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14<sup>th</sup> October 2007, Evensong  
The Vigil of St Teresa of Avila  
Propers: Romans 8:22-27; Matthew 5:13-16; Psalm 42:1-7

In the Autobiography which she completed towards the end of her life, Saint Teresa of Avila gives us a description of her parents, along with a disparaging estimate of her own character. "The possession of virtuous parents who lived in the fear of God, together with those favors which I received from his Divine Majesty, might have made me good, if I had not been so very wicked."

She was born Teresa Sanchez y Cepeda, a name which indicates an aristocratic birth and the circumstances of her father's wealth and privilege. He was wealthy enough to order his clothes from Paris – uncommonly wealthy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – yet he was denied admission to the elite levels of society because his father was a convert from Judaism – if one can call an Inquisition conversion truly one of heart. Teresa is said to have been beautiful – she had many men courting her, yet she found the prospect of marriage loathsome. And so, there being basically two choices available to women of that century, she

denied marriage and entered the Convent – and although convent life required submission of a different sort, she found that she relished religious life. At age forty she began to have mystical visions and raptures.

After a few years the visionary experiences diminished and her spiritual life took on a quieter, more self-focused tone. She re-entered a life of deep quiet prayer and struck out to visit convents throughout Spain as a reformer. She herself was persecuted during the worst years of the

Inquisition, yet she remained faithful to her ministry and faithful to her God.

On her deathbed in 1582 she held her prayer book, and in the prayer book was her bookmark, the outpouring of her own heart:

Let nothing disturb you,  
 •Let nothing frighten you,•  
 All things pass away:•  
 God never changes.•  
 Patience obtains all things.•  
 He who has God  
 •Finds he lacks nothing;•  
 God alone suffices.

Teresa's travels through Spain and her travels within the realms of her own heart strengthened her resolve – she needed, *ached*, to spend time in contemplative prayer, and it is the spiritual practice of contemplative prayer that she urged her sisters to follow. “Everything amounts to seeking God,” she wrote, and her manner of prayer was one which entered the quieter realms of the spirit in that search for the Divine.

“Be still and know that I am God,” the Psalmist wrote (Psalm 46:10) – and the

call to quiet, contemplative, centering prayer may be one of the most difficult to answer. We are so used to structure. To instruction, to verbal leadership, to a talkative sort of direction... that to be told simply to “be quiet” is quite unnerving. “Be quiet and...do what?” one asks. “Be quiet. Be still. Allow yourself to enter the realm of God's presence.”

And in that presence, wrote Teresa and hundreds of contemplatives since, we may begin to know God.

In the quiet presence of God we may learn something. We may learn something about God – and we may learn something about ourselves. For in that time of quiet prayer it is quite possible to achieve a new insight into one's vocation. If we are quiet enough, still enough, it is quite possible to achieve a new insight into who we are and how God desires us to be.

It is quite possible, of course, to hear absolutely nothing. And there's nothing "wrong" with that, because if we are truly still and open to the whisper of God we have already begun a journey.

A modern writer has said, "*Christian Contemplative Prayer* is the opening of mind and heart - our whole being - to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions, whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, thinking, feeling and choosing; even closer than consciousness itself. The root of all prayer is interior silence. Though we think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, this is only one expression. Contemplative Prayer is a prayer of silence, an experience of God's presence as the ground in which our being

is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.”

Teresa of Avila knew that. For Teresa, the constant seeking of God in prayer *was* her life, the ground of her being. The manner in which she entered into the religious life so fully was one of determined humility and fragile hope. Her prayerful persistence in the face of persecution is an example to us all – that a life of deep prayer can be its own end, and our own quiet response to the love of God.

Let nothing disturb you...God alone suffices.

Amen.