

A sermon preached by Emma Hodge on 8th May 2022 at St. Michael & All Angels Church, Sandhurst as part of a sermon series on “Heroes of Faith”.

May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

We continue our sermon series on Heroes of Faith and today we are looking at St. Teresa of Avila, she was a Spanish 16th century nun and she had the honour of being made the first female doctor of the church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. The title of the Doctor of the Church recognises the importance of a saint's teaching to the Catholic faith, in Teresa's case it is her writing on prayer which makes her a Doctor of the Church.

Background

Teresa of Avila, also known as Teresa of Jesus, was born in Avila, Spain on 28th March 1515. This was during the time of the Spanish Inquisition and her paternal grandfather was forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity and after the conversion, the Spanish Inquisition often checked that he hadn't returned to Judaism. Teresa was brought up as a devout Christian however it is worth remembering that not everyone would have access to a whole bible as the first printed bible, the Guttenberg bible was only printed 60 years before St Teresa's birth.

At the age of 7, she persuaded her older brother to join her to leave the city of Avila and *“go off to the land of the Moors and beg them, out of love of God, to cut off our heads there”*; fortunately an uncle found them before they could leave the city, whether this is a sign of her saintliness or a sign of her rebellious character, you can decide!

She shared her mother's love of popular books, although her father disapproved of both of them reading them. However her mother died when Teresa was 11.

As a teenage girl, she was interested in the usual things, boys, fashion, flirting, rebelling. At the age of 16 she joined the local Carmelite convent, and here she developed the discipline of mental prayer and keeping Jesus at the centre of her life, however she often struggled with this feeling that she didn't have the imagination or talent for great theological thoughts.

While we may think of nuns of cutting themselves off from the world and living a very devout life, this was not always the case, they often had visitors and if you came from a wealthy family they were reputedly allowed dogs, had

visitors (including men), as the visitors often brought monetary gifts to the convent.

Teresa's character meant that she was popular, and received several visitors at the convent and instead of her guiding them in the spiritual life, she was drawn into the secular life.

She then became seriously ill with Malaria, and she struggled with prayer, often using the excuse that she couldn't be alone to pray, or was too sick etc. and when she recovered, she often didn't pray as she saw herself as a wicked sinner who didn't deserve to get any favours from God. St Teresa was encouraged to return to prayer by a priest however she still struggled with prayer and was often anxious for the time of prayer to be over.

However, her struggle with prayer has influenced her writing, the Spanish Inquisition examined writing and women were not allowed to be teachers of the faith and this is one aspect that the Spanish Inquisition looked for, but St Teresa wrote several books, prayers and other writings and there are three main books, written by St Teresa that survive today.

St Teresa had visions and her writing is full of images, one of her visions "The Ecstasy of St Teresa" was depicted in white marble by Bernini and was finished just 70 years after her death and 30 years after her canonisation as a saint and it describes a vision that is recorded in her first book and like all three of her books which survive today, they focus on becoming closer to God.

Autobiography – "The Book of my life"

The first is her autobiography and is called "The Book of my life" here she describes her Ecstasy vision, where she describes what can be referred to as a mystical moment where she is in complete union with God. Earlier in the book, she uses gardening as an analogy of spiritual life. The analogy is that the garden is our soul or spiritual life which needs tending and watering as you would water a garden. The water is from God. She uses four different methods of watering the garden to explain four different prayer styles

- 1) Firstly, a well,
Watering a garden by means of a well is a lot of work! And the same is said for prayer sometimes it takes a lot of effort and work. We have to find time in our busy lives to pray, we have to work hard to focus on prayer and concentrate on what we want to say to God and what we want to hear from God.
- 2) Secondly, Watering a garden by means of an aqueduct and windless wheel; This system's modern day analogy would be watering with a hose, where you have to take the hose around all the plants in your

garden, it requires work but provides opportunity for contemplative prayer and we become more aware of God and our relationship with Him.

- 3) Thirdly watering the garden by means of irrigation, whether if that is a stream or a system you have implemented.
If we turn this analogy to prayer, this is where we know that at all times we can easily turn to God, to be refreshed when we need Him, to turn to Him at different points in our days.
- 4) Lastly, watering by means of rain
Watering a garden by rain is the easiest form, we don't have to put any effort into it, we simply need to step into God's presence, the rain, and be drenched with His refreshing water. This is described as a union prayer, prayer of being in union and harmony with God and in many ways can be described as a mystical experience where we become one with God.

The Way of Perfection

The second book, is The Way of Perfection and before we look at this in detail, I'm going to give some background as to what was going on in the world at the time of St Teresa.

Two years after St Teresa was born, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door which led to the start of the protestant reformation and this may have led to the Spanish Inquisition paying close attention to what was being written and said, as not everyone had their own bible a lot of people had to rely on what they heard in church, and the prayers that they learnt by heart – the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary.

Women were not permitted to be teachers of the faith and in addition the Spanish Inquisition challenged reading and writing spiritual texts in Spanish or any other language which was not Latin, however not everyone was well versed in Latin.

The book was written during the time where St. Teresa reformed the Carmelite order, as well as the reformation. St Teresa wrote the book to encourage, primarily the nuns in the order, on her passion, of ensuring that everyone should work to develop a deep and lasting love of prayer, and she encourages people to remember those who develop and defend the faith including theologians. As the book was originally written for her nuns, there are instructions regarding how they should live a devout life, separate from the world.

A large part of the book is focussed on a prayer that everyone knows, the Lord's Prayer and offers a commentary on it using similes and takes several

chapters to reflect and encourage us on the aspects of prayer that is in the Lord's prayer. It is one of the easiest of her books to read and understand.

The Inner Castle

The third book is the Interior Castle, and is referred to in the "Way of Perfection". She uses the analogy of a series of seven mansions, all interlinked, and all leading to the centre and it is a way of developing our faith. With the middle of the castle being the centre where Jesus dwells and as we start at the first mansion, the very exterior and we can easily be distracted by what else is going on outside the castle, as we learn about our faith and develop our relationship with God, and as we move through each of the seven mansions, we become closer to God.

Summary of books

All of the books that St Teresa wrote are written to encourage us to develop a deeper relationship with God and that we need God's help and grace to do so. All of St Teresa's writing is easy to read and very clear and are full of analogies and metaphors, just like the garden analogy used earlier, to help us understand and apply how to realise that our troubles are small if we focus on God and have a long, lasting and deep relationship with Him.

Applications for our life

What can we learn from St. Teresa?

Firstly, if you struggle in prayer, you are not alone! St Teresa is known for her writing on prayer but she also struggled at times in her life.

Secondly, we need help! St Teresa was encouraged to return to a routine of prayer by someone else, and her writings are there to encourage others.

Thirdly, we all are on a journey of faith, and we need to work to develop it and to ask for God's help and grace to become in union with Him.

Teresa's prayer

To close I'm going to read her prayer which sums up her vision to focus on God.

Let nothing upset you,
let nothing startle you.
All things pass;
God does not change.
Patience wins
all it seeks.

Psalm 63:1-8 Matthew 6:5-15

Whoever has God
lacks nothing:
God alone is enough.

Amen