

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 2021

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

'In my father's house there are many rooms,' so we read in John chapter 14. So where and what is this real estate? On Friday next the Church in the west celebrates the life of one of its greatest mystics, although she was much more than that – she was also a monastic, a writer, a theologian, a reformer. Teresa of Avila was a Spanish Carmelite during the upheaval of the Counter Reformation and the Spanish Inquisition. In 1559 the Inquisition notoriously banned many books of devotion. Teresa reacted against this and although the Inquisition never brought Teresa to trial, potentially serious charges were made against her numerous times. The only texts available to her and her community were those they heard in the Liturgy, and Teresa's response was to resort to the contemplative life and as a result in 1580 she wrote what is considered her greatest work: 'The Interior Castle' or 'The Mansions.' This work describes stages of spiritual evolution. For Teresa the Mansion of John 14 was an interior place where God's presence and our true selves, over time, can be discovered and nurtured.

For many of us the intellectual rather than the contemplative life is where we are nourished. We are the children of the printing press, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Reformation and modern day information technology. Contemplation has become a something for eccentrics, monastics and those dabbling in Eastern religions. But contemplation is not just some passive exercise, in Christian spirituality contemplation is the basis of a subversive reaction against the constraints of the world and indeed for Teresa the constraints of the institutional Church, in her case, The Inquisition.

Our readings today generally take us down the path of dealing with wealth, and the obstacles that wealth can put in our path. Amos is the prophet of social justice and rather sets the tone, an outsider from the South warning the people of the Northern Kingdom that their lack of justice in wealth creation will result in great loss. Jesus today engages with a wealthy young man and in classic fashion responds to his question about eternal life by asking him a question about what it is that blocks his path on this spiritual quest. It is perhaps in reflecting on the greeting of the young man 'Good teacher' and Jesus' enigmatic response: 'why call me good?' that we find out what that stumbling block might be.

In Teresa's Interior Castle there are eight stages, you begin in stage one outside the Castle and progress through seven further stages to perfection, eternal life. In Teresa's thinking the rich young man is at stage number two; importantly for those in stage two the world still appears attractive, they cling to their belongings and are concerned what other people think about them. Now, few of us are cut out to be Spanish Mystics, for many of us Teresa's writings are not immediately accessible, but bear with me and let's use Teresa's spirituality as a guide.

For many outside the Church and indeed for some within, being 'good' is crucial to understanding Christian life, thought and practice. Jesus clearly questions this idea; in the gospel passage – and incidentally this passage appears in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is one of those important texts in the

tradition. In this passage Jesus begins by asking the young man about his adherence to the Law, I've ticked those boxes he says! I've done that since I was a youngster. Ok, says Jesus, but there is one more thing! Things now begin to get rocky for this clearly earnest young man. He leaves Jesus shocked, in grief. In Teresa's thinking this man has devoted himself wilfully to the development of what they see as a 'well-ordered' life. They are, as Teresa says, 'shocked by everything.'

For Teresa 'to be 'good' without humility is to be condemned to a really wretched life.' And I think we can get a sense of what she means. Those who are good, who have ticked the boxes as it were, seem to spend quite a bit of time worrying about those us who haven't quite managed it. True religion is not about ticking boxes. St Paul describes a number of boxes ticked when he writes to the Philippians: 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.' Gosh aren't I good; but he goes on I count all this as simply rubbish!

Rowan Williams wrote 'There is a type of goodness, strenuously and violently obtained, that in order to be maintained requires a strenuous job of constant repression, projecting our own fears and uncertainties on to others and showing aggressive zeal for their improvement. In Saul's case this excessive zeal, as we likewise see evident centuries later in the Inquisition and throughout history, means eliminating those who are heterodox for the sake of maintaining our goodness, good order and purity.'

The rich young man has arrived at stage two, perhaps three in Teresa's Interior Castle. I would think this is where many are, perhaps most of us. He needs to hang on to the familiar, his possessions, his commitment to the law, his perceived goodness, the good order of his life. Jesus doesn't judge him, he doesn't judge the disciples who find all this equally difficult, we in turn are not judged. For as Hebrews reminds us in him we 'do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.'

For so many both outside and within the Church the rich young man epitomises what religious faith is all about; it is about being good, it's all about finding comfort, good order in the midst of Chaos. For Teresa there is so much more, so many more rooms to explore. Teresa reminds us that those in the third room have learnt that 'perfection consists not in consolations, but in the increase of love.'

The 'problem,' as Teresa of Avila sees it, is our lack of humility. Although Jesus himself says 'Why do you call me good?' it remains one of those markers for many people of faith. But It is not by becoming 'good,' that we can learn to live together, it is by becoming humble enough to love that which is different, the other. Our usual response to difference consists in creating ever stricter order, but the mystics, like Teresa of Avila, speak of the possibilities that lie not in regulation, not in trying to be good, not in living a well-ordered life but the discovery of who we truly are and what we are truly called to be, this is the journey of discovery through the rest of the rooms, this is the challenge Jesus places before the young man, and before us. Amen.