

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Oct 1st 2015

Memorial of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Who is a saint? Most of us respond to this question by thinking of martyrs witnessing publicly to faith by enduring excruciating torture leading to eventual death. Very few Christians will ever have this opportunity.

Today's saint, St. Therese of the Child Jesus, didn't.

Who is a saint? Wouldn't Jesus' response be quite different? Wouldn't Jesus urge us to embrace the crosses of our daily lives and to follow him by living the two great commandments of love of God and love of neighbor with our entire heart, soul, mind and body? And all of us have this opportunity.

St. Therese did.

St. Therese's life was brief, 1873-1897. She entered a cloistered Carmelite convent in Lisieux, France, at the age of fifteen and died at the age of twenty-four. When she died she was unknown to the world.

And she had her crosses, very private crosses. They included acute ill health, jealousy and criticism from her Carmelite community — and pervasive spiritual desolation even while she was dying. The world would know nothing about her had not her superior ordered her to keep an autobiography. Her Autobiography, published only after her death, revealed her heroic sanctity.

Therese embraced her crosses and followed Jesus totally, lovingly — heroically!

Though Therese had often dreamed of doing heroic deeds she came to realize that God was calling her to live unnoticed and just to love: "My vocation is love! . . . In the heart of the Church, who is my Mother, I will be love. So I shall be everything and so my dreams will be fulfilled."

Today's gospel may seem inappropriate for today's feast. Jesus sends out the seventy-two disciples to announce the Kingdom of God to all the towns and villages he intends to visit. From her cloister Therese offered her life and sufferings for the coming of God's Kingdom, praying especially for priests. So effective were her prayers the the Catholic Church has placed her alongside of St. Francis Xavier as universal patron of missions.

And today's first reading may also seem inappropriate. Israel had returned to Jerusalem after her years of the exile in Babylon. Israel is recommitting herself live the her covenant with God given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The priest Ezra is publicly proclaiming the Torah before Israel's leaders and people. Jesus revered the Law of Israel, but he reminded his disciples that the entire law is fulfilled to the degree they live the two great commandments of love of God and of neighbor.

Therese fulfilled the law.

St. Therese is one of our most popular and beloved saints. And rightly so. I remember reading her Autobiography years ago and thinking “I can do this.” All I have to do is love God in the ordinary events of my life. Today’s feast is an invitation to imitate Therese by embracing all the joys, works, and sufferings of our daily lives and doing them with love!

St. Therese’s holiness was recognized only after her death. Who knows? We may be living with saints whom we just have not yet recognized!

Dick Hauser, S.J.-Creighton University's Theology Department