

ST TERESA OF AVILA.

Meditations on the Song of Songs.

The Collect for the Saint's Feast pays her a unique tribute: "Father by Your spirit You raised up our Mother Teresa of Avila to show Your Church the Way of Perfection. May her inspired teaching awaken in us a longing for true holiness"

One of the Popes, Pius XI has singled out that aspect of St. Teresa - her gift of stimulating the faithful along the path of prayer. It was a gift peculiar to her. She has a way of fostering, encouraging, even coaxing us to follow the better way. This quality fits in well with her role as Mother of Carmel 'Mater Spiritualium'. Teresa was used to getting her own way in life, she could charm people, she could get the best out of them whether they happened to be prelates, Jesuits, or mule-drivers. She could manipulate them in the nicest possible way. Nobody ever seemed to object because they knew instinctively that her motives were literally for the honour and glory of God. It is this same quality, I think, that comes across in her writings. We know that she is telling us to love God because it is worthwhile. She is speaking from experience. That must be the secret of her continued and widespread appeal.

What I want to do now, is to turn to one of St. Teresa's shorter and lesser known works, minor work that is, and look at it together. There is some merit in doing this in that we can more easily cover the whole content of the book, which we could not do with, say, 'The Interior Castle'. Well I had better let you know what I am referring to, to satisfy your curiosity. It is in fact her 'Meditations on the Song of Songs'. As we know, Teresa was a reluctant writer, she simply didn't have the time for it, and she would have preferred to be working at the spinning-wheel we saw in her cell at the Incarnation in Avila. However the tone of this little book is different, she actually enjoyed writing it. She says in fact: 'it consoles me to tell my meditations to my daughters'.

In looking at some of Teresa's thoughts here, I would like to refer to and perhaps draw out a little the sources for this loving relationship with God in Holy Scripture and some writings from the Doctors of the Church.

First of all, let us refer back to the Old Testament book the 'Song of Songs' on which, or at least on part of which, Teresa bases her meditations. We find it listed in the category of Wisdom Literature, although there does not appear to be anything particularly sapiential about this book. The book itself has been the subject of much debate, not only in the Christian Church. but before that among the Jews themselves. The Rabbis settled eventually for the allegorical interpretation. This has also been the prevailing interpretation of the book by the Church. Some scholars think it perfectly legitimate to apply it to the sacramental union of man and woman in the love relationship of marriage. This seems to be acceptable also when we consider how God blessed the union of man and woman in the opening chapters of the Bible in the Genesis accounts of Creation. We might also refer here, for example, to the nuptial theme of Psalm 44. In regard to the 'Canticle' the J.B. introduction says with a great economy of language: 'Mystics like St. John of the Cross were wise to use the Song as they did! Primarily the Songs have been understood in Christian tradition to be applicable to the mutual love between Christ and the Church, between Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, or, by extension, to the union of the individual soul with Christ.

My next point is to draw attention to St. John's Gospel, Chapters 13-17, containing the Discourse at the Last Supper. Here we find set out the marvellous themes of God's love incarnate in Jesus. This is referred to as the Johannine mysticism. Teresa in her writings refers many times to the Evangelists' themes. We know how she loved the incident about the Samaritan woman at the well talking of the water of life that allays one's thirst. There was a picture depicting this incident in her father's house which is now hanging in the Convent of The Incarnation. She meditated particularly on the subject of the Divine Indwelling. For example she quotes John Chapter 17:20 several times in her books. This isn't bad for someone who had no access to vernacular translations of the bible. The verses run as follows, "Father may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you . . . that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world may know that it was you who sent me" .

In the 'Interior Castle' she writes in regard to union with God. And thus while **Jesus Our lord** was once praying for His apostles - I don't remember where - He said that they were one with the Father and with Him, just as Jesus Christ is in the Father and the Father is in Him."

