



Edith Stein

-Fr Matt Blake-

Wistaston Hall: Retreat Centre



-Talk 1 -

Good morning to you all again, I'll just begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, part of Edith's prayer to the Holy Spirit. In the name of the father and the son and the Holy Spirit, amen. "Holy Spirit eternal love, who are you sweet light that fills me? And illumines the darkness of my heart? You guide me like a mother's hand; and if you let me go, I couldn't take another step. You are the space that surrounds and contains my being. Without you, it would sink into the abyss of nothingness, from which you raised it into being. You are closer to me, than to I myself. More inward than my innermost being; and yet unreachable, untouchable, and bursting the confines of any name, Holy Spirit eternal love." Amen.

This morning I'd like to go a bit deeper, go a bit beneath the surface; as I said it's not easy to do this, because there is a place she keeps us outside of. That's part of the type of person she was, her personality etc. She doesn't reveal much of her inner life, the fact is, she very deliberately conceals it. But obviously throughout her writings, we find strong hints of it there. We can

see in some of the things that she said, key insights into herself. So that's what I've picked out here, certain pieces of her writings; not so much for the what they are in themselves...more the fact that, they give us key insights, into Edith herself, into her inner thinking, they help us to get to know this person. So I will go through these this morning, and pick a few things from them.

The first one here, is from St. John of the Cross. Her book on St. John of the Cross: The Science of the Cross, which she wrote at the very end of her life. The last six months of her life. I will pick out this comment she makes about St. John of the Cross; and in the particular context, she is writing about in the book is The Living Flame. It tells us who St. John of the Cross is for her. Perhaps, more importantly, how important St. John of the Cross is and how he writes for contemplative souls. Edith says, "at a very particular point along their way, St. John of the Cross wants to take them by the hand, at a crossroads, where they most feel perplexed, not knowing how to proceed. Impassible barriers confront them on the way they have been travelling; but the new path that opens up before them, leads through impenetrable darkness. Who has the courage to venture on it?"

What a great statement, it could be describing Edith's own life. So often a life that is at a cross roads. When great barriers come up in front of her. When very difficult decisions have to be taken; and we can see how when she does, she meets St. John of the Cross and the help he would have been to her on this road. This something of her own inner life here, the kind of decisions she had to take, the obstacles she confronted, these boundaries. She is a woman that is always crossing boundaries. She cannot be kept confined, in any particular system or way, or way of thinking, or way of seeing things.

The term “contemplative souls” that’s who she is, that’s how she sees herself. How she’s always been, a contemplative soul. The contemplative is always the one who is always taken on a journey. The inner journey..that deeper interior journey. There is so much there about herself. The places that she found herself in, something that she closely identifies with. The second one here is from a book she wrote, shortly after she entered Carmel, considered to be her greatest work of philosophy, Finite and eternal being. She entered Carmel believing that this was the end of her academic work and her philosophical work. She was very happy to leave all that behind. However, after she’d entered Carmel and a visit by the provincial to the Carmel, she was asked to continue with her academic work.

She took up writing this new book, Finite and eternal being. In a sense, she had already more or less, written another version of the same book earlier on. What she is doing is, bringing together the philosophy of her cell, all she that has been trained in, with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, which she had come to know very profoundly, over the past ten years. During her work of translating and studying him, she is trying to bring the two ways of thinking together. That’s wha she is attempting to do, in that work, which is, for those who have read it, not exactly the easiest of readings! It has within it, many gems. I have picked out the very first words, her own preface to the work. I think they are very significant words, “This book was written by a beginner for beginners.” This very first statement is startling, no body could say in 1935 that Edith is a beginner in anything! Whether it be in the philosophical life or the spiritual life, or learning, or studying, or in any area of life, can she possibly claim to be a beginner; and writing for beginners, then I would like to know what book would be for the more advanced! It certainly doesn’t seem like a book for beginners! She is very serious in what she is saying . She is a

beginner. And she's not just referring to the beginnings of her life as a Carmelite nun. Clearly that's what she's struggling with, what's most immediate to her. But there is a beginning at a deeper level. The fact is where all beginners. We're always at the beginning.

Our whole lives in this world are the beginning. The beginning of a life with God. Beginnings of true life. The whole world is a beginning and of course they beginning is where the the bible begins, "in the beginning." Like the beginning of the bible, the beginning of John's gospel, "in the beginning was the Word."

