

Teresa's Advice on Visions: how helpful is it today? *

Jill Robson

When I wrote this paper, I had in mind a present-day pastoral situation where someone turns up who is experiencing 'visions' of some sort, and is shaken and perplexed. So I ask the question: 'Teresa's Advice on Visions: how helpful is it today?'

Visions are always problematic! Or at least potentially so. In this paper I want briefly to examine Teresa's advice about visions and how to deal with them. I will do this from the perspective of a 21st century psychologist with an interest in mental imagery. I will ask how pastorally useful Teresa's advice is today. I shall look at three areas of advice which she gives us on -

- how to distinguish different types of vision;
- how to respond to them;
- how to judge whether they really are visions.

Visions, as we know, played an important part in Teresa's spiritual life. When they first started breaking into her consciousness they caused her a lot of trouble, in not knowing what was happening to her, and how to understand them, in being unable to find a wise learned and discerning confessor to help guide her, and in what other people thought of her:- whether they judged her as especially holy and blessed, or as suspect, unorthodox and dangerous, or just plain mad – deluded and deranged by melancholy. She wants to spare her sisters some of these trials.¹

In this paper, I am going to concentrate on what Teresa writes about visions in the three books written for her Sisters:- *The Way of Perfection*, *The Interior Castle*, and *The Book of Foundations*. These works represent her mature thoughts about visions and are not (just) accounts and reflections on her own initial experiences – although there is still a lot of that – but on how she has integrated those experiences into her life, and is, therefore, able to reflect on them with some critical distance. One thing we should remember is that her advices are written for newly formed religious contemplative communities whose members were white-hot with religious devotion, and with zeal to live out a newly

formed model of religious life.

How to distinguish different types of vision

Now, let us look first at what Teresa has to say about distinguishing different types of vision, and how to recognise them. She concentrates on what we would now call their phenomenological characteristics, that is, what the experience is like, and what characteristics the various sorts of vision have, rather than on their content, that is, what it was a vision of. Her focus is on the details of the experience, and what follows from it. This detached focus makes it very possible to compare her experience with others in the tradition, and in the laboratory, and we are able to begin to map her experiences on to what we know of different types of mental imagery.

Teresa – following tradition of Augustine and Aquinas - distinguishes three types of vision – Corporeal visions, Imaginative visions, and Intellectual visions. These distinctions rest on where and how the visions are seen. (Robson, J. 1986 and 1991)

Corporeal Visions are seen with the bodily eyes, and therefore experienced as being in the external world – like ordinary visual perception. *Except* that the seer knows it is a vision and that what is seen is 'special', and not seen by everyone else. Often it may be bright and clear and 'super-real', and come with feelings of importance as to its content. The knowledge that this is not ordinary perception is important, because it is those beliefs which distinguish it from an hallucination, where the imager does believe that what is seen is really there in the external world. These sorts of visions can be identified as of the same sort of *externally projected spontaneous imagery* as those experienced by subjects studied by psychologists. (Robson 1987; Schatzman 1980)

Teresa is of the traditional view (shared by St John of the Cross) that these are the lowest form of vision and most open to deception by the self (Robson 1991), or by the devil. It is certainly true that people who do experience this sort of imagery experience can have difficulty in distinguishing inner and outer reality.

Teresa tell us that she has never experienced this sort of vision, and is therefore not going

to discuss it! 2 Although she does make a couple of allusions to this sort of experience when she speaks of people having false beliefs about the nature and genesis of their 'vision' – of which more later (see *Foundations* 8, 6-8).

Imaginative Visions are seen with the eyes of the soul, or, as we would say now, seen in the mind's eye, or in the imagination. Teresa tells us a lot about these sorts of visions. She had herself experienced many of them, and has left us some vivid and detailed descriptions in the *Book of her Life*. In her advices to her sisters, she has listed the characteristics of these visions.

This sort of vision takes place not in the external world, but in some inner space. Teresa speaks of “the eyes of the soul seeing much better than the bodily eyes here on earth”, saying that it seems to the visionary that they are “entirely in another region different from this in which we live”. Typically the experience comes spontaneously and unbidden, erupting into consciousness, absorbing all of ordinary attention, it is often of short duration.³ The experience is accompanied by powerful emotions, and feelings of importance and significance.⁴ Such visions are full of light, intense colour, amazing detail, and beauty.⁵ The vision is often (but not always) felt to have a meaning which is clearly understood by the person having the unusual imagery experience.⁶

Teresa gives her sisters all these details so that they can recognise this sort of vision, and distinguish it from other 'imaginative' imagery (of which more in a moment). Such details also help us today to understand the sorts of imagery experience she is talking about. There are parallels with experiences studied by psychologists (Robson 1986), and also with what happens to inventors, scientists and others in 'creative break-throughs' (Roe 1951; West 1991), and in the reports and studies of religious experience (Beadsworth 1977). All of which echoes Teresa's reassurance that these experiences happen to normal sane people (Fach *et al* 2013).

