

FAITH IS LIFE

Sermon preached by Fr Bede Jarrett, O.P., at the Carmelite Church, Kensington, on the 17th October, 1922

The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains.

—Ps. 86, 1.

AS you read that story of St Teresa's life set out by her own hand, in which she describes with extraordinary simplicity and wonderful subtlety that real experience of her own soul in prayer, we see her gradually through life drawing nearer and nearer to God. What strikes one almost beyond her daring and her courage, beyond even, in a way, her love of God, is that throughout every page of that life, surging in her heart and expressed in all she said and wrote, beating through every page of it, there is such a flame of enthusiasm for her faith.

For anyone to reach so high a level as hers, to be able in some wise amid the pressure of life, still to hold God steadily in front of her in spite of opposition, perhaps because of it, somehow cheerful and quiet with this delicious peace of which she tells us—so to meet life must require very great powers of faith. She says herself she was perfectly willing to die a thousand deaths in defence of the faith or of the ceremonies of the Church; and it seems to us perhaps that her ordinary, positive, common-sense spirit has gone a little out-of-date, there is something excessive in that idea that a rubric should be of such importance to so wonderful a saint as St Teresa and to so spiritual a type of soul; but to her it is not so. There was nothing excessive, nothing out of the ordinary in such an outburst, because for her the whole of life was transfigured by faith. Her life began with faith and ended with faith.

Whatever people may say of their experiences of the mystical life, whatever any great authority of old time or of modern time, may say of that strange knowledge of God that steals into the souls of God's great lovers, St Teresa says over and over again that she never got beyond the edge of the Catholic faith. There was no knowledge or

consciousness or awareness of God other than that which came to her through the Catholic faith, and aflame as she so often was with the intense consciousness of the presence of God, it was no other than a mere vigorous act of faith.

I speak only for myself, she says, not for others.

Her friend and confessor, St John of the Cross, said that faith is the limit of all understanding in the human soul.

There is no assurance for the mystical soul, say these two who speak of their own personal experience, there is no awareness of God, except through the faith. But the faith for St Teresa meant no mere intellectual acceptance of certain truths, not simply a catechism which she learnt by heart—it was something to be lived. The Creed was no mere guide book, it was real, alive! She lived the Creed that she knew, and the faith for her from start to finish of her life was the one absorbing passion, the only reward here and hereafter. Knowledge of God can only come through the faith, and so between the pages of her Creed was set for her the whole learning of God, as it may be given from mind to mind, but she had to know and love, and knowing and loving, to find the way out to love and union.

I was ever, she says, a friend to learning, and as you read her life you find her studying the Creed. She is not above the teaching of the Church; she realised it as divine. It is God's own teaching to human souls of the way in which they should reach him.

We live in a Protestant country, we have to defend the Catholic faith, we have to quote texts of scripture, bring forward arguments; these things must be, and we need not lose by them, indeed it may be that we may gain by living in such an atmosphere, but we must beware that the Creed is no mere intellectual position that we hold, for it is not primarily so; it is first a life to be lived. It is the fuller, deeper, more splendid knowledge of God.

The faith, the Catechism, the Creed—these problems that torture mankind, that too often impatient spirits say they cannot accept because they are not in harmony with modern science, because they are not in step with it—my brethren, they are not in step with it, they are on a higher level altogether. They are separate, apart; and the Catholic

Church and these great mystical teachers, one by one they lifted the Catholic faith higher than any other religious body—and these assure us that no particle of the Creed but has its own help for human souls.

There are impenitent and angry souls, and there are kindly, humanitarian souls, to whom the idea of an unfor-giving hell is abhorrent, but, says St Teresa, once you have accepted that, your knowledge of God grows greater. It is not that you say, how can I square that with the thought of a merciful God? These things are not given to perplex us, they are not given for that, but that somehow or other, some-thing more of God's personality, a sense of God's unerring justice, may make us cling nearer to the heart of God.

