

We have oblates of the World Community of Christian Meditation with us at present and yesterday we shared a lectio together – a ‘split screen’ lectio with some present in the guest house and the others present on screen. The text for the lectio was prompted by the day coinciding with the feast of Teresa of Avila, the increasingly well known, though not perhaps well understood, Spanish Carmelite mystic of the sixteenth century. Her writings are designed to put us on the back foot, to disturb our customary way of thinking, to unsettle us – and like the contemplative turn generally – to make us hesitate, stop and give room for God, for the Spirit, to have its say. The text we chose yesterday was from John’s gospel ‘I am the true vine etc’ and the words that struck me forcibly for the first time were ‘*You are clean (or pruned) already by means of the word that I have spoken to you*’ and the thought that scripture goes two ways – as we make ourselves present to it, it makes itself present to us and it’s the latter which is the more important in the sense that, as someone else observed, our primary job isn’t to seek intellectual understanding but simply to turn up, to be present to the text, to allow it, to allow God to do the work- which can take us in all sorts of directions we would never otherwise have thought of. As with the imagery in today’s gospel passage, where persistence, where just turning up, makes the woman rather than the judge the protagonist in the story, the one who brings about change, or better, the one through whom God is able to effect change in the judge, to make him more loving, to bring him alive to the needs of another. And this is a useful corrective to any idea that contemplation, that the mystical turn, takes us away from action or loving service – the idea perhaps that monks simply shut themselves away from the world in order to pray for it – not actually having to ‘do’ anything otherwise. This is what is so disturbing about Teresa of Avila’s brand of mysticism where she will say such things as

‘the soul’s profit consists not in thinking much but in loving much’

And you may think that one who finally gains access to the most interior mansion of the soul

‘will not remain in possession of her senses but will be so completely absorbed that she will be able to fix her mind upon nothing. But no – in all that belongs to the service of God she is more alert than before....’ And *‘all (the soul’s) concern is taken up with how to please (God) more and how or where it will show (God) the love it bears (God). This is the reason for prayer ... the purpose of the spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.’*

Like the woman in the gospel passage we become then a parable for others. This is God’s way of short circuiting our intellect, all that reasoning which can often prevent us from doing that next most loving thing. In this sense Br Herbert was and is a parable for us too.

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