Intellectual Visions are the third sort of visionary experience which Teresa distinguishes. These are seen neither with the eyes of the body, nor with the eyes of the soul. They are not visions in the 'mental imagery' sense of the words at all. Yet Teresa is quite clear that

the experience in some real sense is visual, although nothing is 'seen' in the usual sense of the word. This sort of vision seems to be much more a sensing of a very near presence, or person – in Teresa's case, Jesus.⁷ So these visions seem to be a way of gaining knowledge of someone, or some thing, being revealed deep within the understanding, or psyche.⁸ I have to say that, as a psychologist, I continue to be somewhat baffled by these visions (Robson 1991) – as indeed Teresa was when they first happened to her.

She does give a little more detail about the spiritual effects of these visions later, and there are some accounts of her experiences, but most of that is not about the *phenomenology* of the experience – because, she tells us, that nothing much can be said about it afterwards, even though the experience is engraved on the soul. Her chief way of judging these sorts of visions are by the effects on the person (of which more later).

It does seem to me that there are parallels with some of the accounts examined in the religious experience literature which speak of 'a sense of presence' (Beadsworth 1977; Hay 2005), and rather differently in the mystical literature which talk about the 'spiritual senses' (O'Donaghue 1991). But Teresa's chief piece of advice is to talk frankly to your confessor about it, and try and find one who is experienced in these things, who has the gift of discernment, and who is learned. If you can't find one who is experienced, go for one who is learned and has discernment. This is surely good advice for anyone experiencing visions – find a wise and experienced spiritual director.

How to respond to visions

This leads on to our second area, what does Teresa advise in terms of 'How to respond to visions?'

The first thing she does is reassure her sisters that this is a perfectly OK way to be going on the road to God: if that is the way God is leading, you don't need to be afraid.⁹ Modern psychology would say the same thing in different terms: these sorts of imagery experiences may not happen to everybody, but they are well within the range of the normal. The second thing to say is: find someone who knows about such things to talk to. Knowledge and understanding really do help. As we have seen, Teresa urges her

sisters to be frank with the prioress and with their confessor.¹⁰ Thirdly, she also urges discretion: basically, don't talk to everybody about your visions. This advice is still very sensible, for such talk can be open to misunderstanding – either that the person is in some way boasting about their experiences, or that those experiences make the person somewhat suspect in relation to their psychological stability, or indeed, to their mental health. Throughout her advice on how to respond to experiencing visions, Teresa reiterates the need for humility – if God gives these favours, it is because God loves you, not that you have done anything to deserve it. I guess the secular psychological equivalent is: don't get all puffed up about these visions and think you are special. Relax and see what they are telling you from deep within your being.

Lastly she tells her sisters not to desire visions.¹¹ They are **gift**, and come when God wills – not you. Moreover, desire can cause all sorts of problems with the imagination, falsely creating what is desired. Again, psychologically sensible advice, for the nature of 'visionary' experiences is that they are spontaneous and unbidden. And she is right: wanting something a lot can have all sorts of psychological effects on the imagination.

How to judge whether they really are visions

This leads on to the third area I want to look at. What does Teresa have to say about 'How to judge whether particular experiences really are visions'. She is anxious that her sisters do not make mistakes about their experiences.¹² She wants to avoid misdiagnoses, and like a wise doctor, she reflects on her past case-book, highlighting various possible blind alleys and pitfalls along the way. I want to pick up some that are of particular psychological interest.

She has already alerted us to the possibility that desiring visions will produce 'false visions' in the imagination. She also wants to warn against mistaking various sorts of visual imaginings, however holy or pious, for visions. She says that the images of *imagining* are less lively and vivid than those of a vision.¹³ Certainly the images of *spontaneous imagery experiences* are often reported as being super-real, more detailed and vivid than the *imager* could have imagined on their own, however hard they tried (Robson 1987 and 1991).

She warns about dangers of mistakes being made by those with 'weak' and undisciplined imaginations. She has known of many cases of people who say that they 'see' everything they think, or is said to them.¹⁴ She is baffled by this, and clearly does not have any insider understanding of this sort of imagery experience. There is indeed a psychologically recognised group of people who do have an almost film-like experience of seeing images, in their inner mental space. These images relate to their thoughts, reading, or what is being said to them, etc. This is entirely spontaneous, and **not** easily (if at all) within their volitional control, so it does have some of the characteristics of a spontaneous vision. But most people with this sort of imagery are well aware of the 'imaginary' status of these images. This group of subjects, who have vivid and detailed imagery, often also have a rich – 'almost florid' – fantasy life which can run on of its own accord, and in which they can become deeply immersed for hours on end. For most of these subjects, they know it is 'just pretence' and are able to lead normal lives with no psycho-pathological effects, although often feeling isolated because they know of nobody else who has this sort of inner life (Ehrenreich 2014). This could be characterised as 'extreme day-dreaming' (Schupak & Rosenthal (2009). Psychologists have named this type of person as having a 'fantasy-prone personality' (Wilson & Barber 1983).