Sentimental, emotional people as too often we are—(there is help in sentiments, but they require suppressing). . . God's mercy is infinite, and so also is God's justice, and unless you are willing to accept that idea of a terrible hell, you can have no real knowledge of the infinite being of God—no mystery, no truth, no article of the faith, no way of revelation, not God himself. What God is, we know by what God has done. It will and must help us to a truer, deeper, more perfect knowledge of God. It is not for us to say we cannot square that immense and immeasurable mercy. He did say these things, and if he said them, they are true. I cannot understand, but who can understand God? We get glimpses of God, we get crumbs that have fallen from his own table. For St Teresa, these things were a deeper know-ledge of God, and that, after all, is all that matters.

'There is mischief in the world', she says in one place, though she was writing in Catholic Spain, but it was during the beginning of the Reformation. She is writing of her own country; and she says, there is mischief in the world because of the vanity of those who will not accept the faith, but who torture their minds about problems to which there is no solution. She tells us what the splendour of the faith is like: it is like a clear mirror that throws back the image of God. She insists that even to her own people in her own dear country, with a faith, you would say, stretching from end to end of its great high table-land and down into the valleys all about it, she says that the faith, not accepted,

wrought terrible mischief. For her, faith is the horizon of all human life. It is knowledge of God; every article of the Creed, every word in the New Testament, every clear truth of high sanctity—that is our perfect knowledge of God.

You see, my brethren, the real thing was that she was a contemplative, and contemplation for such a soul must rest on faith. A hard thing to understand to those outside the faith, and hard even to those in the faith. People say, what is the use of all this contemplation—these monks and nuns shut away behind grilles? It is the judgment of the world. They ask what they do. Why should that girl or boy be shut away? Why not work for their neighbour? Now for us, my brethren, life is entirely different. They, you see, would justify contemplation by active work. They say the religious life should be devoted to the service of one's neighbour. They judge by your devotion to your neighbour.

To a Catholic, all that external life is only justified by a knowledge and a love of God. By us, the terms are reversed, and no amount of human service and human labour will do final good in the world unless behind it is the driving impulse of the love of God. It is the simplest and clearest teaching of our perfect Master; it is only in those invisible truths that the outward and visible life is made perfect.

'And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.' It is not the external works of man that justify his looking into the heart of God. Too many of us are content with merely doing good and not with being good, and all our doing is as wasted service without that inner heart to give it a real endurance. External activity is the work of man, and a man's work is too often gone before death itself leaves him, and all he has done becomes unpopular long before he sees the end; but God's work endures. The work of a man sometimes outlasts him, but a man who works for God is working for an eternal thing. The works of a man crumble, the works of God are full of God's own infinite greatness. God's works endure, and for us, therefore, the contemplative life has no need to justify itself. It is all that man shall do in all eternity. He shall know

God face to face, and that knowledge, with the thought of the infinite beauty of God unveiled before him, will move his heart to love. And contemplation, we say, is the final purpose of man. Why, you teach it to your children, you teach them to know God, to love God and to serve God. Service is the sum an expression of love—love expresses itself in service. Service is the mere outward form of an invisible and enduring thing, and those who cannot serve and yet know love, contribute as much—we might almost say more—to the good of the world as others. 'The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains!'

Who of you here think of the foundations of the church in which you now are? A fine church, you say, beautiful lines, fine architecture; there is a spirit of devotion about it. Yet the church would not last a day were there no foundations well and truly laid. Who thinks of that? You do not think of it for a moment. Faith is so; it is simply the best of life, and all the beauty and wonder of man's endeavours are useless without that perfect foundation that shall endure, and that foundation is the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of God is in some way a partaking of God himself. For this, says St Peter, is the participation in the divine nature. Man enters into the life of God himself.

