

St Teresa of Avila

We all enjoy humor, mostly for its entertainment value. But humor has also been effective in folktales and other stories that have a moral, or teach a lesson. Humor is even found in some religious stories that we get from the saints. I think we enjoy these stories in spite of the fact that they may strike us as slightly irreverent. Let's take a look at a story about St. Teresa of Avila as related by Father Thomas O'Meara:

St. Teresa spent her life as a mystic in a monastery of nuns, but circumstances drew her to establish a reform of the Carmelite Order. This involved many difficulties. Traveling on a mission filled with disappointments, her donkey cart, during a downpour, became stuck, and then, through efforts to free it, turned over spilling the riders into the mud. Teresa, at an end of patience, complained inwardly to Jesus. She then felt conscious of an answer from the Lord to whom all her work was dedicated: "But you see, Teresa: this is how I treat my friends." Teresa spontaneously replied: "Then, Lord, no wonder that you have so few."

-From Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., Fundamentalism:
A Catholic Perspective, page 92.

How do we interpret the exchange? Was Jesus being mean? Was Teresa being irreverent?

It is perfectly human for St. Teresa to be annoyed at the difficulties she faced trying to do the Lord's work and just as human to complain about it. But the response of Jesus conveys an important point: just, as we read in the Gospels, our Heavenly Father sends much needed rain on the just and the unjust, the mud that is created presents problems to the just and unjust. Those problems are not suspended for "the friends of Jesus." As his friend, St. Teresa is allowed to do Christ's work in the same world of suffering and frustration where he lived and died.

Teresa's response also expresses a deeper truth: doing the work of Christ is difficult and frequently involves sacrifice and suffering. The difficulties and suffering discourage many.

If you think I am reading a meaning into this story that is not there, consider this prayer of St. Teresa:

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you.
All things pass. God does not change.
Patience achieves everything.
Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
no hands but yours; no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ

must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.

She sees herself as and encourages us to be the eyes, hands and feet of Christ. Hands that will get dirty, feet that will travel through the mud of the imperfect world where Christ's work must be done.

Some are convinced that Jesus treats his friends to the smoothly paved road of the "prosperity Gospel." But the gift greater than wealth that Jesus gives to those who love him is the privilege to continue his work, as in his words to St. Peter: "feed my sheep." And that work often results in the difficulties and suffering experienced by St. Teresa who was willing to take up her cross daily and follow Jesus.

Let us meditate on the story of this great saint, this doctor of the church, sitting in the mud in the pouring rain and learning that the Lord considers her a friend.

S.Csontos, 11 February 2014.