"The beginning" is a powerful scriptural word. For a beginner, by a beginner, for beginners. Because we're always at the beginning, when it comes to the life with God. God always has a life out there in front of us. No matter how old or experienced or knowledgeable we may think we are, in the eyes of God we are always at the beginning. She sees herself as a beginner, at many different levels, writing for beginners. The term, "beginners" is not so much about what's gone before, but what is ahead. The beginner has a sense that there is so much more ahead. That's the point she's really making. We might think we know it or know something, worst still, know it all. In reality, we know really nothing, everything is out there, everything is ahead of us. Edith says that, "At an age where others may confidently call themselves teachers, the author was compelled to start all over again. She had found her way to Christ and his church and was preoccupied with the task of drawing up the practical consequences out of this newly gained position. St Thomas found her a reverent and willing pupil, her mind was no longer a tabular rasa, it has already received a firm impression of her philosophical training, which could not be ignored. Her reason had become a meeting place of two philosophical worlds." In

fact, her mind is the meeting place of many different worlds. Two different ways, contrasting ways of seeing these worlds.

The way of phenomenology, of Husserl, and new way of seeing it, when she discovers Thomas Aquinas. What she is doing is, not so much bring the two ways of see no things together, as rather looking at Christianity, and the whole world from both perspectives. Seeing things from different ways. It is an enormous contribution that she makes to the church. We might say she would have come to the church, with seeing things from St. Thomas Aquinas, and from the philosophical ways of seeing and thinking, that had been there for centuries. She brings a whole new way of seeing and thinking into the church. She tries to draw the two, and how they can enrich the other and deepen the other. She is very much at the beginning in all of this, in all sorts of different ways. She's an innovator, she's at the beginning.

This Christian world, this church, that she has come into, is opening an enormous, infinite horizon for her. So she is standing there, in a sense, we could say, at the horizon of Christianity. Looking into a world that is out there ahead. She is saying to all of us and the whole church, we are only at the beginning, of our understanding of Jesus Christ, of the Christians message and of all of that. We are at the beginning.

The next one is much more personal. We are back in October 15th, the feast of St. Teresa. She is writing to her friend Roman Ingarden, who she got to know through philosophy. A fellow philosopher, and he is now back in Poland and she's writing to him. It is one of the few times she mentions anything about her conversion, or gives us any sense of what the experience was like. She is writing to a person who never really accepted her conversion. Initially, she couldn't talk about it, he was very closed

to the whole idea. So here she writes to him, “at the moment I face a decision of converting to Catholicism.” That’s the way she puts it to him, not exactly true, she’s already decided.

A few months earlier, when she read St. Teresa, that was the decision taken. Yes, baptism doesn’t come until the first of January, so she’s in that in-between period, but for her personally, the decision is taken. The problem with the decision as we go on to see, is not herself, it’s those around her, that’s difficult. It’s one thing to take a decision in one’s heart. It’s another thing to face the reality and the consequences of all those around you, and with your own personal life.

“I have not written to you at what lead me to this, actually it is very difficult to say, I certainly cannot write about it.” This is deep, she doesn’t and she can’t write about, it or speak about it. ” In any case in recent years, I have lived very much more, than I have philosophised.” Difficult to know exactly what she means by that. Probably that she is seeing life outside of philosophy. She’s no longer in...in all her relationship with Ingarden, and in all her letters, going right up to 1938, when the letters stop...are almost always philosophy. That seems the only world in which they are only to meet in, and she is saying to him, “I have a wider world now, my world is widening.”

“My works are all expressions of what has occupied me in life.” She is effectively telling us, that what she is writing about is really herself, in all her writings, “because the way I am now, I just have to reflect over it all.” That is telling us something very key here. She has to look back over everything she has written, everything she has done in her life. As I mentioned last night, that is the very nature of conversion. To go back, everything is seen in

a new light, and to realise all the time, she was writing about herself.

Revealing what was happening deep within her, without even realising it. There is a new light now, shining back over her entire life, “even now I have these difficulties.” These were very difficult months for Edith. Her heart knows what it wants, but everything else is collapsing around her. “I have very difficult days..” Edith says. “Converting is the worst thing I could do to my mother.” that i has devastated her. “It’s horrible to she her struggling with it, and I cannot do anything to make it easier for her, it’s just incomprehensible to her.”

