

SEEKING CHRIST'S PEACE: ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Talk 4c (03/19/24)

Jesus tired and thirsty sat down at a well and there encountered a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water. Asking her for a drink,

“He said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, Give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water... Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’” (John 4:10; 13-14)

In the book of her Life, Teresa devotes approximately a quarter of the text (Chapters 11 to 21) to explain her experience of prayer. As she does elsewhere, she draws upon a striking mental image to help her explain. Here, she uses the image of a watering a garden.

The **garden** represents the soul. The **water** is God’s life and grace. There are four forms of **irrigation** that represent types of prayer. The plants and their **fruits** represent our inner state and its expression in outer action (i.e. how we love and serve others). We are the **gardeners**. God is the **garden’s owner**.

The four waters [i.e. types (*or modes*) of prayer!] range from the most effortful (pulling up water from a well in a bucket) to the least effort (a fresh downpour of rain). There is a shift in balance from human action to divine action.

Teresa speaks of these forms of prayer as a development, from stage to stage, as we persist in prayer, which requires less of our effort over time; yet also, she recognized that you *never* move into a stage where human effort is *entirely* superseded.

This progression is also not attained by spiritual ambition. It is God’s gift to grant, in His time.

Teresa’s very well-known definition of prayer is:

“... nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be with Him who we know loves us.”

Despite Teresa’s remarkable and intense spiritual experiences in prayer, she emphasizes that any inner experience of prayer ought to bear fruit in how we live. Here, she speaks especially of a growing capacity for humility, (mature) trust, gentleness, joyfulness and profound love of God, and neighbor.

From her autobiography:

"A beginner must look on himself or herself as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord's pleasure, on most unfruitful soil, which abounds in weeds. His Majesty roots up the weeds and will put in good plants instead. Let us reckon that this is already done when a soul decides to practice prayer and has begun to do so. We have then, as good gardeners, with God's help, to make these plants grow, and to water them

carefully so that they do not die, but produce flowers, which give out a good smell, to delight this Lord of ours. Then He will often come to take His pleasure in this garden and enjoy these virtues.

"Now, let us see how this garden is to be watered, so that we may understand what we have to do, and what labor it will cost us, also whether the gain will outweigh the effort, or how long it will take. It seems to me that the garden may be watered in four different ways. Either the water must be drawn from a well, which is very laborious; or by a water wheel and buckets, worked by a windlass. I have sometimes drawn it in this way, which is less laborious than the other, and brings up more water. Or it may flow from a stream or spring, which waters the ground much better, for the soul then retains more moisture and needs watering less often, which entails far less work for the gardener. Or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it Himself without any labor of ours, and this is an incomparably better method than the rest.

"Now to apply these **four methods of watering**, by which this garden is to be maintained and without which it will fail: this is my purpose, and will, I think, enable me to explain something about the four stages of prayer, to which the Lord has, in His kindness, raised my soul." ...

On the first water...

"We may say that beginners in prayer are those who draw the water up out of the well; which is a great labor, as I have said. For they find it very tiring to keep the senses recollected, when they are used to a life of distraction. Beginners have to accustom themselves *to pay no attention to what they see or hear*, and to put this exercise into practice during their hours of prayer, when they just remain in solitude...this is what I mean by beginning to draw water from the well – and God grant there may be water in it!"

[the above from various Carmelite sources on the internet.]

[The First Water or the first stage of prayer requires considerable exertion on our part —we must draw the water from the well—to listen to God about what is important, and speak to him from our hearts about those things, overcoming distractions to these things, and growing in basic goodness. As she will explain later in the “Interior Castle”, prayer is the means of entry into the Castle. Our perseverance in prayer will require a parallel in self-denial, cooperation with grace and growth in the practice of the virtues in order to be a true follower of Christ. Here, in what she later calls recollection we gather ourselves in an interpersonal focus before God and his gracious and loving majesty. This is the primary and somewhat universal ascetical quality of this stage, corresponding to the first Three Mansions and includes both vocal prayer and meditation. It is the preparatory ground for the Fourth Mansion when God intervenes more directly in our communion of life with him. Our concern, of course, in this series is not precisely the first water, but the realm entered in the following waters, but it is necessary to see the nature of the journey from the beginning. The weeds of sin and other causes of distraction needs be dealt with; they take away from the growing focus on God and all that he gives us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We must begin to see our lives as meant for a profound communion with God, and that our worship and thanksgiving and obedience and heart-deep conversion are essential to our receiving this gift of new life.]
More to come!