

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH GRAFHAM

'THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK'

14th October 2020

I am sure we all have times when it is difficult to pray. Perhaps we find ourselves wondering 'am I doing this right?'. I don't think there is a 'right' way. We all pray in different ways and the ways vary at different times. We may find ourselves drawn to praying in one particular way and not to another. There are various studies which show that different personality types are attracted to different ways. However I think that two pieces of advice from Dom John Chapman, Abbot of Downside from 1928-1933 still remain crucial: 'Pray as you can, and do not try to pray as you can't' and 'The more you pray, the better it goes'.

It is worth reminding ourselves that prayer is actually God's gift to us, not something we 'do'. The important thing is to keep turning up. Sister Wendy Beckett wrote: 'If you want to be with God then you are praying: that is all prayer is'. And if you are not sure about 'wanting', then Archbishop Michael Ramsey said 'we can want to want to' or even 'want to want to want to' and so on!

Nevertheless there are various ways in which we may become more open to receiving God's gift and responding to him. Things to think about in future 'Thoughts for the Week' perhaps. What triggered this week's Thought was realising that the Church remembers St Teresa of Avila on 11th October. It is tempting to think that the saints and mystics must be better at praying (whatever that might mean!) than most people and certainly find it easier. St Teresa's writings swiftly disabuse us of that misconception!

Teresa was born into an aristocratic Spanish family in 1515. A passionate but troubled personality, she ran away to the Carmelite order of nuns when she was twenty-one years old. From the 1550s she was drawn into desiring an ever deeper spiritual life which led to her calling for a reform of the Carmelites to recover the original simplicity of the order. Despite opposition she persisted. There are many pictures and statues of St Teresa but one which I particularly like is in front of the convent in Avila where she spent most of her religious life. It shows her not in prayer but determinedly setting out to take the message of reform further afield. Teresa understood well the necessary connection between contemplation and action. Despite wanting to be alone with God she accepted that she had practical tasks to do too, believing that she should share her own experience and insights to benefit other people.

In her teachings on prayer, Teresa is extremely honest about her own difficulties. She wrote: 'Over a period of several years, I was more occupied in wishing my hour of prayer were over and in listening whenever the clock struck than in thinking of things that were good Whenever I entered the oratory I used to feel so depressed that I had to summon all my courage to make myself pray at all'. There were times when she struggled to concentrate; times when she felt nothing was happening, when her prayer-life felt dry and much

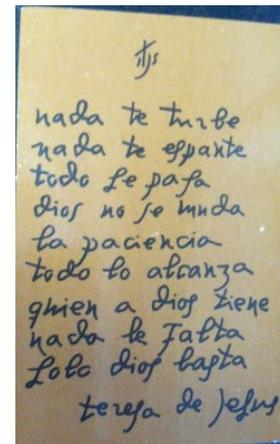


more. Yet despite her difficulties she also wrote that turning away from prayer was like a 'baby turning away from its mother's breasts'.

Teresa's own struggles gave her deep wisdom and insight which she shared extensively in her writings. She wanted to encourage people to pray and so we can still learn from her today. Teresa tells us to begin where we are. If we feel that we just recite existing prayers, then she recommends trying to become more aware of the words and what we are doing. She makes it sound almost like a matter of good manners: 'if you are to be speaking with so great a Lord, it is good that you consider whom you are speaking with as well as who you are, at least if you want to be polite'. For her prayer is 'being on terms of friendship with God'. It is a relationship - a relationship of love.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges in her own life, Teresa wrote the beautiful prayer poem, *Nada te turbe*:

Let nothing disturb you,
let nothing frighten you,
all things will pass away.
God never changes;
patience obtains all things,
whoever has God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices. Amen.



Words which can still strengthen and encourage us today in troubled and uncertain times.

Nada te turbe
in St Teresa's own handwriting

With my love and prayers

Camilla

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