

Feast of St. Teresa, October 15, 2013

Homily by Fr Dominic Borg, ocd

“My heart sings with joy to the living God.” That was the response that we expressed in the Responsorial Psalm this evening, and I hope that we expressed it not just with our lips but that it was an overflow coming from our hearts. Here it says that *“my heart sings with joy to the living God”*. It is clear from the Scriptures that joy comes to you and to me when we listen to the Word of God. Jesus Christ explicitly said *“These things I have said to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy will be complete.”* Those who heard these words experienced the joy that was burning in their hearts. So much so that the disciples of Emmaus said to each other *“Were not our hearts burning with joy when He was explaining to us the Scriptures?”* This joy comes to you and to me today too brothers and sisters when we open our ears and prepare our hearts so that the Word of God will be instilled in our hearts the way this Word was instilled in the hearts of our holy Mother St. Teresa.

Sometimes we take many things for granted as we are doing, for example, today. We take many things for granted. We take for granted the fact that we have the Scriptures. We take for granted the fact that we have the words of St Teresa of Jesus. We have them there, we put them on the shelf, we do not study them, we do not read them, we do not analyze them. It is not enough to just read them. It is not enough to read the Bible. The Word of God has to be imprinted in our lives. It is the same with the words of St Teresa. What use is it that we read the Way of Perfection, that we read the Interior Castle, that we read her meditations on the Song of Songs? What use is it if we do not strive to allow these words to become flesh in our lives so that other people will be able

to see them? *“When they see your deeds, they will give praise to your Father who is in heaven.”*

Our deeds have to shine. It is not enough that there will be a deed, it has to shine with joy, the way that when a person is rendering a service with joy, you look at the face of that person, you look at the way that person is doing the service and his work, his face. His behavior shines. That is what Jesus Christ told us *“Let your light thus shine on others so that seeing your good deeds they will give praise to your Father who is in heaven.”*

Did I say we take things for granted? Yes, such as for example, because the letter of Jude is short, it is a short letter, only one chapter. Because it is short, we do not hear much about it. We hear about the first letter of John, that it speaks about love and so we go to read the first letter of John because we want to grow in love, grow in our love for God and in our love for each other. We hear about the letter of James because it is so practical. It speaks about gossiping. It tells us that *“whoever has no wisdom let him pray to God and he will receive this wisdom”*. But it also tells us *“let him pray properly without any doubt”*. It tells us also to put into action the Word of God. And so the letter of James is very practical and you are familiar with it. I wonder how many of us this evening noticed that the reading in the Evening Prayer was taken from the letter of Jude. Listen once more to the word that has been presented to you and to me today in this opportune occasion. *“Beloved, grow strong in your holy faith through prayer in the Holy Spirit. Persevere in God’s love, and welcome the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to life eternal.”*

These words are very much opportune to the situation, to the celebration we are living

this evening. Here it says *“Beloved, grow strong in your holy faith”*. You have been hearing, I have been preaching about living this year of faith, the importance of learning how to unwrap the gift of faith, how in Psalm 119, verse 130 tells us that *“the unfolding of your word gives life, it inspires understanding, even to the simple”*. And here, are the psalms, in this year of faith telling you and me as Jude is telling us *“Beloved, grow strong in your holy faith, through prayer.”* On one side St Paul says *“faith comes by hearing, and hearing (obeying) the Word of God”* because it involves hearing.

We encounter a problem here, the problem of selective hearing. Many times the Word of God, in my life and in our life, falls on deaf ears, and we allow it to pass by us without leaving its effect. We don't invite the Word of God to come inside our lives to transform us, to change us, to give us the courage, the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of awe, the spirit of the fear of God. I don't know how many of you noticed, for example, in Isaiah. Isaiah does not speak about the “gifts of the Spirit”, but he speaks about the “spirit of wisdom”, not the gift of wisdom “the spirit of courage” not the gift of courage, “the spirit of understanding”, “the spirit of wisdom”, “the spirit of the fear of the Lord”, “the spirit of awe”. It is the outpouring of the spirit, the spirit that overflows through our actions.

