Westcott House

Compline 15 October 2007

Readings: Wisdom 7:7-15; John 7:14-18

"Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true and there is nothing false in him."

Teresa of Avila, whose feast day we celebrate today, was born in 1515 in Spain. Teresa lived at a time when the Church's attitude to lay and female education was negative. Teresa writes in the Way of Perfection:

'When the Church forbade the reading of many books in the vernacular, I felt that prohibition very much [but] The Lord said to me: "Don't be sad, for I shall give you a living book".

Teresa had to rely on her relationships with others, her limited diet of reading and prayer in order to find God. Through it she had to face her own feelings of self-doubt and the censure of clerics who were sure her spiritual experiences were from the devil. We can take great comfort from the fact that her vocation and spiritual maturity took many years to form. She was no great beginner in prayer and it wasn't until she was in her forties that she began to have incredible experiences, in particular after much physical pain and suffering due to severe illness.

Teresa's story has given me great comfort and I urge you if you haven't already to read about her and her writings. During my first year here at Westcott I came up against the limitations of my own thinking and knowledge of God; it was a deeply disorientating and shocking experience. It is not easy to confront the reality of the living God and to know if our experiences and how we interpret them are true. I think we need spiritual guides like Teresa if we are to make sense of the shock of the radical love of God in our own lives: to get some kind of orientation as we meet with a knowledge that is simply not of this world.

The community that we form here and the paths that we all walk are beset with struggle. We are like the disciples in our ignorance and in our preference for the honour and glory of this world.

Jesus insists that the knowledge that comes from God is a knowledge that glorifies God, whereas any other form of knowledge is that which glorifies the speaker. Our passage from Wisdom confirms that those who seek God's wisdom obtain friendship with God. Teresa taught likewise that the 'World's honour is the greatest lie and all of us are involved in it'. She regarded the struggles of her contemporaries to seek honour in Spanish society as ignorance; but she also exposed the hypocrisy of religious institutions in which one form of honour is simply replaced by another the desire to seem holy and wise.

Teresa learnt her wisdom in community life and has much to teach us, here, living a form of community existence and entering into service in the Church. As a community desiring to serve God there are many pitfalls. Teresa, for example, tells the story of her over-enthusiasm for the Host at the Eucharist, which led her for a time, to ask for an extra large host. Discipline in our devotion is perhaps one of the hardest tasks to learn of all; for it seems so good to indulge ourselves in the love of God. I know myself that selfish desire to take from God, whereas the Eucharist as a model demands that we give. And so we have to learn to lose so much before we can begin to gain the delights that accompany the Wisdom of God.

And so what does it mean to give up our lives? It can seem like what we mean by that is simply the jobs that we leave behind, the higher salaries, the compromises we have had to make with family and friends, the places we lived. But that's the easy stuff, what we are really giving up is the value system within which we are all trapped: the self-seeking nature of all our thoughts and motivations; attachments to our own way of thinking.

When I used to meet with my old friends in the tiny amount of time that Westcott allowed for that last year, I felt like a stranger: I knew these people and the world that we occupied so well and yet I felt unsettled, and I desired so much the comfort of old ways of being. At the same time this new road I was walking was extraordinarily attractive to me, intoxicatingly so and I did not want to give it up.

Finally however, the love of God is a comfort, it brings us through struggle to right relationship with God and others. Teresa came through terrible suffering to articulate an enormous sense of well-being in the light of God's love. The fact is that if we give up our own structures of thought and values, however painful, at the end we realise our true value in God's eyes and no longer need to use others to secure it. Moreover Teresa's teachings on prayer and the inner life do not make her turn inward away from the world; on the contrary they inspire her to persevere in the difficult task of loving others. Teresa writes: "we cannot be sure if we are loving God, although we may have good reasons for believing that we are, but we can know quite well if we are loving our neighbour'. She came to live the love of God and neighbour that is the heart of the Gospel.

And the challenge for all of us is to communicate with others that strange reality of a saviour that died for us and whose flesh we eat. God's love throws us back into the world, to learn with and from others the wisdom of God that is 'unfailing treasure for mortals'.

AMEN

Imogen Nay

15-10-2007