

Day Three: Suffering and darkness

Today our pilgrims travel 120 miles south-east of Avila to Toledo, known as 'the city of the three cultures' in reference to the Jewish, Islamic and Christian communities which have flourished there. The multiple religious and cultural influences are much in evidence in the city's architecture; the cathedral, for example, is built over the site of an earlier mosque and its floor design is said to reflect the layout of the earlier building. Our pilgrims will be visiting the cathedral, as well as the El Transito Synagogue, and the El Greco museum which celebrates the life and work of the Renaissance artist who completed some of his most important works in the city.

Toledo is also significant in the lives of both St Teresa and St John of the Cross. Both their fathers came originally from the city, Teresa's great grandfather having moved the family to Avila in only 1480. We don't know whether Teresa ever visited Toledo as a child, but we do know that she was there twice in 1568, engaged in making the foundation in Malagon. Teresa's reform was flourishing, and even while the foundations at Malagon and Valladolid were in progress, the opportunity for a fifth house in Toledo presented itself. The new monastery in Toledo, dedicated once again to St Joseph, was founded in May 1569 although Teresa stayed only a couple of weeks before setting out to establish the next community at Pastrana.

Teresa returned to Toledo in less happy circumstances in 1576. The very success of her reform had provoked antipathies and jealousies, her critics and opponents were now at their most powerful. Denounced to the Inquisition at Seville she had been ordered to retire to one of her monasteries, all thought of further foundations halted and the future of the existing houses in serious doubt. Teresa arrived in Toledo in the June of 1576 and remained there for about thirteen months. Just before leaving she began work on what was to become the *Interior Castle*, her most mature and accomplished work, taking it with her to Avila and completing it a breathless five months later. At the height of her suffering then, and when all she had laboured for seemed to be in ruins, Teresa produced the masterpiece for which she is perhaps best known, a work which has influenced the lives of countless souls through the centuries. St John of the Cross, too, was in Toledo during his darkest hour. Kidnapped from Avila in December 1577 he was brought to the Carmelite friary in Toledo and imprisoned there for nine long months until August 1578. Locked in a cramped, airless cell he produced some of the most important mystical poetry in the history of Spanish literature. For both John and Teresa then, light came in and from their darkest hour; suffering gave birth to resurrection.

There seems to be a strong human tendency to want to tidy up suffering. Most of us have a sneaky suspicion that if we could just get the circumstances right, go into it better prepared or with the right disposition, we might suffer gloriously. We harbour a secret dissatisfaction with our paltry attempts to deal with the inconveniences, burdens and ailments which come our way, and feel convinced, in retrospect, that we could, and should, have done better. As Christians we canonise those who suffer heroically, revering those who bring courage, dignity and faith to the arena of suffering. Those who are broken by the experience of suffering – degraded, humiliated, dehumanised – are much harder for us to deal with. In the Passion narratives, the Gospel of John has Jesus deal almost majestically with suffering: seemingly in command throughout, he ensures that the last details of scriptural prophecy are accurately fulfilled and is more attentive to the sufferings of others than his own. Mark, the earlier account, offers us a different theology. Jesus prays in Gethsemane distressed and agitated, is too weak even to carry his own cross, and dies in abject abandonment crying out to a Father who is no longer there. The Resurrection concludes both these narratives. Maybe we need to remember that ugly suffering still achieves God's purpose. We speak of offering our suffering for the sake of others, we believe in the graced-ness of suffering, our faith tells us that God is present within it; but this needn't mean that suffering is always pretty, or undergone with bravery and fortitude. Sometimes grace is completely obscured; sometimes the darkness of the dark night is impenetrable. This doesn't mean that God is absent, or that he is not working his purpose through it, but for some of us the light of the Risen Christ may not yet be seen. Teresa, companion in our darkest hour, pray for us.

O my Lord, how certain it is that anyone who renders You some service soon pays with a great trial! And what a precious reward a trial is for those who truly love you if we could at once understand its value! (*Foundations*, 31.22)

Pilgrims' Liturgy

Give heed, O Lord to my prayer
and attend to the sound of my voice.
In the day of distress I will call
and surely you will reply. (Psalm 85)

We pray for those whose suffering seems unbearable and interminable. We pray for those living with chronic sickness, intractable problems or endless worry. We ask that our prayers may touch them in their suffering, that they may know the light of the resurrection through our companionship in the darkness.

We pray for ourselves, for the humility to suffer badly. May God take all that we endure into his hands, may he accomplish in us all that he desires, may he lead us to the resurrection in his good time.

Loving God, you taught St Teresa that through her sufferings she could serve you, and endowed St John of the Cross with a spirit of self-denial and love of the cross. By following their example may we come to the eternal vision of your glory. We ask this through your son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.