And here he is telling us ... so James knows that on one side faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God, on the other side he is speaking about the importance of prayer in the expression of our faith. The importance of prayer so that our faith will continue to increase – The disciples prayed to the Lord *“increase our faith”*. The centurion said to Jesus Christ *“Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief.”* I believe

that you can do it, and yet I don't believe that you are going to do it with me. Help me in my unbelief. Jesus Christ asked him *“Do you believe that I can cure your son?”* and the answer was not *“yes, I believe”*, he said, *“Yes, I believe because I have seen you doing it with others, help me in my unbelief, I don't yet believe that you are going to do it with me.”* But here is this reading from Jude that challenges you and me to open our hearts to receive the mercies of God given to us through Jesus Christ. What St Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians *“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the abundance of love with which He loved us, when we were enemies”*, He gave us the gift of His Son, much more now that we are trying to be reconciled with Him. Here Jude continues to tell us that we are being challenged to grow strong in our holy faith through prayer in the Holy Spirit.

In the second reading from the letter to the Romans, we were told about the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of love, it is the Spirit that gives us the freedom, the courage to turn to our God and address Him as our Father. And then, if God is our Father, then we are brothers and sisters. We are His children, heirs to His kingdom. And so, we have to be on guard brothers and sisters about these words of the Gospel, these words of the letter of Paul to the Romans, because, if we do not take these words seriously, they will not have an effect on our life. They will not take root. And if they do not take root, then it would be strange to expect that we are going to harvest the fruits from the tree, the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, self control. It would be a stupid attitude to expect to harvest fruit from the tree if the tree is not there.

That is why St. Paul says *“Do not stifle the Spirit, do not suffocate the spirit.”* Allow

the Spirit to flow with the freedom that love gives, the kind of love that St Paul says in his letter to Corinthians *“Christ has set you free. Do not submit yourself to the yolk of slavery again.”*

So we are living in this Year of Faith and Jude is throwing at you and me this exhortation to continue to grow in faith. It is not enough that we read a lot about it, which is good. It is not enough that we read the works of St. Teresa, which is good, and we should, and we are. The same it is with the Scripture. Our holy Mother Teresa tells us. The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives the example of St Teresa, how she was in love with the Book of the Gospel as St. Therese was. Next to her heart was a copy of the Gospel and without Biblical spirituality, make no mistake about it, there is no Carmelite spirituality. There is no Carmelite spirituality without Biblical spirituality, because Carmelite spirituality is first and foremost biblical spirituality, so much so that our Rule, the Rule of St Albert is full of biblical citations. It is there where we are not only encouraged, but we are admonished: *“This book of the law should not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate upon it day and night. Have I not told you? Have I not encouraged you? Be courageous. Do not be afraid for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”* It is this pattern that our holy Mother experienced, especially in the love for one another. This is why she speaks so much about this kind of love both in the Way of Perfection and also in the Interior Castle. This kind of love that is seen in the first reading today is this Spirit of Wisdom *“I prayed and the Spirit of Wisdom was granted to me.”*

In the Old Testament we find the word incarnate in this expression *“the spirit of Wisdom”*. Father Eugene in his two books

“I want to See God” and *“I am a daughter of the Church”* speaks explicitly about the Wisdom of love and St. Teresa does the same. After the third mansions in the Interior Castle when the fourth mansions kicks in, she begins to speak about being open to this Wisdom of love, to be more open so that the power of God will begin to manifest itself through our actions, that we become not just puppets, but we become coordinators with this Wisdom of God. That before there was some passiveness, that we are being watched by God from afar. But now He is very near, and we have to create this friendship. That is why in the Book of her Life, in chapter 8, paragraph 5, which is the very classical definition of prayer, she speaks of prayer as being a relationship, an intimacy, a conversion, making time to have frequent conversation with the one whom we knows loves us. It is a relationship. Prayer is a relationship. And unless we have a love relationship with the Word of God, the Word of God will not open itself to you and to me. We suffocate it, we block it. The same it is with our Mother, when she speaks about prayer. We all know, and we have heard it many times, but it is not a matter of hearing it brothers and sisters. It is a matter of listening. And when we listen we obey.

Listening is the first duty of love. To listen means to obey, as Jesus Christ said *“If you love me you will obey my commandments.”* And our holy Mother St. Teresa, in the Way of Perfection, when she begins to speak about prayer, paragraph 4 to paragraph 7, she mentions the three instructions for a genuine prayer. From paragraph 4 to paragraph 7, mostly she speaks about the first instruction, loving one another. It is so important. The noted Spanish scholar Thomas Alvarez is the greatest authority on the teachings and Teresian studies, the teachings of St. Teresa. Many times I have

seen the book for sale in our meetings “100 Themes St. Teresa of Avila”. He speaks in this book about this very topic that we find in the books of St. Teresa. Topic number 93 speaks about the love for one another because you know that these are the three instructions that St. Teresa gives.

