



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 30: 15-20
Second Reading Philemon 1-20
Gospel Luke 14: 25-33

It is said that when St Thomas Becket's body was prepared for burial after his assassination by Henry II's barons at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, the monks were shocked to discover that under his vestments, the saint-to-be wore a nasty and extremely uncomfortable hair shirt. Wearing this garment was a constant reminder to the archbishop in a life surrounded by pomp and ceremony that the call to follow Christ meant bearing one's Cross daily and accepting the consequences.

A similar discovery is taking place now with the publication of the letters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose death took place ten years ago last week. Even at the time, Teresa's death was overshadowed by that of another more glamorous figure that same week: Diana, Princess of Wales, a woman whose every fault and personal problem was well covered by the press and her over-eager biographers. Now it is Teresa's turn, and what we learn by reading her letters has shocked both friend and foe alike by its revelation of a human being who lived much of her life in a "dark night of the soul."

First the foes: like atheist Christopher Hitchens who penned a scathing attack on Mother Teresa in 2000 and who has now written, "She was no more exempt from the

realization that religion is a human fabrication than any other person." But what does one expect from someone whose most recent book is entitled, *God is Not Great?* No, Mother Teresa wasn't perfect; as some are quick to point out she made some bad choices in her attempts to get funding for her work, and fell victim to her own weaknesses and pride. But as the best of saints will tell you, perfection is not a requirement for sainthood- redemption is.

For many, the heart-searching, and heart-breaking account of Teresa's spiritual suffering may prove not only the depth of her imperfection, but perhaps also the primary reason why she should be considered a saint. Her letters, in fact, speak of a time of spiritual dryness and virtual despair that could have been experienced by anyone. She writes:

So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them...If there be God- please forgive me-When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven- there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me- and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

These are not the kind of words expected from someone who is in the process of being raised to sainthood, particularly when she has been known for a life of self-sacrificing service to the poorest of the poor in India's slums. We want the record of her words to be full of pious and encouraging religious ideas of hope and trust and faith. Don't we? Well, perhaps not. Perhaps Teresa's innermost thoughts will vie with her selfless deeds in giving voice to the concerns and the doubts of millions of faith seekers in the world today.

I mean it when I say seekers rather than doubters: doubt is a component part of the process of seeking faith. Many who say they believe in God are trying to convince themselves of something that they don't really feel. Others go through periods of doubt and eventually but come out again, wondering perhaps which was the more real- the dark night or the bright morning. Now they hear that someone who seemed to show an almost super-human ability to follow Christ quite literally in serving the

poor might have gone through not only a *brief* period of such spiritual desolation, but (terrifyingly) most of her life. For some, including myself, this makes Teresa an even stronger candidate for sainthood in the official sense of that word: someone who is an example to follow in living the Christian life- someone whose company I would like to keep.

I hear the troubles and the concerns of many people in my professional life. The ones that I appreciate most, and the ones whom I can most effectively help, are those who are honest about their own doubts. Rather than trying to impress me with their piety, their regularity in Church or their love of Jesus, they share the inmost fears they have that their faith may not be real or their sense of God might be absent, and where some people may have a lively, powerful faith there is only darkness and a void. It is not that I enjoy people's misery, but I can deal much more effectively with those who may doubt, but who don't give up on the Christian journey despite that fact.

Today's bible readings speak of two very different attitudes towards God's dealing with human beings. The Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy says that "the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering...but if your heart turns away...you shall perish." That "carrot and stick" approach to pleasing God has caused much trouble over the centuries, and even the Jews themselves came to realize that life is never that simple. St Paul finally addressed the frustration felt by many when he said that following the rules isn't always enough, or even possible for us. As Christians, we may believe that Christ died for our sins and opened the way to everlasting life, but that doesn't guarantee that our lives will be free from sickness, disaster or even such dark nights of the soul as we encounter in the life of Mother Teresa. That is the simple and blunt fact of the matter.

What the Gospel says today is also blunt- perhaps *too* blunt for us. Christ tells us that we must hate our own family members if we are to follow Him. Horrified Christians throughout the history of our Faith have quickly subjected that verse to explanations and rationalizations to cushion the blow of so offensive a sentiment. But Jesus was speaking in extremes to prepare his followers for an extreme life of

persecution and misunderstanding. Even if we don't choose schizophrenically to hate those we love, we will find that there are times when the call to follow God doesn't come naturally or comfortably. Mother Teresa found that out for most of her life, and yet she persevered in living out the Gospel command to love and to show compassion. Many other saints have done so, too- and the best ones have been honest about it both to themselves and, thankfully, to others. I am thankful that Teresa's instructions to destroy her correspondence were ignored.

The saying of Christ that follows in today's Gospel reading is the one that should stick: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." For some, the cross to be borne will be death for the Christian faith. They are perhaps the lucky ones since their sacrifice will be clear and noble: it will give meaning to suffering. For others, their cross will be subtle and involve choices in career or the use of leisure time that will alienate old friends without immediately guaranteeing new ones.

But for a few unlucky, but nevertheless blessed Christians, bearing the Cross may involve a time of spiritual darkness and loneliness- questions about meaning, relationship and the worth of plugging on with life. These Christians are blessed because, I believe, there are some very notable prototypes in the lives of the saints of those who have kept going despite the darkness, trusting a God who they *wanted* to be there even if He didn't *seem* to be. For those who doubt and who still go on, this cross may be the hardest of all. Ask Teresa; she knew it all too well. And now, we pray, she knows clearly *why* that cross was worth bearing. As she wrote about her internal suffering in one of the letters which can now bring comfort to countless other faith-seeking Christians: "If this brings you glory- if souls are brought to you- with joy I accept all to the end of my life." For her sake and for ours....Amen.