

MOTHER TERESA - 11th September 2016 – Lost Coin

Last Sunday, in a ceremony attended by about half a million people, Mother Teresa was made a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

Not surprisingly, once anyone is in the media spotlight, there has been a lot of debate and discussion not only about whether she should have been fast-tracked up the ladder of sanctity, but also about the quality of her work. It seems a bit daft, to me at least, that critics should be complaining over the cleanliness of her homes when, in fact, she was trying to minister to, and alleviate the suffering of those who are considered the lowest of the low in the poorest areas of Calcutta. After all, she was called “The saint of the gutters”, a place that is not known for sweet smells and health safety policies, and she was trying to help and bring comfort to the people no one else was caring about.

It is true that she was very right wing on moral questions. But she did give her all to the despised, the unloved and the rejected.

In her acceptance speech when receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 she said, “It is not enough to say ‘I love God but I do not love my neighbour’”, and she went on to challenge her listeners to action on behalf of the poor, declaring, “In dying on the cross, God has made himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one.”

Christ, she said, “Christ is everywhere. Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile we receive.”

It’s all very authentic and challenging stuff.

But in all the dissections of her life and work, little was mentioned, from what I read, about the contents of the letters and notes she wrote to confessors and confidantes. 10 years after her death in 1997, these writings were gathered into a book called “God be my light”. And they give a very different picture of the inner spiritual life of one who, most of us would regard, as a spiritual giant.

For it appears from her letters that for almost 50 years she felt no sense of God’s presence.

In more than 40 letters and notes she wrote of darkness and loneliness where God was concerned.

Looking serene, clasping her rosary beads, kneeling in prayer she appeared to be the very epitome of someone very close to God. But for most of her life that sense of nearness to God eluded her.

The paradox of this is that her work in the slums of Calcutta was inspired by a very vivid spiritual experience in which she felt Christ telling her to minister to the poorest and the lowest of that vast city and to serve the most needy, whether the multitude of street children or the multitude of the sick and the dying.

But it seems that once her mission got going, so too did her sense of the nearness of God's presence, even in prayer and the Eucharist. She felt God to be remote – as we have been singing 'Immortal, invisible...in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.'

And yet all she did and achieved was done in the name of Christ. All her life was dedicated to following in his steps. She firmly believed in God even though she had no seemingly personal or intense experience of his presence in her life.

And yet, last Sunday, she was made a saint.

And there is great comfort for us in that.

For some people God is real, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

For some Jesus is a friend to whom we talk. For some the Holy Spirit is a tangible presence leading & guiding.

But there are many, who though they believe in God, do not have that same sense of intimacy with God.

Take, for example, one of the great poets of the last century, R.S. Thomas. He was a Welsh clergyman who spent most of his ministry in Wales in remote mountainy parishes.

In one of his poems he writes movingly about how he felt God to be impersonal. He wrote

"To one kneeling down, no word came
only the winter's song."

As a clergyman Thomas believed in God, he felt called to ministry by God. In all that he did he served God, but, like Mother Teresa for most of her life, never did he feel God to be a near presence. But yet both received great strength from God.

Their example is encouraging. And so, too, is today's Gospel reading, because in it, the point that is being emphasised is that we do not have to find God, he finds us.

We are not the woman searching, we are the lost coin that is found.

We are not the shepherd seeking for the lost, we are the sheep that has been rescued and recovered. We are the one out of a hundred that God's looks for.

A similar theme comes out of the opening verses of today's epistle. Paul thanks God because, unlikely material that he was as a persecutor of the church, God chose him. It wasn't Paul's effort that made him a Christian but the fact that God sought him out and as he says, "appointed me to his service."

About 100 years ago, just before he died, the writer Francis Thomson, wrote a poem called "The Hound of Heaven."

Although brought up in a well-to-do family in Manchester, Francis was a rebel and went off the rails a bit. In later years as he looked back on his life he realised that he had been running away – not only from his family but also from God.

But whereas his family let him go, God did not. Like the woman with the coin, and the shepherd with the sheep, God went after Francis to find him.

God's love was, and still is, a 'love that wilt not let me go' to quote another hymn. As Paul went on to say in today's epistle, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' and he has the "utmost patience" with us.

Two things so to take away from today's readings:-

It is not given to all who believe in God to have a personal experience of God. That's OK. But like Mother Teresa we can still see and serve Christ in others, especially those most in need.

Secondly, our standing as Christians does not depend on our efforts, on what we do, but on what God has done and continues to do in searching for us, until as the Hound of Heaven he finds us, and helps us to connect with him in our own individual way.

There is no class system when it comes to faith. No list of things we must believe to be accepted as a 'proper' Christian. There is no one better than any other.

Few of us will be made Saints and in fact many of us will be called many things but a Saint won't be one of them!

We are individuals loved by God who come to worship here in this church to connect with God in whatever way we can and in doing so God meets us and loves us.