

My Soul is Cast Down Within Me

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Psalm 42

Many of you have heard me talk about Malcolm Muggeridge. Malcolm was a writer, university chancellor and BBC commentator. He called himself a "Vendor of Words." The most important project he undertook was to do a BBC documentary, and then write a book on the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The book was titled, *Something Beautiful for God*, and when released became an immediate best seller. During one of my visits to see Malcolm at his home in Sussex, England, he told me the story about a time when Mother Teresa was invited to be on a television program with a panel of Christian leaders. Their assigned topic was to share about their faith. Here was the Archbishop of Canterbury and other world-renowned theologians, and then there was this small in stature, Albanian nun from Calcutta. Following the very eloquent academic dissertations of the other guests, Mother Teresa was asked to share what *she believed* and *why she believed it*. Her response,

“Oh, I try to follow the example of Jesus. I want to love as Jesus would have me love...care for the sick, feed the hungry and love the poor.” Following the program, the archbishop was heard to say, “You know, if I had to spend much time with that woman, I would go mad!” The reason why the archbishop would “go mad” is because such a beautiful simplicity of faith as represented by Mother Teresa always causes discomfort in those who do not have it. It is a childlike openness to the workings of the Living God. It is not a simplistic faith, but a faith of profound simplicity.

I thought about this story when I read the book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, which includes letters from Mother Teresa where she openly shares about her “dark nights of the soul.” The media reported on these letters as if doubts and questions were something new in the lives of faithful Christians, almost calling Mother Teresa a hypocrite for feeling depressed and raising questions about God.

The doubt and anguish that Mother Teresa experienced has been a part of the human condition from our very beginning, and it has certainly been a part of the Christian faithful and the Quaker faithful throughout their histories. Doubt and faith go hand in hand. It should not be surprising to any who know religious history that many of the most committed persons to their faith, are also the ones who experience God's absence in the most excruciating ways. Mother Teresa is not an exception. In a letter to one of her spiritual directors, she wrote: *"Now father, since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God, which gives me that pain deep down in my heart—Darkness is such that I really do not see, neither with my mind nor with my reason, the place of God in my soul is blank—there is no God in me—He is not there—God does not want me. Sometimes I just hear my own heart cry out, 'My God' and nothing else comes—The torture and pain I cannot explain."*

Trying to comfort her and help Mother Teresa understand that what she was experiencing was a part of the mystical life, her confidant, Archbishop Perier writes to her, saying, *“In what you reveal there is nothing which is not known in the mystical life. It is a grace God grants you, the longing to be God's entirely without return on self or creatures, to live by God and in God but that longing which comes from God can never be satisfied in this world, simply because God is infinite, and we are finite.”*

The longing for the “Absent One,” as Mother Teresa called God in one of her letters, is the theme in one of the most beautiful of the Psalms. In Psalm 42 the Psalmist writes: *“As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My Soul thirsts for God, for the living God...My soul is cast down within me...I say to God, my rock, ‘Why hast thou forgotten me?’...As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’...Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?...*

And there is the example of Jesus and his own experience of darkness on the cross, when he quotes Psalm 22, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Mother Teresa, the author of the 42nd Psalm and Jesus are just three examples of those who expressed doubts and struggled with their dark nights of the soul. They also exemplified what Ram Dass meant when he said, "...it is only in that dark night of the soul that you are prepared to see as God sees and love as God loves."

I am sure than many of us in this room could write about our own dark nights of the soul. I did, and with the release of my book, *Sacred Chaos*, I shared with the world what I went through in my own faith struggles. As we go through these chaotic times, these times of darkness, it is important to know that we are not alone and that even the most faithful have had questions and periods in their lives when they have felt the absence of God. I believe that this is a part of faith development...*But it is only one part.* Even though Mother Teresa experienced such an agonizing absence of God in her

life, Malcolm Muggeridge could write of her: “In a dark time she is a burning and shining light; in a cruel time, a living embodiment of Christ’s gospel of love; in a godless time, the Word dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. For this, all who have the privilege of knowing her, or knowing of her, must be eternally grateful.”

For the Psalmist, the feeling of God’s absence is only part of the story expressed in Psalm 42. There are also these words of affirmation: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

The agonizing question of Jesus while on the cross is recorded in both Mark and Matthew. Except for “A loud cry” they are the last words that Jesus utters before he dies. In the Gospel of Luke, however, there is an utterance of affirmation, when Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Doubts, questions, longing for God in the midst of an enveloping darkness...at times this may well be our experience. But there are also awakening moments when God’s presence feels overwhelming.

Why such contrasts in our faith development? I don't know. I do know that whatever I am experiencing in my life of faith, I am helped when I can share it within the context of community, with spiritual friends who are supportive and understanding. Those of us who are a part of Cincinnati Friends Meeting are people who take seriously the truth that we are *members one of another*. In a community where love is practiced, the times of doubt are less painful, and the times of awakening are intensified. *We are a community in which our sorrows are divided and our joys are multiplied.*

Friends, wherever we are along this continuum of faith development, we can be comforted by knowing what Julian of Norwich learned in her own classroom of spirituality, "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."