***THIS WEEK’S SAINT***

***Thursday 1st October* St Thérèse of the Child Jesus (1873-1892)**

Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon, in France, on 2nd January 1873. Her mother, who already had breast cancer, died when Thérèse was four, and the family moved to Lisieux. Thérèse became a nun at the Carmelite convent there at the age of 15, after a long battle against the superior, who insisted that 16, or even 21, would be a more sensible age. She died of tuberculosis at the age of 24, and that was that. Another forgotten nun: born, was good, died. Holy, no doubt; but nothing much to write home about.

  In 1895 Mother Agnès of Jesus, the prioress, had commanded Thérèse to write her memoirs. Writing ‘not to produce a literary work, but under obedience’, Thérèse took a year to fill six exercise books. She presented them to the prioress, who put them in a drawer unread. A year after Thérèse’s death, the memoirs were published in a small edition of 2,000: the first spark that ignited a ‘storm of glory’ that swept the world. Miracles started to happen: conversions, cures, even apparitions. ‘We must lose no time in crowning the little saint with glory,’ said the Prefect of the Congregation of Rites, ‘if we do not want the voice of the people to anticipate us.’ The beatification process opened thirteen years after Thérèse’s death. She was canonized in 1925, the Pope having suspended the rule that forbids canonization less than 50 years after someone’s death. Her parents, Louis and Zélie Martin, were canonized by Pope Francis on 18th October 2015. Their feast day is 12th July.

  When Thérèse was 17, she confided to a visiting Jesuit her hope of becoming a great saint and to love God as much as the Carmelite Saint Teresa of Ávila. The Jesuit thought he found traces of pride and presumption and advised her to moderate her desires. ‘Why, Father?’ asked Thérèse, ‘since our Lord has said, *Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*’ 100 years after Thérèse’s death, Pope St John Paul II declared her a Doctor of the Church, joining St Catherine of Siena, St Teresa of Ávila and, since then, St Hildegard of Bingen, as one of only four women accorded the honour.

  The very storm of glory that propelled Thérèse into sainthood makes her a difficult saint for many to stomach. The late 19th century was a highly sentimental period, and much of the literature about Thérèse has taken that quality and made it sweeter and sicklier still, to the point where you feel like brushing your teeth after reading every page. There are antidotes. One is raw Thérèse: *The Story of a Soul* is still in print in most languages. Another is a clear and astringent biography such as those by Guy Gaucher, Bishop of Meaux (which may be hard to find but is worth looking for) and Monica Furlong.

  What makes St Thérèse so special?

  We have grown used to the idea that just as there are people with talents for sport or scholarship, and the rest of us can only admire them without trying to keep up, so there are people with a talent for holiness and heroic virtue, and the rest of us can only bumble along as best we can. We can’t do better because we’re not designed to do better, so there’s no point in trying. We sink into a consoling mediocrity. But  Thérèse wrecks this. She was physically weak and psychologically vulnerable. For her the great saints were giants, they were inaccessible mountains, and she was only an ‘obscure grain of sand’; but she was not discouraged. The writings of St John of the Cross taught her that God can never inspire desires that cannot be fulfilled. The Book of Proverbs told her, ‘If anyone is *a very little one,* let him come to me’, If you only look, Scripture is permeated with images of our littleness and weakness with respect to God, and of his care for us in our insignificance.  Thérèse’s ‘Little Way’ means taking God at his word and letting his love for us wash away our sins and imperfections. When a priest told her that her falling asleep during prayer was due to a want of fervour and fidelity and she should be desolate over it, she wrote, ‘I am not desolate. I remember that little children are just as pleasing to their parents when they are asleep as when they are awake.’ We can’t all hug lepers or go off and become missionaries and martyrs. But we all do have daily opportunities of grace. Some of them may be too small to see, but the more we love God, the more we will see them. If we can’t advance to Heaven in giant strides, we can do it in tiny little steps. **Our weakness is no excuse for mediocrity.** And that’s the great message of Thérèse.