That can be very difficult in anybody’s life. We can all identify with this, in one way or another. The person can know what is right for us, what we have to do, but impossible to explain to others. Knowing the decision that you make, is devastating for another person, incomprehensible; and you take it, knowing it is what one has to do. A very difficult place that be. That’s where she is here. So many people can identify with being in that place. That’s the “incomprehensible darkness” that she has referred to there, the quote from St. John of the Cross. Impenetrable barriers, but to have the courage to go with it. Those she is certain in her own heart, this is what she has to do, what she can no longer say no to doing. It’s impossible, it’s so difficult. So painful for her. This is going to require every ounce of courage that she has. So that’s an insight into her life there in 1921.

We go now forward a few years now, to about the late 1920s. Next is from her book on women, it’s one of her talks she gave on women. Problems of women’s education. As I said last night, this is a topic that she wrote about, women’s education. she lectured

upon, extensively. Again, I pick it out here because what it can tell us about Edith herself. “A flexible, variety of educational methods is needed, to bring about a combination, of authentic humanity and womanhood, with an unspoiled individuality.” What a great statement that is. If that ever could be put into practice what human beings we would be! “Authentic humanity, authentic womanhood, unspoiled individuality.”

Each person, human women or man, but also an individual. Holding the three, all the time, we see this in Edith’s writings. Trying to balance and hold all of these things together. “But especially needed” she said, “are faith in ones own being and courage regarding it.”

“Faith in ones own being...” who am I? To really, to be able to look authentically at oneself. Courage and because courage is needed. So in ones own being “as well as” she said, “faith in ones own individual calling, to definite personal activity, and a ready willingness to follow this call. Sense of call that every human being has. Something definite, something individual, the willingness to follow that.”

“Thus we can specify as the goal of individual educational work the formation of a person who is what she is supposed to be personally. “Who goes her way and performs her work.” As I said, the emphasis from Edith’s texts, “her way her work. Her way is not chosen in an arbitrary fashion, it is the way in which God leads her. Whoever wishes to guide others, towards the pure development of their individuality, must guide them towards a trust in God’s providence; and towards the readiness towards the signs of this providence and to follow them..”

Edith Stein taught that by her own life, that's herself, that's who's she is. To become the person that she is meant to be, that's she's created to be. She went her way, her road, that very unique road, crossing boundaries, setting out on new roads. The courage to do that and to do her work, her mission. Which is enormous. She is the living personification of what she is teaching here. She's lived this. This sums up Edith's life for us. This is what she lived. God's calling. God led her. Even when she didn't recognise God; even when she left the question of God aside; when she was an atheist; God was leading her. She still had that desire and that interest and that fascination with truth. That's what she was looking for. An education and a right education, being the key to that.

Education has always been something that Edith has been interested in, not just being educated herself, but she's an educator, in the pure and total sense of that word. The word is quite literally in its origins, "to draw out of a person." Education is not to put something into a person, but to draw something out, it's already there. To draw out who the person is. To draw out that individuality. That unique humanity that this person is. To draw out from the person that work, that role, that contribution, that the person is uniquely created to give. She is the great example of the effectiveness of this, the truth of it. She truly became this herself and continues and lives on. Hence, we are here talking about her, reflecting upon her.

The final quote I have got here, is a very personal one from her, in a letter she wrote 1928. So from 1922 to 1928, she is six years now baptised in the church. She's writing with a certain experience now, of her Christianity. She said, "on the one hand, it's one thing to receive baptism." Clearly she prepared herself well for it, we know the famous story, she went to the parish

priest, after reading St Teresa and asking him to baptise her. He said, “well you have to do a course, and preparation.” and she said, “well ask me any question you want to ask me.” To say after a few questions he decided, Edith knows far more about this than he does.

She clearly researched Christianity in depth, but that didn't mean she couldn't convert, but she certainly knew Christianity inside out, we might say. It took something else to get her to the point of conversion and was the influence of Teresa. But of course after baptism, all the practical questions us come up, how do you live this? Who is Edith Stein now, in this totally different world? It's one thing to think about it theoretically, and to have all the ideas around it. But to plunge yourself into it is something else. To find yourself suddenly there, what does this mean? So she writes to Sister Collister here, who has obviously written to Edith for advice and a subject like this. We don't have the letter of course. It appears she wrote to Edith on how to balance academic study and Christian living and prayer, how you balance the two. Here's some of Edith's answer, “religion is not something to be relegated to a quiet corner, or for a few festive hours, but rather as you yourself perceive, must be the root and basis of all life; and that not merely for a few chosen ones, but for every true Christian.”