You remember in the Last Discourse when Philip had been making difficulties by looking for a closer manifestation of God along O.T. lines, Jesus tells him "Philip. to have seen Me is to have seen the Father". Then He tells us that whoever listens to Him and keeps His words is the one who loves Him, and as a result the Father and Son will love him and take up their abode with him, and reveal themselves deep within that person's consciousness. That is the meaning of the word 'manifest'. Unfortunately only the saints, such as Teresa, fully realised the truth of these words of Jesus.

I want to underline especially the references to the love of God and the love of Jesus found in the Discourse. In the Gospel read for Holy Thursday we find the phrase, 'He loved them to the end, 'eis teyos' here is emphatic, it means either 'utterly' or 'to the end of His life'. In John Ch.13 v 23 we read about the disciple whom Jesus loved. This could be very significant. In the prologue to the Gospel we learn that the Logos, the Word, is in the bosom of the Father. And now at this point we are told that the beloved disciple leans on the breast of Jesus. He is then in the same position in relation to Jesus as Jesus is to the Father. It seems likely moreover that the beloved disciple here is a symbol of the believer and consequently of the believer's relationship to Jesus and the Father. A truly sublime idea indeed! We can readily see I think how this idea would have made an enormous appeal to St.Teresa and St.John of the Cross. In regard to the Indwelling it is interesting to note that the evangelist uses the same word 'mone', meaning dwelling-place or mansion, to describe both the abode of Jesus with the Father as well as His abode in our hearts.

I would like now to jump a few centuries from the evangelists' wonderful discourse and consider briefly the early church development of the theme of God's love. I want simply to point to one or two forerunners of St.Teresa and St.John in the way the song of songs was understood. In about the year 389 AD, Gregory of Nyssa wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs. In this work together with two others, the 'Life of Moses' and 'The Treatise on Virginitiy' Gregory made a marvellous contribution to mystical literature, so much so that he has been called the 'Father of Mysticism'. Gregory showed especially how the soul through the experience of darkness becomes the Spouse of the word, and being united to him by love she receives a share in his goods. No thought of ours, he maintains, can grasp God in Himself because He is hidden in a dark cloud. Later on we have the concept of 'The cloud of unknowing' in the famous English work of that name. This is really as you can see, the path that leads straight to St.John of the Cross and St.Teresa. In the meantime, However, Pseudo-Dionysius had produced his work on Mystical Theology, by which we know St.John was greatly influenced. He refers to this work several times.

The next milestone I would like to look at in regard to our theme is St.Bernard's "Sermons on the Song of Songs". I feel that both St.Teresa and St.John must have been influenced by this piece of writing. St.Bernard is very theological but also very lyrical. He had an extraordinarily complex latin style that still has the commentators guessing.

It is very interesting to compare the beginning of St.Bernard's commentary with that of St.Teresa on the same book. They both say that what is indicated in the opening words is the fact that God is offering the kiss of peace to the soul.

I have Fr.Kieran Kavanaugh's justification for spending time looking at this little book of St.Teresa. 'Though small in size' he says, 'these meditations are fresh in insight. They merit all the attention given to other Teresian works'.

Teresa wrote this book in about 1502, that is ten years before her death. It is amazing to notice how fascinated both Teresa and John were by this particular book of Scripture. She begins by saying that for some years the Lord had given her great delight when she heard or read some words from the Song of Songs. She refers to these words as 'the things that pass between the soul and Our Lord'. That is the giveaway. It's the secret of divine intimacy that she is referring to. So on second thoughts it is not really surprising that for her the contents of the song are directly related to prayer. She says some people cannot understand the metaphorical language of the book. Teresa tells us that some people she knew wouldn't even listen to it. She tells us about an amusing incident that happened when she was attending Mass in a church one particular Holy Thursday; the priest was preaching about the mutual love between the bride and the bridegroom but the congregation only laughed at him. And, Teresa asks, what else would he be talking about on an occasion Like Holy Thursday'.

