

RESTING IN GOD – OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL

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The following reflection was given at the combined 'Day for the Carmelite Family' and pilgrimage in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel held at Aylesford Priory on Sunday 17th July 2011.

Fr. Joseph's reflection began with a reading from Ephesians 3:14-21.

'Our Lady of Mount Carmel' – the title sums up how Carmelites throughout the centuries have related to Mary, Mother of Jesus. Our symbol is the scapular – the habit of Carmel. People who wear the scapular participate in some way in the Carmelite story and spirit, particularly in relation to Our Lady. It is the reminder to us of our commitment to live 'in allegiance to Jesus Christ' inspired by the example of Mary, 'The Lady of the Place', as the first Carmelite hermits called her when they dedicated the chapel on Mount Carmel to her. The scapular is also reminder of Our Lady's commitment to us as she accompanies us throughout life and in the passage from this life to the eternal life with God.

Carmelites throughout centuries have viewed Mary, mother of Jesus, from different angles. Like all Christians, Carmelites have viewed Our Lady as Mother, of course, but also as Sister, the one who accompanies us on the road of life and particularly on the journey deeper into the mystery of God. From the very beginning of the Order, Carmelites believed that Mary had a very special care for 'her Order' as she was the Patroness since those early days on Mount Carmel.

What attracted Carmelites to Mary above all is the intimacy which she experienced with God represented by her giving birth to the Son of God. One of our modern documents says: "*Carmelites see in the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and archetype of the Church, the perfect image of all that they want and hope to be.*"

This intimacy with God is another way of describing contemplation. Contemplation is not an attitude or a prize for being extra good. It is an intimate way of relating to God that affects how we relate to other people and to the world around us. Normally we have to put some effort into the relationship with God. In the midst of all the distractions around us, we hear a call to enter within, to our inner room, so that we can converse with God. Saint Teresa talks about the reptiles that inhabit the land outside of 'The Castle'. We have to shake these off and enter through the door of the castle, which is prayer. If we wish to rest in God, we have to make for the innermost chamber where God dwells. On this journey we will change or be transformed.

To be a Carmelite is to be a contemplative, committed to the journey of transformation. Clearly to be a contemplative has to mean different things according to one's state in life. I am convinced that the Carmelite vocation is the same for friars, nuns, sisters, and lay people, but obviously it has to be lived in very different ways.

This contemplative way of seeing reality is impossible without a serious commitment to prayer, or as our sister Teresa of Avila said, "a determined determination". The test of the authenticity of prayer is how we live our daily lives. Even prayer can be used as an escape from reality. The reality that surrounds us is the place where we are called to meet God here and now. This reality can be difficult, it can be challenging, but nevertheless it is the sacred space where we meet God. Prayer is an opening of our hearts, our lives, to God, so that God can transform our lives. God has a plan for each one of us and for our world. We are invited to co-operate in this great plan of salvation and re-creation. Mary's response was eager acceptance – "Oh let what you have said be done to me". What is your response?

Mary listened to the Word of God; she pondered things in her heart; she thought about what happened to her and she was able to discern the voice of God in the midst of her day-to-day reality. Like Our Lady, we are asked to listen to the Word of God no matter how it comes to us. Our Lady had no barriers in her to the accomplishment of God's will since she was without sin and so she knew how to listen. Unfortunately we must learn how to listen and this is not an easy task. In order to be able to listen to God, we must become aware of the barriers within us that either prevent us from hearing God or that distort what God is saying to us. We must become aware of our hidden agenda. A hidden agenda is the collection of prejudices and ideas, picked up throughout our lives, that motivate much of what we do and say. These things are hidden very often from ourselves and sometimes from other people. At other times what is motivating us is as clear as day to other people while remaining hidden from ourselves.

Another hidden agenda is the insecurity of needing to earn God's love, of not accepting it for what it is – a completely unmerited free gift from God. Saint Thérèse understood that God does not search for good people who merit His love. God searches for people who will open their hearts to Him, and who will allow God to transform their lives, and through them to transform the life of the world. Due to so many conditioning factors in our upbringing, we may have difficulty in truly accepting the Good News of God's love for all. This is one reason why the road to transformation can be so long and arduous, because God needs to heal many wounds so that our infinite capacity can receive what it was created for. God

will heal us through prayer of course but I do not think that God will normally do so if we spurn the normal ways to receive healing – the Sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual direction, medical and psychological help, and so on.

In order to truly listen, we must seek to be aware of the barriers within us. Our hidden agenda can act like a filter keeping out what we do not want to hear. How can we become aware of the hidden agenda that is so much part of us? How can we really hear what God is saying to us? First of all, we must accept that God is a God of surprises. Our Lady discovered this and accepted this in her life.

If our God is predictable and we always know what God's will is, then we are fooling ourselves. We must follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, not try to drag him along behind us. We must seek God's will by pondering His Word in our hearts as Our Lady did. So we must expect to be surprised by God. God will speak to us through the Scriptures, through the liturgy, through our own face-to-face encounter with God each day. God will also speak to us in the events of our day. Perhaps God will use some unlikely person to be a special messenger to us. We have to cultivate a listening heart to be aware of God's message in the midst of the noise of daily life. It is especially difficult to accept what God is saying to us if it is couched in negative terms and perhaps spoken by a rather undiplomatic person.

Perhaps the most important thing is to be aware of the fact that we all have some sort of hidden agenda that blocks and filters the Word of God. We need to ask God to reveal to us this hidden agenda perhaps bit by bit, as we are ready to accept it and to gradually change our motivation from self-preservation and self-gratification to a pure love for God and neighbour. We need to give God the time and space to speak to our hearts. God does not need the time but we do. Therefore we must find time in our busy life to be silent, to ponder God's Word in our hearts as Our Lady did.

We are asked to be faithful to God in our particular situation. We are asked to live the Gospel where we are. Perhaps our situation is not particularly to our liking but this is the sacred reality in which God is speaking to us. We are asked to be contemplatives at the heart of the world, being aware of God's presence not necessarily in dramatic ways but in the midst of everyday life. As we become more and more aware of God's presence, we become more sensitive to the signs God leaves us. Contemplatives can see the presence of God and announce this to others. The visit of the poor shepherds to the crib and what they said made Our Lady ponder in her heart. She recognised the hand of God at work through unlikely people.

We cannot claim to be contemplatives unless we take the call to pray seriously. An essential element in prayer is an ability and willingness to listen. God speaks to us in many ways each day but we often filter out and block off God's Word if it does not back up our own opinion. On the contemplative journey we become more humble because we begin to stand in the Truth. As we see ourselves as we really are, we gradually dismantle all the barriers within us to God. Some of these barriers can only be dismantled with outside help, and some only by God in the silence of the night, but we can throw down what we can so that we are able to hear what God wants to say to us. On this journey, Our Lady accompanies us, our Patroness, our Mother and our Sister.

On this journey we are given moments of rest to re-invigorate us for the next stage. Accept these moments gladly but don't hold on to them. Journey onwards, for what awaits us is beyond anything we could ever ask for or even imagine. There we can finally rest in God.