

## **Transforming Love; Wounded Christ: Some Teresian Insights into Estate Ministry**

I am an Anglican parish priest, serving outer council estate parishes in Birmingham and have found the Carmelite mystics to be extremely nourishing in this ministry. Outer estates (or housing projects) are areas of social housing on the edges of our cities into which working class people were moved as the inner city slums were cleared in the twentieth century. They are areas often marked by multiple deprivation and poverty. People in them are resilient but often have low confidence and self-esteem. Good employment is hard to find, educational attainment can be low. The Church has historically tended to find it hard to make an impact on these places; congregations are often small.

This paper seeks to lay out some areas in which St Teresa seems to speak to my ministry in this context. In the time available today, I will focus on the democratisation of mysticism, true prayer and loving service, entering the darkness, and living in our woundedness. This is an attempt to put down some markers for further and deeper exploration. I am aware of potential pitfalls, not least the danger of making Teresa in my own image; I hope this is an authentic outworking of teresian theology and spirituality into a particular context. I want to ask whether you find any of this mistaken or inauthentic. Are there areas of thought or reading I ought to explore further?

So, let us begin to explore some of these connections.

### **The Democratisation of Mysticism**

At the heart of Teresa's vision is a way of life. This may be summarised as a way of love that has Christ at its centre. God and the human being are in relationship through prayer. This is alive and dynamic, a friendship that is potentially ever deepening, ever uniting. The person is transformed in this loving relationship. This way of prayer, which shows the potential grandeur and dignity of human beings, is offered by God to everyone. We will consider Teresa's teaching that the life of prayer is open to all, a democratisation of mysticism, as a first connection between estates ministry and Teresa.

Mystical prayer has often been mistrusted or seen as the province of an elite. The Spanish Carmelite Mystics are insistent that it is offered to all. The reformed Carmels, at least at the beginning, did away with distinctions such as choir and lay sisters, emphasising a life of prayer and friendship with one another and with Christ that was the birthright of all.

We can see something of the importance of this for Teresa and the difficult consequences of it in *The Way of Perfection 21:2*:

*Now returning to those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say how they are to begin is very important – in fact, all important. They must have a great and very determined determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may,*

*happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses. You will hear some persons frequently making objections: 'there are dangers'; 'so and so went astray by such means'; 'this other one was deceived'; another who prayed a great deal fell away'; 'it is harmful to virtue'; 'its not for women, for they will be susceptible to illusions'; they had better stick to sewing"*

We should remember that those who were frequently making objections included the Inquisition. Teresa was in danger if she was seen to be teaching wrongly. She treads around this in a complex and brilliant way. Part of this is her use of a rhetoric of simplicity and foolishness. I want to ask how much is it possible to take this argument of simplicity at face value, to say that prayer is for the poor, the weak and unlearned? What does this mean for ministry with people whose experience of education has often been poor and who live in a non-book culture?

There is much else here that is suggestive for estates ministry. Teresa's style is deliberately simple and direct, it is humble, it uses Castilliano rather than Latin. She can communicate directly with ordinary people, helping God to transform their lives. The challenge for people like me is how to use the right language to communicate meaningfully with people. (I am currently working on this as part of a group exploring 'non-academic theology'.) Teresa nudges us to consider ways in which the Church today may unconsciously fall into the same traps of exclusivity as the Inquisition in Teresa's time.

Prayer and God's love are open to all people, including those who are seen as being the least. My experience is that the ground is ready: a good number of people in our estates are hungry for prayer. In my parishes, quiet days and retreats are popular and people often make a considerable sacrifice in order to attend them, for example by very carefully stewarding a small amount of income or using annual leave.

However, in the context in which I minister, there are structural injustices that make it difficult for people to live this out. In his little book on *The Interior Castle*, Peter Tyler reflects on his work with homeless people and suggests there are a number of basic human needs that are essential for a person to live a fulfilled life. These are good food, good sleep, good relationships, good work and good prayer (Tyler 1997 p40ff). This makes a great deal of sense. It is very hard to pray if you are living in poor, damp, insecure housing; if you cannot afford to eat enough or keep warm; if you are doing three jobs to make ends meet for your family; if you are anxious; if your confidence and self-esteem are non-existent. Teresa recognised this with practical instruction for her sisters, for example ensuring that they never gave away so much that they went hungry.

If, as we have seen, God offers the possibility of union with him through prayer to all people, what does it mean for us that we have structured a society in which deprivation makes it extremely difficult for this to happen? If 'many are called but few are chosen', what does it mean for us if we are excluding people from the

possibility of union with God through structural poverty? We will consider this as a second connection between Teresa and estates ministry.

### **True Prayer and Loving Service**

Teresa gives us hope on a number of levels. For her, prayer, union with God and justice are intimately linked. Teresa is part of a tradition that privileges the practical love of others as part of the essence of contemplative prayer. Praying is a way of love for Teresa. The only way we can tell how our love of God is progressing is in how much our practical love of other people is increasing:

*The most certain sign, in my opinion, as to whether or not we are observing these two laws is whether we observe well the love of neighbour. We cannot know whether or not we love God, although there are strong indications for recognising that we do love him, but we can know whether we love our neighbour. And be certain that the more advanced you see you are in love for your neighbour, the more advanced you will be in the love of God, for the love His Majesty has for us is so great that to repay us for our love of neighbour he will in a thousand ways increase the love we have for him. I cannot doubt this.*

*(Interior Castle 5.8)*

This seeing of contemplative prayer as containing within it a strong and active love for others is taken further:

*What would it matter were I to remain in purgatory until judgment day if through my prayer I could save even one soul? How much less would it matter if my prayer is to the advantage of many and for the honour of the Lord. Pay no attention to sufferings that come to an end even if through them some greater service is rendered to him who endured so many for us.*

*(Way of Perfection 3.6)*

Teresa several times says it is better not to make progress or achieve union if we can help someone else. This is extremely beautiful. Prayer is affective, it involves our deepest desires and longings, transformed in the love of God. Prayer is thus embodied, incarnational. The inward and the outward are united.

