

Out of the long dark night, the fruits of love – Homily for Trinity XVII

Isaiah 5.1–7

Philippians 3.4b–14

Matthew 21.33–46

In 2007, a collection of private letters by Mother Teresa of Calcutta was published for the first time. She had written them to her spiritual directors over her lifetime. They disclose the inner spiritual life of a person revered for her dedication to the poorest of the poor. Indeed, with her characteristic small frame, white and blue religious habit, and her uncompromising, compassionate yet mischievous demeanour, Mother Teresa embodied for many the love of God – for people of faith and none. She was one of a handful of people who shone as a true beacon of holiness amid a dark period of history that had seen two world wars, the onset of the cold war, and growing disparity between rich and poor.

Against this backdrop, the content of her letters can shock. Indeed, they were shocking to many when they were first published. For they speak of a deeply painful and abiding sense of God’s near total absence. For example, Mother Teresa writes:

Where 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. Love — the word — it brings nothing. I am told God lives

in me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

In the history of the church, Mother Teresa is not alone in writing about the absence of God in such terms. She echoes the voices of many throughout the ages. People like the Spanish poet and mystic St John of the Cross who famously speaks of the dark night of the soul.

Mother Teresa lived this dark night for some 50 years until her death. She did so while continuing in her unwavering commitment to the welfare of the most vulnerable, sharing with them God's love and human kindness. In fact, she saw the two as intimately connected. Not only did she see her painful sense of God's absence as sharing in Christ's abandonment on the Cross but she believed this was for the sake of sharing God's love with others, especially the most rejected and despised.

This paradoxical connection between a sense of God's absence and a dedication to others lies at the heart of our parable today. Jesus begins the parable with a beautiful account of an adoring landowner planting and caring for his beloved vineyard. This image sings with the tender abundance of God's loving presence in creation and the life of his chosen people, Israel. Yet is precisely this that makes it startling when we are told that the landowner left the vineyard and went to another country.

Traditionally, this has been understood as speaking of a mystery at the heart of our faith: God's apparent absence or hiddenness. This serves, however, a crucial purpose. God's hiddenness is associated with nurturing the fruits of human freedom. Rather than an overbearing cartoon deity whom we have no choice but to worship or be damned, God veils his presence amid the vineyard of creation. God gives us space to act freely and grow into the full stature of our dignity as made in the image of God.

To see God's hiddenness as vital to safeguarding human freedom and dignity challenges a perennial temptation in the life of faith, namely, to identify our own sense of inner conviction and emotional certainty with the proof of God's presence in our lives. This risks making God in our own narcissistic image.

Here Mother Teresa's experience is instructive. She shows that intimacy with God and living out the fullness of God's love in our lives does not depend on specific subjective states of spiritual achievement and psychological self-assuredness. In fact, she shows that experiences of profound doubt and uncertainty, struggle and anguish, God's absence even, can be wholly compatible with God's creative presence. This is profoundly liberating for those who find the language of faith difficult, for those who struggle with the debilitating mental illness, the abused, the sorrowful, the bereaved, for those who have lost faith. Indeed, Mother Teresa speaks into the heart of our culture's

agony with its pervasive sense of God's absence, its uncertainty about human value and purposes, and its myriad anxieties amid a time of unprecedented crisis. The burden of Mother's Teresa long dark night and life of service is that even atheism, anxiety, despair and suffering can be taken into the service of God's hidden purposes for the sake of building up the glorious liberty of each person.

In Christian terms, this is the way of the cross, of dying to self and rising to selfless love. For some like Mother Teresa, this may include a vocation to share in Christ's own intense suffering and experience of God's absence: Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane; his forsakenness on the Cross. We hear this echoed in our second reading today when St Paul says, for Christ's sake, 'I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.' But here we should be careful. We must not make loss, darkness, despair and emptiness final in way that imprisons us and shuts out God's offer of grace. For that is an insidious idol of despair. Rather, whatever we are feeling or not feeling, the desert landscape will blossom into a fruitful vineyard. The wood of the cross does bud with the green shoots of life.

Mother Teresa reminds us here that what is key is whether we as individuals, as a church, and even as a society can allow our experiences of emptiness, pain and God's absence to change us and turn us outward towards others, especially the most vulnerable. We must not misuse our freedom and be like the tenants in the parable

who cannot countenance a hidden God and violently reject those God sends. Rather we manifest God's hidden presence by living freely in solidarity with others, particularly those whose dignity has been denied them.

This is to live hidden in Christ. In Christ, God transforms God-forsakenness into the site of self-giving and transformative love in which no-one is left out. In Christ, God turns the violent rejection of God and humanity into the cornerstone of renewed human community. In our Gospel, Jesus declares that the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls. These difficult words soften when we realise that this stone is made up of the weight of the glory of God shining in our fellow human beings, even as it shines in the sacraments, the words of scripture and a common life dedicated to loving service. To carry the full weight of the glory of others will indeed break and crush all that is unloving in us and refashion us. We cannot do this alone but only by letting ourselves, with Mother Teresa and countless others, become living stones in the vineyard of God's love, capable together of bearing the fruits of God's kingdom of justice and pressing out of darkness and emptiness the true wine of thanksgiving – God's most holy Eucharist.