The Church was, to St Teresa, the revealer to her of the secrets of the Son of God. God came and spoke, and, she says, there is the Master, because faith comes to us explained by the Catholic Church. She herself gives no message, but she explains the Master's message. The word is not of the Church, the word is of Christ, with the explanation, authoritative, actual, living, given from the living lips of the Catholic Church. She interprets the divine message. The divine message is lost to humanity unless they can find the meaning of it.

Our explorers who have gone from end to end of the world have sometimes come across inscriptions which no man can read; of what service are they? They may be the solution of all our problems, but what is the use? Here and there a scholar comes and fumblingly spells out the whole, and the next scholar comes and has another version. What benefit can man get out of that? And were the words of God

written and no man knew for sure, how would it profit a man? He would not know whether it were yea or nay, and all the precious message would be lost. The Church does nothing to the words of God, she merely tells us what Christ said, and it is not her meaning at all. She is merely the interpreter to us of God's own spoken word. Faith is the best of life; with it we shall know the road into the word of God.

St Teresa bids us, when we are troubled, to leave for the moment all our perplexity, to come into prayer forgetting our own needs, even at times to get right away from all perplexities of human life, to stand face to face with God, to leave everything, and to rejoice only in his divine company; and then, she says, to go back to your own life, and the problems will solve themselves. No one can find the answer to the problem in his own brain; he may find it in the brain of God. No man can answer problems out of the loneliness of his own heart, but he may find an answer in the infinite heart of God. You must look up to God to find the answer. And strange as it may seem, that is the *only* answer to man, and she quotes a sentence from St Augustine: 'That God is not as easily met with in the street or the market place, as he is met with in your own soul'.

And I suppose, my brethren, that is the truest, greatest thing St Teresa can teach us. If we can learn that from her, we have learnt a great deal, for there lies the secret of the contemplative life. It is not in the energy of life or in the pressure of life, nor in the service of humanity, that you will really find your way into God; these things are good, and if you have a love of God, you will be driven to do these things, but God is the more important of the two, and you must look to God, love him, serve him; then you will be a lover of God's own creatures. You cannot love anyone without loving the things they have made, and all humanity is God's workmanship.

And for us, my brethren, that is our lesson. We must climb the great high hills of faith.

In the streets of men the higher they build their houses the less is seen of the sky. In those great modern cities across the ocean, where the buildings lift themselves storey

by storey nearer and nearer to the skies, the heavens are narrowed by the height of the work of man; but the hills are not like that, for the higher you climb the nearer you get to the wideness of the sky, the more easily is it to be seen. For us who know human life, if we would live at all we must see things steadily and see them whole, we want to take a fair view of ourselves and our own troubles, not to be irritated or worried with the monotony of life, but to see life wider than that, to be catholic in our faith, our knowledge, our love, our lives, as in that great spectacle our Master made from the high hill of Calvary.

We too have our heights to climb, and St Teresa was a Catholic and Carmel is a hill. Let us picture the valley of Jezreel, where Elias paced in great haste, outstripping the chariot of the king, with the sweep of the rain down its steep sides. From the heights of Carmel he had seen the gathering storm and had hastened to the city that he might tell of the coming of the rain. It is on Carmel that you see the storm, not in the valley. There is no need to be told by others; you can climb yourself through faith, which will lift you above the level of other lives not so blessed as yours, and you will find that the only answer to man is at last to be discovered in the heart of God. Man's little problems will never be answered by man's ideas, even, but only by the knowledge of God. If you would help man, help yourself. If you would see your way through life, do not go beyond the borders of faith; other knowledge will help you, but faith will answer your problem.

As you see, when you go out this evening, the leaves of the trees fretted against the night sky, you see it as a thing of beauty and colour and light; it arrests you and silences you momentarily, even in cities where men toil with curses on their lips. The world is beautiful because it is God's world. But there is a world more beautiful, more enduring, more strong, and behind all is God, and God is that great hill from which a man must be lifted up to see widely and highly all human life.