Teresa's answer to the fundamental question of the nature of true prayer shows it to be deeply concerned with those who occupy the least parts of our society. This puts huge emphasis on transformation and change.

Much estate ministry is about transformation. People often have low self-esteem and confidence. With the crumbling of trades unions, the paucity of good jobs and the historically poor nature of education in estates, the Church is now one of the few places in which people can be built up. A key role for me is building people up, both as individuals and as a group, so that they can flourish, either by being able to take positions of leadership within the Church or in getting better jobs. Transformative prayer needs to be social, corporate and structural if people are to fulfil their possibility.

## **Entering the Darkness**

I have quite a bit of hesitation in talking about this. There seems to me a very great danger in mining the treasures of other people's darkness (*Isaiah 45:3*), to say nothing of the fact that there are people who are utterly broken by darkness. I do not want to be making any sort of capital out of suffering.

However, when I shared these thoughts with colleagues, they insisted that I write these reflections. There are things we learn in the darkness that we do not elsewhere. In churches like mine, where many people have experienced considerable brokenness of one sort or another, it is really important that, if they can, those who have been through darkness share the experience with those who are going through it. So many people carry things but don't talk about them. A gentle sharing of one another's burdens in this way seems to me a way of enacting the practical acts of love that are so much part of Teresa's prayer.

There are many types of darkness. In the way that Teresa spends a lot of time on different manifestations of things, would it be profitable to write a thorough-going phenomenology of darkness and darknesses as they are today?

The really helpful part of Teresa's teaching about this for me is that she faces up to the darkness. There is none of the temptation to ignore it or to bury it. When you are ministering in situations where people have no choice but to enter the darkness, where there is no way of buying your way out, where you cannot evade it, this is of utter importance.

Ministry and life in estates can take us to our limits. With the descriptions of the *Sixth Mansions* I find great consolation in the truth that God is at work in us in this darkness. There are frequently times when I am way beyond any capacity that I have, and when all I can do is learn to trust and rely on God. I have written about this in a couple of poems that I append to this paper; this area is something that needs poetic language to attempt to explore it.

The metaphors and symbols Teresa uses to express the life of prayer are so beautiful and so rich. It is suggestive to think of the beautiful diamond Interior Castle being made of something that has been formed by tremendous pressures in the dark and the deep. This is a way of being that demands Teresian virtues like fortitude and determined determination. A key issue for priests and workers in areas of deprivation is combatting burn out and being there for the long haul. Prayer forged in the darkness is a key part of this.

## **Living in our Woundedness**

My final section reflects on woundedness and vulnerability. In many ways, this section catches and brings together the threads in the rest of this paper. At the beginning of the *Sixth Mansions*, Teresa writes of this being the place "*where the soul is now wounded with love for its Spouse*" (IC VI:1). This use of traditional mystical language encompasses a whole range of themes including desire for

union, living our potential, being transformed, being deepened, being strengthened. As we have seen, these are key themes for me in estates ministry.

There is a huge richness in reading Teresa's reflections on woundedness in a context in which people are deeply wounded and communities are deeply broken. This is taking me to the edges of what I can say and know, which is an indication to go away and reflect and pray more deeply. I would like to explore more the social dimensions and connections in all this; I think there is a piece of work to do here in reading Teresa and disability theology together which would be full of possibility, not least because of the high number of people with disabilities in many estate churches.

The important thing with this is that it centres everything on Christ. Jesus is at the heart of life for Teresa, for estate churches, for all Christian people. The brokenness of communities, the woundedness of people, the woundedness of myself come together in the wounded Christ. I remember that he is recognised by his wounds after the Resurrection. In Christ, who is at the centre of everything, we are caught up and taken into the Paschal Mystery.

Recently, folk from my parish were engaged in a development programme; a word came to us each week, Jesus' teaching "Do not worry" (*nada te turbe*). This was with a group of people who, by and large, have plenty to worry about. We have been praying and reflecting on what it might mean to be a Church that does not worry. Our culture is changing to one which is much more relaxed and loving.

There is much for us and for God to do, but the life in our estate parishes gives me hope. We continue to walk in a way of love, of smallness, and we do this in a way of "*great and very determined determination*" following the Lord as closely as we can, walking in a way in which individuals and communities are opened to the transforming wounds of Christ.

- Andy Delmege, June 2015

## Dark Prayer

Pausing to let myself catch up,  
I noticed only afterwards the solitary crow  
fly flat and slow across the broken field;

impressions rather of an hour,  
winter canal, grey heaps of dredge and brick,  
a man crouching back to it all  
over a wet fire  
soot black acrid flame that does not warm or light.

Trudging to pace unmeaning out  
heart and soul against a limit.  
Hands take an orange from the pocket  
thumb breaks open sticky tang;

in this exhausted praying somewhere between  
the rooted tread, the piece of fruit, the breathing in,  
this pouring out, eyes follow flight to seek a way,  
as when, at the end of a funeral, the woman sat in the porch,  
bending over a baby tenderly fed.

## Essential baggage

Trudging up the icy hill  
to visit someone nearing death  
I become aware of my poverty,  
of the little I bring with me.  
Pausing to gather strength,  
I blow my fingertips  
as if to warm my courage  
and kindle my heart.  
The reassuring voice:  
'You carry nothing  
but love  
in your bag'