

Let me read to you the prayer of a Christian and a saint:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love – and now become as the most hated one – the one You have thrown away as unwanted – unloved. I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One to answer, no one on whom I can cling. The darkness is so dark, and I am alone. Unwanted, forsaken. The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith? Even deep down, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.

A group of university professors of theology from the United States once travelled half way across the world to meet with this modern-day saint. They said to her, ‘Tell us something that will help us.’ She said, ‘Smile at each other.’ They asked, ‘Are you married?’ She replied, ‘Yes, and I sometimes find it very difficult to smile at Jesus because He can be very demanding.’

The Christian and saint whose words these are is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. This is the woman whose compassion and sympathy for the poor of Bengal were over-flowing. I believe that we can gain incredible strength and encouragement in our own faith by looking at the life and witness of the saints. Not only can we learn from them, but, at times, we may perceive God through their experience. Learning from the saints is like standing on the souls of giants. It is like sitting at the feet of a great and wise teacher. As if by osmosis, we can benefit from their spiritual lives and so grow and mature on our own journey.

We have much to learn from Mother Teresa. Respected and revered the world over, she said of herself, ‘Very often I feel like a little pencil in God’s Hands. He does the writing, He does the thinking, He does the movement, I have only to be the pencil.’ Named Gonxha at

birth, she became Sister Teresa when she joined the Loreto Order of nuns. She arrived in Bengal in 1929 to begin her work as a teacher in St Mary's School for girls. On Sundays, she used to visit the poor in the slums. She wrote:

Every Sunday I visit the poor in Calcutta's slums. I cannot help them, because I do not have anything, but I go to give them joy. Last time about twenty little ones were eagerly expecting [me], their 'Ma.' When they saw me, they ran to meet me, even skipping on one foot. I entered. In that 'para' – that is how a group of houses is called here – twelve families were living. Every family has only one room, two meters long and a meter and a half wide. The door is so narrow that I hardly could enter, and the ceiling is so low that I could not stand upright....Now I do not wonder that my poor little ones love their school so much, and that so many of them suffer from tuberculosis. The poor mother [of the family she visited] did not utter even a word of complaint about her poverty. It was very painful for me, but at the same time I was very happy when I saw that they are happy because I visit them. Finally, the mother said to me, 'Oh, Ma, come again! Your smile brought sun into this house!'

In April 1942, Mother Teresa made a private vow. She wrote, "I made a vow to God, binding under [pain of] mortal sin, to give to God anything that He may ask, 'Not to refuse Him anything.'" This vow was a 'folly of love.' She wanted to 'drink the chalice to the last drop' and to say 'Yes' to God in all circumstances.

Last week, *The Times* carried an article about her spiritual life. Mother Teresa is a moral and spiritual giant. She is a moral giant because of the costly work which she did among many of India's poorest people. She is a spiritual giant because of her faith and I want to speak for a moment about her faith. Before she arrived in India, she described herself as being very happy, 'the happiest nun'. It was when she began her work among the poor that she began to write of the emptiness and the darkness. The saint wrote:

Since 1949 this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that deep pain down in my heart. Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. The place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me. When the pain of longing is so great – I just long and long for God – and then it is

that I feel – that He does not want me – He is not there. Heaven – souls – why these are just words – which mean nothing to me....God does not want me. The torture and the pain I can't explain. From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament – but this too has gone. I feel nothing before Jesus.....

She is a saint. Her faith is monumental because in the face of no sensible awareness of the Presence of God she believed that God was there, that He would not let her down and that, if He wished her to remain in darkness for all eternity to be a light to those in darkness, then she would do so. Mother Teresa came to understand her spiritual pain as a gift. It became a means and point of her complete identification with the poor, with 'her people', in their misery, loneliness and rejection. She lived everyday with that sense of being hated and unloved, unwanted and worthlessness. Through the most arduous spiritual journey she displayed deep and strong faith. In 1942, as a young nun, she had promised God 'to refuse Him nothing.' He took her at her word.

The story of Jesus and Peter walking on water is a narrative about the nature of faith. Peter steps out of the boat towards Jesus; he is walking on the water. With his eyes fixed firmly on the Saviour, Peter walks towards Jesus. When our faith is at its best, we know in our hearts that God is real, Jesus is real, that God through His Spirit speaks to us. Surely all of us have to some extent at some point in our life felt our heart warmed by the belief that God is real: we have felt His Presence, have, through silence, word and picture, heard Him speak to us and know that above everything else in life, God is the ultimate reality. Everything else will pass away. In baptism, do we not place our children before that ultimate reality?

But there are times that all we see and feel and know are the waves. God has gone, or so it seems. Jesus has gone. No one is listening. Only the waves. That darkness that is so dark may last an hour, a day, a month or, in the case of Mother Teresa, a lifetime.

In spiritually dark times, I find it helpful to recite The Apostles' Creed. Sitting alone, privately and quietly, I find it comforting to focus on the ancient words of the Church. These words, like the Bible itself, bring God to us. They take us out of ourselves. They re-orientate and re-focus our lives. It is good, particularly in spiritually dark times, to begin the day with: 'I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth: and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord.' It is helpful to repeat the faith, which somehow brings the whole Bible close: 'Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried, He descended into hell; The third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.' Repeating this or another affirmation of faith may not, in spiritually dark times, bring the sensible awareness of God any closer, but it is a demonstration of our faith in that darkness. It is an expression of our belief that, though we are unable to see God, He is there and ultimately will not let us down.

The experience of faith is sometimes like walking on water and sometimes it feels no better than drowning. Faith is belief and practice which says that at the end Jesus will reach down for us. He will pull us up. That is our faith. Though the waves be high, that is our faith.

Amen.