But St.Teresa herself found in the words of this book exactly what her soul was looking for, just what she needed. Using the third person as she usually does when referring to herself she says, "She understood that it was possible for a soul in love with its spouse to experience all these favours, swoons, deaths, afflictions, delights and joys in relation to him". After all most of her writings, especially "The Interior Castle" and the "Life" only discuss at length all these aspects of the life of prayer culminating in union with God. She is not surprised then that the language of the Songs is daring: 'Being what we are' she writes, 'the love that He had and has for us surprises and bewilders me more\'; for knowing that He has such love, I already understood that there is no exaggeration in the words by which He reveals it to us, for He has shown this love even more through His deeds". And she was thinking of course of His suffering and death on the cross. Indeed she mentions that explicitly in the very next sentence. St.Teresa, as always, has her feet firmly fixed on the ground, the ground of faith. She is reminded here of the wonder of the Incarnation, Christ truly God and truly man. The 'kiss of peace' she associates with the Blessed Eucharist. "I was even wondering if the bride was asking for this favour

that Christ afterwards gave us". It is worth pointing out again that St.Teresa is at one with the great St.Bernard in her interpretation of the song as the longing of the Fathers for the Incarnation of the Son of God.

In Chapter 2 Teresa continues to show the down to earth nature of her spirituality by pointing out the various kinds of false peace it might be possible to have. By this she probably means being careless even about little things. We ought to feel these pin-pricks of conscience - that's a sign that we're spiritually alive.

She then goes on to list some of the things we should be careful about - riches, honours, praise and comforts. "The flesh is very fond of comforts", she says. This of course is designed to make us feel distinctly uncomfortable'. Her irony is seen to good effect; have we read in the lives of the saints that they had a comfortable life? Nowadays we should be aware of the needs of the poor, and the terrible poverty of the third world, and ask ourselves what kind of witness we ourselves provide by our style of living.

Teresa goes on to exhort us to work hard at cultivating the Lord's friendship and she tells us many people remain at the foot of the mount who could ascend to the top. St.Teresa pursues at all times, here and in her other works her great theme of progressive intimacy with the Lord. And, she says, courageous thoughts lead to courageous deeds. We need to avoid offending God in any way. She wants us to guard against being lukewarm - and you remember the stricture in the book of Revelations against those who are tepid. For her this lukewarmness goes hand in hand with self-deception. In this connection she urges typically the need for humility. Then Teresa's impulsive and impetuous nature is seen in her criticism of a certain category of people - what you might call the calculating type. "They will never throw themselves into the sea as St.Peter did", she says.

On the other hand, true peace St.Teresa tells us in Chapter 3 is a union of our will with the will of God. This is a forgetting of oneself. The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing about. The rest of this chapter is a really inspiring call to closer friendship with God, a friendship that can be deepened through the Eucharist. "Along how many paths", she writes, 'In how many ways, by how many methods you show us love. With trials, with a death so harsh, with torments, suffering offenses every day and then pardoning:

Chapter 4 deals with the "prayer of quiet"; as she says herself she had already written much about this in two books (Life and Way) and she was to do so again in the Interior Castle. She describes the prayer of quiet thus: "In the interior of the soul a sweetness is felt so great that the soul feels clearly the nearness of its Lord." Her descriptions here are really marvellous, "It's as though there were poured into the marrow of one's bones a sweet ointment with a powerful fragrance". She tells us that the union between the two (God and the soul) is so close that there is nothing between them and the mind is greatly enlightened. She goes on to indicate to us a profound theological truth that is so prominent in the prayers and liturgy of the Church, based on this text from St.Peter, "We are made sharers in the divine nature". This reminds us again of St.Gregory of Nyssa and the other Greek Fathers who taught the doctrine of our deification. St.Teresa's words recall again the beloved disciple close to Christ at the last supper. She says the experience is altogether delightful. Again we see how close St.Teresa is to the eminent Fathers of the Church; Gregory spoke of "sober inebriation", Teresa calls it "divine intoxication".