In chapter 4, paragraph 12 it speaks explicitly about the importance of loving each other, and there in paragraph 12 it says “There are two kinds of love. There is a love that is imperfect and there is a love that is spiritual”, a love that later on, she continues to expand upon where she speaks about the mysticism of love in chapter 27 to chapter 35 of the Way of Perfection. Before that she speaks about the importance of these three things: love of one another, love of our neighbour, detachment and humility. She says explicitly that in the convents, in the monasteries that she was establishing, she wanted them to be a house of love, where they love each other. She gives the warning to the Superiors to love the sisters, to love the friars, because when they discover that the Superior loves them then it is easy for them to obey the Superior.

She gives the same instructions to the Master of Novices that they should love. And you and I too – how much do we love our brothers and sisters, because St Teresa says that there is this love which is imperfect, a love which is a sensual love based on affection (you know, I like that person, he is my brother, she is my sister, he is my cousin) so what! – you will impress me when she is my enemy and I love her ... that’s when you will impress me with your love, not when you are loving just your brother and your sister. That is still imperfect love, St Teresa says. It is the spiritual love that is important - when we learn to love the other person because we learn how to see the image of Jesus Christ in

that person, because we are open to the commands of the Lord. Don’t kid yourselves brothers and sisters. The importance of love in our communities, not only our love for each other, but also our love for the outsiders, is a must that we have to cultivate, otherwise the punishment will fall upon us – it will.

“This I command you, to love one another as I have loved you.” We must have an open heart for our brothers and sisters, for those who are in need, for the weak. The Pope says it explicitly for heaven’s sake. He has been talking constantly ...”it is more important to discover God’s love in us than our love for God”. And once we discover this love, God’s love in us, *“The love of Christ impels us”*, St Paul says, it pushes us. It widens our hearts.

Here is the definition of Mother Teresa of Calcutta on prayer. She says “Prayer is the enlargement of the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of Himself.” When I close my heart, when I close the doors of my community to someone who is weak, brothers and sisters, we are closing our hearts to God, *“because I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink ... I was hungry and you did not feed me ... I was sick and in prison and you did not come to visit me”* These are the people - Jesus Christ comes to you and to me in disguise.

We continue to speak about the strength of the community. How many times do we have to hear it, that the strength of the community does not consist in the most spiritual person in the community. The strength of the chain is in the weakest link of the chain. And the same it is with the community. The strength of the community is in the weakest person in the community, and it is to that person that we are challenged to open our hearts. It is in that

the situation where we are challenged to manifest God's mercy to that person that needs it. *"Go and learn that I desire mercy and not sacrifice."* What God has said to King Saul *"Obedience is better than sacrifice."*

Yes, we all know that St Teresa speaks about the danger of blind obedience sometimes, but make no mistake about it brothers and sisters, in the Bible we find *"blind obedience"* many times. And blind obedience has placed the people of God in the fire and in front of martyrdom, but God gave them the courage to accept the martyrdom, to bear witness. And God, when the youth of Daniel, blind obedience put them in the fire, He sent an Angel for them and He sent a breeze that surrounded them and not only did the fire not touch them, the bible said that *"not even the smell of the smoke was on their hair and on their clothes"*. *"If you love me, you will obey my commandments."* And our holy Mother St. Teresa says *"If you want your prayer be genuine, make sure that these three elements are the makeup of your prayer – love of your brother and sister, love of your neighbour, detachment and humility."* Humility is the truth. It is when we learn how to be humble that we are ready to receive what Jesus quotes in today's Gospel *"out of them will gush living water welling up to eternal life"*. The water is the symbol not only of the Spirit in the Bible, but also it is the symbol of the Torah.

Moses, who learned how to receive the Torah, the Word of God, the Bible says about him that he was *"the most humble person on earth"*. That is why his prayer was heard. As soon as he saw his sister struck with leprosy he turned towards God and said to him *"God, heal her, and do it now!"* and she was immediately healed.

He was a person who was humble, who was filled with the power of God's Word. The same it is with you and with me. We have heard it many times about these three elements that make up genuine prayer, about these three instructions that St Teresa gives to the sisters so that their community will be a community of love. It is about time that you think seriously about putting them into action starting from myself. When we put these things into action, then it will be the time that we will be able to bear witness that you and I as Carmelites, are not just called to pray, but we are called to become prayer in Carmel.