

Eastern Vessels

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If you were listening at this time last Monday or the Monday before, you should perhaps be able to guess the topic or subject of my few words with you today. It is, of course, St Teresa, the great Teresa of Avila, whose feast day is this 15th October. She was a most extraordinary woman: very much a woman of her time and place, 16th century Spain, in so many ways — but also a woman for today, for other times and places where Christian men and women try to pray and live spiritual lives in a world that's distracting, or even more opposed to Christian living. There's so much about Teresa that's really modern — or, at least, what we today like to think of as being modern. And she remains accessible today, and comes alive, in her writings — books that are still read and translated, and not only within the Catholic church or even the Christian family. Apart from a large collection of letters, many of them gems not only of spiritual wisdom and good advice but of astute comment and down-to-earth humanity: besides these letters there are her formal writings which run to three good-sized volumes in the complete, classic English translation of E. Allison Peers. And she did all that while being both a contemplative nun and a very busy, active woman, a pioneer and a reformer as well as a mystic — and all within the last 20 years of her life; for before that she'd been a rather indifferent nun, not blessed with very good health, in a convent that was quite lax and worldly though not any more seriously so than many convents of the day which housed large numbers of nuns with varying degrees of commitment to religious life. And Teresa was a woman: by birth, family and upbringing not an ordinary woman, it's true — but, she used to say that to be a woman was 'to feel your wings droop'. Well, here

in her letters and her accounts of her travels and founding of new convents of new convents didn't really droop all that much: [Teresa's wit and humour, openness and a zest for life as well as complete trust in the infinite goodness of God. Teresa views prayer not as a pious practice but an attitude to life — more than that, a way of life. And to live this life, the will is all-important. If there is the will to pray, the will to love, if the will is oriented towards God it's possible to find (no matter how great may be a person's fervour of spirit) a pool of tranquility, or a level untouched by the senses. God is not "up there" or "out there" — He lives within each of us, a hidden God. For Teresa, we have no need to ascend to Him, no need to speak in a loud voice, but only to withdraw within, like a tortoise or a hedgehog. But Teresa doesn't think of prayer as turning one's back on the world.. the soul she describes as having soared aloft to God remains tethered to earth as if by a thread of such delicacy that it is not felt as a hindrance — of such strength that it cannot be severed. For Teresa, prayer does not become a vague intoxicant as it did for her contemporaries the "Alumbrados" or "Illuminati" who regarded prayer as being so remote from the material world that to meditate even on Christ in his humanity was a barrier to perfect contemplation. As Teresa sees it, there's no rigid either/or dividing the spiritual from the material: contemplative prayer is not inseparable from activity. In her book "Interior Castle" she writes that QQ "Servants of Love" p 24 t-m.

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A contemporary of St Teresa was her fellow-Spaniard Tomas Luis de Victoria: here's part of his "Ave Maria" MUSIC / PRAYERS

From the Life of St Teresa, QQ id. p 40

(From: St Teresa's letters after her death):

Be thou by naught perturbed, Of naught afraid.

For all things pass Save God Who does not change.

Be patient, as at last Thou shalt of all Fulfillment find.

Hold God, And naught shall fail thee, For He alone it all.

Almighty God, our Father, you sent St Teresa of Avila to be a witness in the Church to the way of perfection. Sustain us by her spiritual doctrine, and kindle in us the longing for true holiness. We make our prayer through Christ Our Lord.