

A Little Way (Mark 10. 32-45)

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I didn't make this explicit in my reflection last week, but we've begun a new short series! I'm calling it 'God of Small Things'. This theme occurred to me as I was thinking about the experience of lockdown – which almost all of us have shared at some point over the past 18 months. In these periods, as well you know, life seems radically reduced in scope. We live or have lived in invisible cages – bounded by the edges of our local government areas, our allotted times of exercise, the very few people with whom we're permitted contact.

In our gospel readings set for these weeks, Jesus and his disciples are 'on the road' – they're out in the wide world, walking between villages, encountering new people every day and from every walk of life. We, on the other hand, have been confined to the domestic sphere. Thanks to the wonders of Zoom we may meet online with colleagues, friends, members of Benedictus around the world, but in physical life many of us have barely left home for months. And this got me wondering about the spiritual significance in our tradition of constraint, smallness and hiddenness, and the invitations of the ordinary and domestic.

Last week, we touched on the vision of God present in ordinary life that had profoundly inspired Charles de Foucauld. Originally a French Trappist monk living in north Africa, de Foucauld had seen the difficult lives of the poor among whom he lived, and he yearned truly to share the real vulnerability of the human condition as Jesus had done in Nazareth. 'The Holy One of God', he wrote, 'realised his sanctity not in an extraordinary life, but one impregnated with ordinary things: work, family and social life, obscure human activities, simple things shared by all people'.¹ From this realisation came de Foucauld's decision to leave the relative safety of the

¹ Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, trans. Rose Mary Hancock (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972, 1990), p.93.

monastery and to live as a 'little brother' of Jesus, seeking to be and bear God's presence anonymously in the midst of the world. And we wondered what it might mean for us to see our circumstances and call in this light of Nazareth. This week, with the help of another French monastic, I want to continue exploring the possibilities of discipleship lived out, as it were, in 'miniature'.

Thérèse of Lisieux was a Carmelite nun who, says Richard Rohr, 'in her short, hidden life ... captured the essence of Jesus' core teachings on love'.² Born in 1873 into a devout family, she grew up (according to Czech theologian Tomas Halik) 'in a small-town household that was more bigoted than pious' and 'did not even liberate herself from those surroundings when she entered a convent' since her three sisters had also entered in turn.³ Therese was only 15 years old when she joined the enclosed order of Carmelites and she lived what was outwardly an unremarkable life. Indeed, shortly before her death at 24 of tuberculosis, her fellow nuns were discussing her obituary to be sent to other convents. One of the sisters said, 'Sister Thérèse ... is a good person, but she has done nothing. What can we write about this poor little creature?'⁴ And yet a century later, in 1997, Pope John Paul II declared her the thirty-third Doctor of the Church, the youngest person and one of only four women so named, the others being Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen. So what had happened?

Reading about Therese involves navigating the rather cloying language and sensibility of 19th century Catholic piety. She had entered the convent with the avowed determination to become a saint, and that's not an aspiration most of us find particularly congenial. Yet it was in seeking to fulfil this radical desire for God that she discovered what she called her 'little way' – a way of surprising depth, resource and (I think) relevance for our time.

² <https://cac.org/therese-lisieux-part-ii-conversion-2015-08-04/>

³ Tomás Halik, *Patience with God*, trans. Gerald Turner (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p.28.

⁴ Ernest E. Larkin, 'The Little Way of Therese of Lisieux', *The Published Articles of Ernest E. Larkin O. Carm.*, <http://www.carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin042.pdf>, p.184.

It came about like this. On entering the convent, Therese's saintly ambitions had soon run up against her own limits. She felt herself very far from the unflinching love she wanted to practice. She found reading some of the key texts of her Carmelite tradition exhausting, and her struggle to make herself perfect gave her a profound sense of her own unworthiness. She began to recognise that her only hope of holiness was to rely utterly on the goodness and mercy of God, rather than her own strength. And she described this path in terms of the newly invented technology of an elevator.⁵ 'I will seek out a means of getting to Heaven by a little way', she wrote: 'We live in an age of inventions; nowadays the rich need not trouble to climb the stairs, they have lifts instead. Well, I mean to try and find a lift by which I may be raised unto God, for I am too tiny to climb the steep stairway of perfection'.

