

Sermon for 6th May 2018.

In response to questions some parishioners have asked about the Christian mystics, I have included something in my pew sheet message that offers a brief account of mysticism – and in the sermon today I will talk a little about our visit on pilgrimage to the places of St John of the Cross 16th century mystic and St Terese of Avila, of the same era.

Today is the 6th Sunday of Easter and today's gospel reading is part of Jesus' farewell discourse which spans from the end of the 13th chapter to the close of the 17th chapter in John's gospel.

To put the gospel story in context, it is the time of the Passover and Jesus is with the disciples as they share the Passover meal together – or as we know it – 'the last supper.'

Jesus has washed the disciple's feet, and Judas had fled into the night to betray him.

In the absence of Judas, Jesus imparts to his disciples all he can about the intimacy into which they are called.

In simple terms, we, his disciples, are to make our home in him and we are to let him make his home in us. The space within – or interior home - is to be a place of rest for one another - and a place of presence to one another.

Our interior home is to be a resting place out of which comes life and creativity. It is in essence - a mutual indwelling between Jesus and ourselves which Jesus calls "friendship."

Now this is a different type of friendship from that of human friendship – which as I'm sure we know and experience, can be loving, loyal and intentional- but which lacks actual indwelling real presence of one another.

In friendship with Jesus, however, indwelling presence is a reality, for he abides in us in real presence, as do we in him.

Now here's the thing - this indwelling - is the key of Jesus friendship with us – because it is this that makes obeying Jesus commandments, not like a military sense of duty; but in a way that is following and sharing in the desire of the one we love who dwells within.

Jesus indwelling presence, has, down through the age become a conscious reality for some disciples, who have experienced it as a burning love within.

Mystics like John of the Cross lived this burning love, seeing Jesus as the bridegroom of the soul, and in the beauty of his poetry we hear the depth of this personal experience.

On our pilgrimage after leaving Norwich UK and Julian of Norwich, we travelled to Spain where we visited the places of St John of the Cross and Terese of Avila.

I loved Spain. I loved the food, the warm nature of the people, and the wine wasn't bad either.

We were in Segovia for Palm Sunday and we watched the massive crowds (many thousands of people), gather to watch the procession of the different church and community groups that wound through the streets, waving palm branches and leading the huge float carrying Jesus on the donkey.

There were thousands of people there and at one point three of us found ourselves leading a massive band playing drums and trumpets.

How that happened I still don't know. But it was pretty spectacular.

Segovia was the place where St John and St Terese shared both time together as friends and the same burning love for Christ.

St John of the Cross, was born Juan Alvarez in 1542. He studied philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca.

John entered the Carmelite Order at age 20 and was given the name John of St Matthias. He received his habit in Feb 1563 and received permission to follow the original Carmelite rule.

He was told in a vision that he was to serve God by helping to restore the ancient religious Carmelite order to its original rule which was one of simplicity, prayer and contemplation, emptying oneself of all that hinders personal communion with God.

John met Terese in Medina when she came to found a convent. Both John and Terese were of the same mind about restoring the Carmelite order to its original rule and they worked together to do this over the years.

Although reforms spread widely, as you can imagine this was not an easy task –both John and Terese suffered greatly from those who opposed the restoration of the Carmelite order.

John was even imprisoned during the reforms and Terese was locked out of her own convent by the nuns at one point.

Despite all hardships their resolve to restore the order to its original rule – which was ultimately to seek deeper intimacy with God – prevailed.

Both John and Terese wrote extensively about their visions and their union with Christ, and their writings expressed a deep understanding of spiritual truth which led many readers to a fresh understanding of their own interior life. St. John of the Cross died in 1591 and was canonized in 1726.

His poetry and prose is considered the summit of mystical Spanish literature and has had a profound impact on the church down through the ages.

Probably his best known theological work is “Dark Night of the Soul” in which we learn that feelings of interior darkness, isolation and aloneness are part of our journey into oneness with God.

When we visited the monastery where he spent many of his years and where his bones now rest, we spent some time in the gardens where he would sit and contemplate prayerfully.

As we entered the gardens, the birds that we had not heard anywhere else in the grounds – began to sing. The sound was beautiful. I felt very deeply that I was present to holiness there – and standing on holy ground. I prayed for you all in that garden.

St Terese was also a prolific writer. She wrote for her sisters, that she might support them in the way of contemplative prayer.

Her major writings include, the well-known “Interior Castle,” a work inspired by her vision of the soul in the shape of a castle containing seven mansions, which she interpreted as the journey of faith through seven stages, ending with union with God.

Terese described the unity in the indwelling real presence of Christ within, like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rain water cannot be divided.

As I understand things, both St John of the Cross and St Terese of Avila knew and experienced the burning love in the real presence of Jesus in friendship.

My prayer for each one of us is that we may glimpse this wonder, and continue to open our hearts and minds to humility, simplicity, contemplation, prayer, love for one another and especially receptivity to the indwelling love of God in our lives through Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord be with you.