

## CONTEMPLATING “ST. TERESA’S BOOKMARK” WITH *THE JEWISH BRIDE*

After St. Teresa of Avila died, the thoughts that have come to be known as “St. Teresa’s Bookmark” were found written in her handwriting in the margins of her breviary. The prayer is familiar to us:

Let nothing disturb you.

Let nothing frighten you.

All things pass away.

God never changes.

Patience obtains all things.

They who have God

lack nothing.

God alone is enough.

Whether or not Teresa herself composed these lines, they obviously inspired her, just as they have inspired the countless others who have encountered them over the centuries.

However, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that, at least at first glance, this prayer raises some questions. Is it really true, for instance, in the case of a parent who has lost a child that “all things pass”? Or how can we possibly “let nothing disturb us” if we are consumed with worry, for instance, about the serious ill-health of a loved one, or about being “found out,” or about losing our job? And what does it mean to say that “God alone is enough”? Should we feel guilty about seeking earthly help in some way, or about loving other people and “worldly” things?

We need to dive deeper than these interrogations and penetrate to the beating heart of the prayer. To do this, let us consider the prayer in the light of Rembrandt's exquisite painting *The Jewish Bride*.<sup>1</sup>



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Jewish Bride*, 1665-7, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This painting has been described as one of the greatest and most profound of Rembrandt's works. It is an image of unutterable tenderness and trusting vulnerability. In fact, the intimacy of this painting is such that we almost feel we are intruding on an intensely personal encounter.

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<sup>1</sup> I have drawn on these sources for the following commentary on *The Jewish Bride*: Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, *Magnificat* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 66; Wendy Beckett, *Sister Wendy Beckett: Meditations on Love* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1995), 10; Ruth Burrows, *To Believe in Jesus* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978), 69-70.

The husband enfolds his wife in an embrace of gentle reverence. His left hand is on her shoulder. His other hand is laid upon her heart, touching the gold chain that is his gift of love to her.

Her hand delicately meets his over her breast. She is recognizing and reciprocating his caress, but almost ephemerally, as if to indicate that the full meaning of their union lies in the untouchable depths within. Her other hand rests over her womb, signifying the fruitfulness of their love.

He is wholly absorbed in her. There is a quiet certainty about him. He inclines his head towards her with an utterly reliable tenderness. It is as though he is listening to the thoughts and innermost cares of her heart.

She knows that she is loved and that she will be loved, and will love, for better or worse. She gazes into the distance with reverent awe as she ponders the mystery of being so known and cherished. Gravely, she contemplates the depths of trusting surrender this relationship will ask of her.

This painting offers us an image of our relationship with our Lord and, as we will see, helps us pierce to the essence of Teresa's prayer. We are, each of us, the Jewish bride and the Lord is our Spouse. The image of the soul as bride flows from the biblical tradition.<sup>2</sup> In the desert, Israel became the Lord's betrothed through the covenant; she promised to belong to him exclusively and permanently. In Jeremiah, we hear the Lord say to Israel,

“I remember the devotion of your youth,

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<sup>2</sup> The following discussion of bridal imagery draws upon chapter nine of Obbard's *Magnificat*.

your love as a bride,  
how you followed me in the wilderness,  
in a land not sown.” (Jeremiah 2:2).

And, even though Israel is frequently unfaithful to her Spouse, the Lord is *always* faithful. His love for her is relentless and his choice of her is irrevocable. We read of the Lord espousing unfaithful Israel to himself anew in Hosea:

“Therefore, I will now allure her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her.

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

On that day, says the Lord,  
you will call me, ‘My husband,’  
and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’

For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth,  
and they shall be mentioned by name no more.

And I will take you for my wife forever;  
I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice,  
in steadfast love, and in mercy.

I will take you for my wife in faithfulness;  
and you shall know the Lord.” (Hosea 2: 14, 15b-17, 19-20).

The bridal character of Israel prefigures the bridal character of the Church – the new Israel – and every individual Christian. We can consider the sacraments as the means through which the Lord espouses us and sustains our intimate union with him. We are betrothed to the Lord in baptism. The bride's gold chain in Rembrandt's painting can be regarded as symbolic of our baptism. It is her husband's gift to her to represent that they belong to each other; it is deeply significant and beautiful that their hands meet over the gold chain. In baptism, the Lord puts a gold chain of love over us and claims us as his own. Our lives are deliberately opened up to a lifelong relationship of love with him.

In the Eucharist, the Lord gives his very body to his spouse – the Church, and each individual Christian. And, in turn, we give our very selves, the whole complex, often messy, reality that is *me*, to the Lord. So, through the Eucharist, the spousal relationship that is initiated in baptism is nurtured and deepened. And reconciliation is a further way in which what is begun in baptism blossoms into wholeness and integrity. In reconciliation we confidently expose our brokenness and failures to the Lord who cherishes us with infinite tenderness and who longs to heal our wounds.

Returning now to “St. Teresa's Bookmark,” it is because we know in faith, if not in feelings, that we are cherished by the Lord so tenderly, known so intimately, cared for so completely that we can make the kind of wholehearted surrender to God that Teresa clearly made and that she calls us to make. Like the Jewish bride we know in faith that we will be divinely loved and sustained through thick and thin, so we can, at the deepest level of our being, take the Lord for better or worse and live in the spirit of freedom that breathes through Teresa's prayer.

Living as the tenderly loved bride, we can, with Teresa, say that God alone is enough. This has nothing to do with removing ourselves from our loved ones or distancing ourselves from the good things of this world which we enjoy. Rather, it is about receiving all as a gift from him, as an expression of his love for us. When we see all as gift, we tend to hold the things of this world with reverence and delight, rather than possessively. And, while we are sometimes devastated and heartbroken when we lose the gifts the Lord has given us, we have a quiet, unshakeable hope that, somehow, we will find them again in him.

Perhaps our greatest challenge is to believe in the Lord's unutterable, personal love for us. The circumstances of our lives, our changing emotions, dryness in prayer – all of this, and more, can make us wonder if all this talk of the Lord's passionate, spousal, cherishing love is a bit too good to be true. But the Lord's tender, intimate love *is* true, it is the only truth that really matters, and it is the truth that must be the bedrock of our lives.

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