So in a context which emphasised the accumulation of religious merit and cultivation of virtue, Therese realised that only by letting go her pious efforts and yielding the whole of herself in child-like and trusting surrender, would she be lifted up. She wrote: 'Let us love our littleness, let us love to feel nothing, then we shall be poor in spirit, then Jesus will come to look for us... and transform us into flames of love'. Her imperfection became the ground of her hope.

And this led to the second dimension of Therese's 'little way'. She understood that 'love shows itself by deeds' but, young, enclosed, female and not particularly robust, she was in no position to accomplish major outward good works. She had written two plays about Joan of Arc, but wrote of herself: 'great deeds are forbidden me'. Therefore, she said, the 'only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love'. Such things as not taking offence at an unkind word, being pleased to see a difficult sister, setting the table with loving attention, bearing pain uncomplainingly. Again – this could seem rather cloying. Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, responded to her first reading of Therese's story scathingly: 'What kind of saint was this who felt she had to practice heroic charity in

⁵ Larkin, 'The Little Way of Therese of Lisieux', p.180.

eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat ... enduring the society of mediocre souls'. It sounded, Day said, like 'pious pap'. Thirty years later, however, she saw the matter differently. Having spent her own life serving in difficult contexts, Day described this 'little way' as one of heroic sanctity, and Thérèse as 'the saint we should dread'. For this non-violent love, Day writes, love like that of Jesus is not cheap grace; it comes at a heavy price.⁽⁶⁾Larkin)

I'm aware there lurk dangers in all this, many of which feminist theologians have pointed out. There's the risk of unhealthy self-abasement, the consent to be trampled come what may, a destructive self-effacement. But interestingly, for all her talk of littleness, Therese seems to have been quite clear that her practice of radical love was not the saccharine piety of a good Catholic girl, but a costly participation in the way of Christ. She was not a doormat; she was actively seeking to allow the love of God to love through her, to respond with love to every person and circumstance.

At the outset of her religious life, Therese had said 'my vocation is to be love at the heart of the church'. By the time of her slow, painful death, her love – like Jesus' – had been radically purified. Not only had she borne the misunderstanding, even the spite, of some of her fellow nuns with patience and grace; during the last 18 months of her life, she lost all felt sense of God's presence and experienced, as did Jesus on the cross, an ever-deepening desolation. Halik writes, 'On the verge of death, Therese confesses that she has "lost her faith" and all her certainty and light – *she is now only capable of loving*'.⁷

Jesus asked James and John: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?' Therese of Lisieux teaches a way of self-emptying love available to anyone. And she shows that when it's truly embraced, then the sphere in which it operates is neither here nor there. What matters is simply that love of this profound purity is liberated, forged. The mystery is that this quality of love, however, tiny a circle of expression it seems to have, is redemptive. It

⁶ Larkin, 'The Little Way of Therese of Lisieux', p.183.

⁷ Halik, *Patience with God*, p.31.

acts in the world as a kind of depth-charge, whose impact seems out of all proportion to the magnitude of the life that incarnates it. In other words, it's the love that counts, not the size of the action it enables. The paradox of Therese's 'little way' is the paradox familiar from the letters of St Paul: 'great things are revealed in small things; God's wisdom is revealed in human foolishness ...; God's strength is revealed in human weakness'. Or as Jesus said: 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'.

Little wonder Dorothy Day described Therese as the saint we should dread. She gives us nowhere to hide. None of us is too small, too weak, too locked down or constrained in our sphere of action, to love. Whatever the outward circumstances of our lives, the little way of Therese of Lisieux is always available; and however seemingly insignificant our action, the love of God breaking through it may transform worlds.