This sounds to me like those sisters Teresa speaks of who spend hours on end absorbed in their pious imaginations in meditation, and who claimed they had had a vision. Teresa is right to distinguish this sort of imagery experiences from those of visions, *but* I don't think she is entirely fair in suggesting that these imagers are being '*weak minded*'. They may well *not* be able to *volitionally control* their imaginings. Although, her advice about changing their prayer regime, and giving them different duties to take their minds off is probably pragmatically sound.¹⁵ Such persons now could do with a little more knowledge about, and understanding of, their inner lives.

However, there are others of this 'fantasy prone' group who get into all sorts of difficulties and mix ups with their inner and outer realities. Such persons sometimes turn up in religious contexts, often looking for help. This group of people are more likely to experience other para-psychological phenomena: for example, apparitions of the dead, out-of-the-body experiences, religious visions, hearing messages from an unknown

external source, inspirational writing with words dictated by an external voice, etc. These subjects often experience their imagery in multi-modal forms, smelling and tasting things, as well as seeing and hearing them (Gow *et al* 2004).

These subjects seem to me to be similar to those Teresa believed to be self-deceived, or deluded by the devil, and with whom she had very little patience. Today, I hope we can see that such people need careful, and psychologically informed, listening to – so that they themselves can gain some understanding of what is happening to them.

Teresa speaks of those who have become withdrawn and absorbed in prayer for long periods, who seem to be in a daze, with their thoughts are all over the place, and who have claimed to have seen a vision. She tells prioresses to check whether this is due to too much fasting and discipline – and if it is, to temper the regime.¹⁶ This is sensible advice, for certainly hunger, starvation, fever, monotonous auditory input (e.g. chanting the office), sensory deprivation of various sorts, as well as states between sleeping and waking, can all reduce level of cognitive attention in which hallucinatory images can spontaneously arise, or just the muddled and unfocused imaginings of an over-stressed and over-tired mind (Robson 1897 and 1991; Sachs 2012).

Melancholy

Teresa writes at some length about 'melancholy' (see *Foundations* Ch 7). She uses that word to cover a much wider range of mental illness than just depression. She writes with a mixture of harshness, insight and compassion. She is well aware that those with melancholy may claim to see visions and hear voices (locutions). Although she shows an enlightened compassion towards those afflicted with melancholy, her general advice to the prioresses is: don't challenge the sufferer – that just makes things worse¹⁷; in charity, put up with the melancholic sister inside the community – and let the prioress be their doctor.¹⁸

If there is even a reasonable suspicion that someone who is having anomalous imagery experiences, who believes them to be 'visions', and who has no insight into the situation, and is not open to reason, nor patient discernment, and might have a mental health

problem of depression, bi-polar, schizophrenia, personality disorder or be psychotic, then the obvious kind, helpful and loving thing to do is to see they get professional psychiatric help. For what is happening to them has moved from the range of the normal to the psycho-pathological. I believe that Teresa herself would approve, for she is in essence compassionate towards her sisters, seeing melancholy as in many ways worse than physical illness, in terms of the suffering it brings. She always is open, and indeed eager, to learn from those who know more about a subject than she did – the learned – in this case a psychiatrist (Menezes & Moreira-Almeida 2009).

Conclusion

So to end with the question I started with – Teresa's advice on visions – how helpful is it today? I will answer that in relation to the three areas I examined.

First, how helpful is it in distinguishing various types of vision? The answer is: very helpful. It is astonishing, that across nearly 500 years she writes with such accurate detail about psychological experiences, that we can form a very clear and nuanced understanding of the phenomena which she is discussing, and translate that into present-day psychological categories.

Second, how helpful is her advice on how to respond to visions? The answer is: psychologically, pastorally and spiritually it is very useful and sensible.

Third, how helpful is her advice on how to judge whether they really are visions? I think she is very good at identifying the areas of difficulty; she writes with compassion and insight for her time. But there are some areas where she would have found the psychological knowledge we have today both helpful and illuminating in ways that might have modified her advice in some areas.

In all of this testing and advice, Teresa has a meta-question: Is it from God, and does it lead to God? To answer **that** question, she looks at people's lives, and judges them by their fruits – in term of humility, obedience, peacefulness etc, and their spiritual growth

towards God. This is the ultimate test, and one psychologists can also understand. Look at the whole of the person's life – are these things leading to self understanding, integration, good relationships, and concerned action for others in the world? This is very good advice.