Feast of Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)

Luke 12:8-12

St Teresa of Ávila,
Painted by Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652),
Painted in 1644,
Oil on canvas
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Daily Gospel Reading

Luke 12:8-12

Jesus said to his disciples:

‘I tell you, if anyone openly declares himself for me in the presence of men, the Son of Man will declare himself for him in the presence of the angels. But the man who disowns me in the presence of men will be disowned in the presence of God’s angels.

‘Everyone who says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

‘When they take you before synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves or what to say, because when the time comes, the Holy Spirit will teach you what you must say.’
Reflection on the painting

What is it to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? And why should this sin not be forgiven? The greatest of the Church Fathers have found these questions hard to answer. Back in the early fifth century AD, St Augustine admitted to his congregation in Roman North Africa that he had previously avoided preaching on this passage, and he begged their prayers to help him do so now (Sermon 71). The first question didn't seem so hard to him. Anyone who denied the truth of the Gospel spoke ill of the Spirit that inspired that Gospel. But, then, wasn't that a blasphemy committed by practically everyone before their conversion to Christianity? Didn't Christ offer forgiveness to them, and every person, in baptism? There was, he thought, probably no harder, no more difficult problem to be wrestled with in the whole Bible. Augustine's eventual answer was the recognition that the blasphemy in question was a person's refusal to repent, to reject the forgiveness of sins offered to him or her by the Holy Spirit. It is the sin that cannot be forgiven, because it is our own refusal of forgiveness. That, for Augustine, was cause for hope, because however impenitent a person might be now, perhaps by our remonstration, or by our heartfelt prayers to God, she or he might be graced with a change of heart, repent and accept the forgiveness offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this seventh-century painting of St Teresa of Avila by Jusepe de Ribera, the Holy Spirit, represented as a dove, inspires the writings and actions of this sixteenth-century nun and spiritual theologian, who reformed a great many Carmelite nunneries in her native Spain. Her poverty of life and simplicity of purpose find expression in the plain colours of her religious habit which are also reflected in the plain brown wash of colour behind her. Our attention is fixed on her bright and lively face, her eyes trained on the Spirit who inspires her. The skull on her table reminds her and us of the death from which God alone can redeem us; the tomes beneath and beside it probably represent the wisdom of the Church Fathers, like Augustine, who fed St Teresa's understanding of the spiritual life. Her faith in God is summed up in the prayer found in her breviary and now known as her bookmark: 'Nada te turbe; nada te espante; todo se pasa; Dios no se muda, la paciencia todo lo alcanza, quien a Dios tiene nada le falta, Solo Dios basta.' 'Nothing is to throw you; nothing is to make you fearful; all things pass. God does not change; patience gains all. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.'

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