

## Handy Hints

A filthy night in the sixteenth century. Gales, rain and a horse and its rider bogged down in mud on what passes for a road. The rider, a nun, looks up at the sky and shouts at God, 'If this is the way you treat your friends, I'm not surprised you haven't got many'.

That's just one of numerous stories about St Teresa of Avila who we remember on the 15<sup>th</sup> of this month. She's famous not just for her holiness but for her down-to-earthness. That included commonsense advice.

In her writing, Teresa points out that a lot of people have no real self-knowledge – that is, no real understanding of their inner selves and of the deep potential they have for relationship with God and transformation by Him. They are content to live outside themselves in a world of external realities with barely a glance at their inner world. Teresa compares such people with the physically paralysed who have limbs but are unable to move them. Those who live on the surface of life have souls but are unable to move them. They're suffering from an interior paralysis.

Prayer is Teresa's remedy for this. A good starting point is to settle down with a Bible and after reading a few pages – say, of the life of Jesus – to think for a while about what has just been read. This kind of meditation can only do good and sometimes, during it, God may take hold of our thinking and pull us down into a deep and direct experience of Him. Teresa also tells us not to worry too much about that bane of prayer, wandering thoughts. Like a choppy sea which is nonetheless still in its depths, so too we can be united to God at our centre even if, on the surface, our thoughts are racing.

Another piece of advice is to keep our eyes fixed on God at all times. That way, we'll see our own faults clearly and learn the crucial lesson of humility. Just as black stands out against white, so we see ourselves for what we are against the backdrop of God. Keeping our eyes on Him has other benefits too. It prevents us from getting too preoccupied with ourselves, too self-centred and too discouraged. On this last point, Teresa repeatedly tells us not to give up when we make a mess of things. God can even bring good out of our falling. Teresa says it's like a man selling a cure who drinks a poison first to prove that the antidote works!

One final reason for focusing on God is to avoid the wiles of the devil. For Teresa, he's a very real force who works like a 'noiseless fire' and we often fail to realise that an angel of light was, in fact, an angel of darkness until it's too late. The devil wants at all costs to stop us a) loving God and b) loving each other. Teresa warns us that he's particularly fond of getting us into the habit of back-biting, gossiping and seeing other people's faults too clearly and our own not at all. Remember, she says, that the *only* test of whether we're making progress in the spiritual life is whether or not we're growing in love.

**Brian Shand**