“The root and basis of all life.” Can't be kept out of any area of life, cannot be put in a corner. What did that mean in practice for Edith? “That it is possible to worship God, by doing scholarly research, is something I learned only when I was busy with the translation of St. Thomas Aquinas. Only thereafter, could I decide to resume serious scholarly research.”

So she's obviously struggled with doing serious scholarly research, and living this new religious, Christian, Catholic life,

that she is living. It was St. Thomas Aquinas, that taught her how she could be both. The translating of Thomas Aquinas, has such great influence upon her. It enabled her to take up this step now. To seriously pick up again scholarly research. She goes on, “immediately before and for a good while after my conversion, I was of the opinion, that to lead a religious life, one has to give up all that was secular, and to live totally immersed in thoughts of the divine. But gradually I realised, that something else is asked of us in this world, and that even in the contemplative life, one cannot sever the connection with the world. I even believe, that the deeper that one is drawn into God, the more one must one go out of ones self, that is, one must go to the world, in order to carry the divine life into it.” There is a whole journey behind that paragraph.

From the beginning, she has come to terms with what it is to live a contemplative life, as she is a daughter of St, Teresa. She has a very personal identification with St Teresa. This paragraph is very Teresian. The contemplative life, though she is a teacher, she’s working a very busy life, she is a contemplative. She has to learn that to live a contemplative life is not a cutting off from the world, but it is a going deeper into the world.

We see in the life of St.Teresa, we see almost two parallel roads, in St. Teresa’s story. The deeper Teresa prayer life goes, the busier Teresa becomes. The deeper her prayer life goes, the more engaged she is in the things of the world. The contemplative life, rather than cutting one off from the world, brings one ever deeper into it. We see it, in Teresa interior castle, which Edith has undoubtedly studied by now. The seventh dwelling place, the most interior dwelling place, is the one most open to the world. Last chapter of the seventh dwelling place, is all about the relationship with the world, works of charity, works.. works..

works. Reaching out to the whole world. One goes in, in order to go out. The deeper one goes, the more one is called to do the work of God in the world.

We find this so often in Teresa's thinking. That is what Edith is doing here, she is effectively reflecting Teresa's thinking. She come to learn it through her own experience. That the contemplative life, for Edith Stein, leads ever deeper into an engagement with the world, the things of the world. We learn something else about her in that letter previously mentioned, Edith goes on to give he own practical way of doing this. This is what she said it is, "it is finding a space each day in silent prayer." She doesn't say how long or how much it has to be, or anything, but she did a space. She herself she said, likes to do it early in the morning. "To find a space each day" she said, "for silent prayer, that's the one essential."

Then she goes one to say, something similar to what she said about the women's education, "it's about accepting ones own role, ones own calling, in the wider sense of that word, in other words, accepting who one is, and what ones specific roles or task is and not only seeing God in that, but seeing ones self as God's instrument at that, whatever our work may be, whatever our role maybe, we are God's instrument. We are working for God, it's God's work." and for us she said, "scholarly research is God's work. We're God's instruments. We are following a call of God here. This is an extension of the contemplative life."

It's part of the contemplative life, not something that takes one away from the contemplative life, it's actually something which through the contemplative life, to enter ever more deeply into. Therefore, our daily life becomes more and more meaningful, because it is a work of God. Perhaps another way of putting that

is, to think about Teresa's famous statement, "that God is amongst the pots and pans." It's a great statement that, but we need to think about the context in which she made it or the point she is really trying to make there; and that is, whatever the "pots and pans" of our lives are, whatever the everyday: the mundane, the obligations, the commitments, the particular role, work, responsibilities, whatever it is in our lives, that's where God is. God isn't somewhere else, God is right there. That's the place of holiness. That's the place where we grow in holiness. That's the place where we bring the life of God into. To use Edith's term, "that's where we are God's instruments." So rather than our roles and obligations, and all of that, taking us away from God, they are doing the opposite. They are where we enter in, ever more deeply into the life of God. That is where God is calling us to be, that is where God is working through us and in us, and that's where we meet him.

Photo Credits:

Edith Stein: <https://medium.com/inserting-philosophy/edith-stein-philosophys-saint-adc6c3884b71> and Pinterest- public domain

Christ begging statue/ scenic with view kind permission: <https://www.orc-crewe.org>