoken message is that one has outgrown Christ. Yet the supreme privilege, in fact, is to stand at the foot of the Cross. "I cannot imagine how it can enter into anyone's head not to be contented with this; yet I myself was not and I have lost in every respect where I ought to have gained." This is an implicit plea for the centrality of the Incarnation; how we must be grounded in this mystery as an essential safeguard against any tendency to want to be absorbed in a faceless Absolute.

We do not have to concentrate solely on the suffering Christ, goes on Teresa. Perhaps our temperament or some indisposition prevents us. "But what can prevent us from being with Him in His Resurrected Body, since we have Him so near us in the Sacrament, where He is already glorified?" Indeed, she can see nothing but blessings accruing to her from the glorified Christ. He is the Friend, the good Captain "who came forward first to suffer". With Him "one can bear everything. He helps us, He gives us strength; He never fails; He is a true Friend". Then follows the passage which opened this talk, concerning Christ as the door or way into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. To regard Christ as Door seems to me to answer the objections which might be raised against St Teresa's and Julian's insistence on the pre-eminence- one could say the monopoly, almost - of the Sacred Humanity in the spiritual life and prayer.

Some people have no trouble meditating, while others find themselves unable to do so in the strict sense of the word. Both are led by the Spirit and should not be anxious about the propriety of their respective prayer-lives. The 'Cloud of Unknowing' however, you recall, tells those practising the prayer of simplicity, as it is sometimes called, to put down reflections, however holy and attractive. Is this contrary to the view of Teresa and Julian or can the standpoints be reconciled? I was tempted to shirk the question but venture an answer which, indeed, seems to be supplied both by St Teresa herself and the author of the Cloud. Whether one prays in concepts or apparently without them, Christ is always the starting point and the centre and the One to whom one returns. St Teresa does not deny that there is an imageless prayer when the "Presence is taken from us... Blessed is such a loss... for the soul can then employ itself wholly in loving One whom the understanding has been striving hard to know; it loves what it has not comprehended and rejoices in that of which it could not have great fruition save by losing itself, in order, as I say, the better to gain itself." But a deliberate effort to exclude Christ's humanity in order to reach this state seems to her to be "not right". "The soul is left ... in the air; for it has nothing to lean upon, however full it may think itself to be of God". If one finds itself in an imageless country, the 'deep quiet of the Godhead', one must first have gone through the door which is Christ. Otherwise, agrees the author of the Cloud, one is not only 'a burglar of the night but a sneak thief of the day'. In the 'Epistle of Privy Counsel', ch. 9, he has much to say on this subject, which would take too long to quote in full. In short,

he says that whoever thinks he is too special to enter by this Door does not really come in at all, but stays outside. His spirituality is an illusion. Not only is the Lord the door keeper but the door as well; doorkeeper by His divinity, door by His humanity. 'I am the door by reason of my manhood; he who enters by me will be safe.' It is the same refrain in St Teresa and Julian. I venture to say that the voluntary exclusion of even good thoughts can be valid when the Doorkeeper Himself is telling the one praying to keep quiet for once. It is the form the prayer has taken, through grace, not a method arrogated to oneself to further one's progress.

St Teresa makes another point: we are not angels and we have bodies. To want to become angels while still on earth is ridiculous. What is of prime importance is rather, to embrace the Cross and refuse to abandon Him in His trials. "Let us not leave Him, for His Hand will help us to rise more effectually than our own efforts." He knows what form of prayer is best for us and will certainly give it to us, if we remain modest and faithful to His will. Prayer mirrors or sums up our spiritual life; it is its essence. If in our lives we are passionately given to His will or, if that seems worryingly austere, simply devoted to Him, to His Person, to all His wishes, we shall be the same when at prayer. Prayer is giving the self and loving in neat form. We do receive infinitely more than we give, whether we are conscious of this or not, but neither in praying nor in loving is receiving our first concern; or at least we do not want it to be, if we have decided to put Christ first.

St Teresa says that God is well pleased to see a soul humbly taking His Son as mediator. He is, after all, the image of the invisible Father and if we prefer certainty to illusion, it is the only sensible choice. St Teresa implies, all the same, that the choice is based on self-renunciation and self-distrust, therefore on humility. Even if the soul is raised to the highest contemplation, she continues, it realises its unworthiness and says with St Peter, 'depart from me, for I am a sinful man'. "The entire foundation of prayer must be established in humility and that the more a soul abases itself in prayer, the higher God raises it." She maintains that the outstanding favours God granted to her were always preceded by an overwhelming sense of her own sinfulness. The point she is making, or re-iterating, is that her favours were undeserved and unrelated to any effort to attain them. Conversely, anyone who tries to further his progress may derive some immediate benefit "but will very quietly fall again because he has not laid the proper foundations. Indeed, I fear it will never attain to poverty of spirit."

A great patience will result. She counsels calm in trials and aridities, the times when we cannot even think properly about holy things; and this would apply equally to our whole spiritual life as to times of prayer. With her usual common sense, she does not say that we should not pray for release from trials nor seek positively to be devout and recollected; we must, in fact, be careful how we approach the presence of God. But "we must not worry ourselves to death if we cannot think one single good thought. We are unprofitable servants; what do we suppose it is in our power to accomplish?" We are like little donkeys drawing a waterwheel, who are blindfolded and don't know

what they are doing and yet are drawing water copiously nonetheless. “After placing ourselves in the hands of God, we must walk along this road quite freely... God cares for us better than we can care for ourselves and He knows of what each one of us is capable. What is the use of governing ourselves, if one has surrendered one’s whole will to God?”

To recapitulate a little. Our spiritual life and prayer is secure, when it is based on the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. We may, should, behave towards Him simply, asking Him and trusting Him to supply all our needs, yet never hoping or thinking that we are more advanced than we are, far less believing that we can leave Him behind at any stage.

And if He is mediator, if He is the image perfectly conformed to the Father, then by our baptism into Him our life and prayer must be patterned on His; indeed, we are taken up into His life and prayer. He is born, He loves, He suffers, He returns to the Father. In us, too, He is born; He loves the Father and the world in us; He suffers in us; and we return with Him and in Him to the Father. His purpose is to glorify the Father and bring the world back to Him by redeeming it. We, too, when we pray, may gather into our love the whole world and offer it and ourselves to Him. We may identify ourselves so closely with mankind that when we pray we bring every living creature along with us. We know that the Father loves this Christ, this beloved Son to whom we are joined and whose condition as man we share. Far from ever outgrowing the Son, it is because of our oneness with Him that we, too, are beloved by the Father. And as the Father and Son are one, so we are brought into their oneness by the Holy Spirit. If God in Christ has made us one with Him and if, in our hearts we hold the whole world, then through our prayer the whole creation is united in love within the Blessed Trinity. Contemplative prayer is, in this way, what ultimately saves the world, but only if it is part of the prayer which Jesus, God and man, makes to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.