

I Thirst

By Kathryn Spink

(Author of *Mother Teresa, An Authorized Biography*, HarperCollins, 2011)

A 600lb bronze statue on a granite base of 6,000lbs! The material from which this remarkable work of art is made suggests something static and unalterable, and yet, perhaps most significantly, statues carry the power of symbolism. Not complete in themselves, they point beyond to something even greater: the ideals of the figure depicted. During her lifetime Mother Teresa had a constantly expressed abhorrence of anything that focussed on her. She was, she insisted, only the 'imperfect instrument', the 'little pencil' with which God was writing his love letter to the world. The work was his work; all glory was due to him. I remember the first time I met her, as she knelt in prayer in the sparsely furnished little room that served as one of her Sisters' chapels in London, being struck by the absence of any assertive presence. She was diminutive, ordinary except in her fidelity and faith. But when she spoke or smiled, the luminous power she exuded was extraordinary. Like the potency of a statue, her 'potency' transcended the immediately visible.

On the wall of that London chapel, as in every Missionary of Charity chapel throughout the world, were inscribed the two words 'I thirst'. In responding to the needs of the thirsty, hungry poor, Mother Teresa believed she was answering the cry of the crucified Christ for love and souls. It was this conviction that underlined the sanctity of all life and gave primacy to love over efficiency. It meant too, that she sought always to see the Holy Spirit at work in others, regardless of creed, caste or nationality. With time, her own understanding of who the poor were grew to embrace not only the physically bereft but the spiritually and morally also. She recognised that the breakdown of Western family life and the thirst for spiritual waters was a more complex problem to solve than physical deprivation. She knew moreover that it was often easier to hold the hands of the dying destitute or cuddle a tiny baby and sing to it until it breathed its last, than it was to respond to the thirsting Christ in the violent drug addict or the abusive, alcoholic spouse.

'Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". We need to have an open heart to be able to see God in others.' Her secret, she maintained, was prayer that required 'only that small raising of the heart and mind to him' and did not consist of many

words for, as the inscription on the base of the statue reminds us, 'in the silence of the heart God speaks'. Mother Teresa was not one who came to know God through clear images and careful thought. Hers was an understanding of the heart, not as seat of the emotions but of direct knowledge, the heart as referred to by St Paul when he wrote to the Ephesians, 'I pray that the eyes of your heart may be opened that you may *know*' (Eph. 1:18).

Central to Mother Teresa's mission was a mystical vision of Christ crying out for love in the broken bodies and hearts of the poor, and Christ simultaneously offered on the altar as sustenance in order that that cry might not go without response. Following a period of extraordinary union with God in 1946, during which she was called to bring the 'light of faith' into the 'dark holes' of the poor, she knew personally what it was to 'thirst', in what has been identified as an experience of the 'dark night of the soul'. Yet she persevered, confident always of the love of God for each one of us. 'He has carved you in the palm of his hand' - this quotation from Isaiah (49:16) is one that Mother Teresa cited regularly as an illustration of the extent of God's love; and divine love was given in order that we might pass it on. Her strong-jawed face was earthy not ethereal. To understand 'poverty' was not to theorise about it intellectually but to touch it, dive into it, live it. 'I'll put you to work!' was Mother's repeated directive, for love was best expressed in deeds.

Unlike that which is made of granite or bronze, we are capable of evolving. In today's world of global communications we are made constantly aware of 'poverty' in all its forms - and rightly so. Compassion, 'suffering with', is central to the Christian message, as is giving, not just from the comfort of our armchairs to some worthy but far-distant cause, but as Mother Teresa urged, to the 'poor' in our own families or neighbourhoods, 'until it hurts'. The effect of the barrage of bad news, however, is often to arouse a sense of helplessness leading to inertia. 'We can do no great things, only small things with great love', she insisted. There can be few better illustrations of how faith and love can transform small things and make them great than the life of Mother Teresa.

May we in silent contemplation of this statue, itself the product of and a tribute to love, hear the voice of God calling us to greater love, both of him and of our fellow human beings which, in the vision of Mother Teresa, are one and the same.