

THE RICHES OF OUR HUMAN POVERTY

Insights into the Mystery of the Trinity from Ruth Burrows

Michelle Jones

‘HUMAN POVERTY is a deep mystery that plunges us into Trinitarian depths.’¹ This insight is derived from the Carmelite spiritual tradition in general, and from one Carmelite nun in particular—Ruth Burrows. Burrows’s understanding of the mystery of the Trinity originates in her lived experience—in particular her vivid experience of ‘human poverty’, by which she does not mean material poverty, but rather the fundamental contingency and vulnerability of the human condition. For her it is our own essential nothingness that is a gateway into the life of the Trinity. Her understanding has much to teach us in everyday life as well as theologically.

Ruth Burrows has been a Discalced Carmelite nun for over 75 years and belongs to the community at Quidenham in England. In 1975, Burrows published her autobiography and first book, *Before the Living God*, which she wrote at the prompting of her friend and mentor Wendy Beckett—who is widely known for the television programmes she made about art for the BBC. This work was followed by twelve further books and numerous articles on the Christian life in general and Carmelite spirituality in particular. Her most recent book, *Love Unknown*, was commissioned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Several of Burrows’s books are widely regarded as spiritual classics; they have been reprinted many times and translated into other languages.

The Blossoming Desert

Perhaps unexpectedly for a nun and spiritual writer, by temperament Burrows knows only the raw fragility of the human condition. She has

¹ Ruth Burrows, *Love Unknown* (London: Continuum, 2011), 11.

been vividly aware since her earliest childhood of the terrifying reality of humanity's inescapable contingency and the fundamental chasm between God and humankind. She finds within herself only emptiness—her nature does not offer her any comforting, secure emotional supports upon which to establish a relationship with God. Burrows gives us a window upon her own inner life in her autobiography:

Often I have complained in my heart that God seemed absent from my life. It seemed to me that I had to live life all alone, eating it in its raw bitterness. He was not there to give me understanding and comfort. Even now I can sympathize with myself over this. A hidden God he has been to me, but God indeed.²

And in *Love Unknown*, she recounts how she appraised herself during her early years as an enclosed, contemplative nun: 'In short, I felt I was a sham, pretending to be something I was not. I lacked a natural religious sense and feared I was an agnostic if not an atheist at heart.'³

Because of her singularly stark inner life, Burrows has long lived with the truth that intimacy with God requires immersion in Jesus' communion with the Father. She details:

My purpose in being autobiographical is simply to tell you how I came to have an indestructible conviction that the weaker, the more wretched and poor we are, the more we realize that we have no goodness of our own, and cleave to Jesus with might and main, taking him absolutely at his word that he has come to save sinners, that he has come as our servant, our healer, the more is he able to do everything for us.⁴

Burrows has embraced the truth that her own nothingness is a pure capacity for the Holy Spirit to articulate Jesus' 'Yes' to the Father in her. So, in one of those paradoxes of which God seems so fond, the desert of Burrows's interior life has blossomed into a vivid illustration of the fundamental gospel message that we cannot save ourselves; but as dependent, loved children, we are scooped up into the divine life.

A Lived Theology

The fingerprints of Burrows' personal story can be seen everywhere in her formal theological statements; hers is a *lived* theology.

² Ruth Burrows, *Before the Living God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 31.

³ Burrows, *Love Unknown*, 4.

⁴ Burrows, *Love Unknown*, 4.

The Trinitarian life of God [is] a life of total self-bestowal that it is our blessed destiny to share. The Father Is, exists in begetting the Son, in pouring himself out to him, and the Son Is by returning all to the Father. In a way incapable of image or expression, the Spirit Is this mutual self-dispossession with which the Father endows his Son and the Son his Father.⁵

For Burrows, the crucified Jesus is the icon of this communion of ecstatic, uncontainable, outpoured love. 'If we want to know God', she asserts,

... we must look at Jesus crucified. Holding up the cross, bidding us gaze into that bleeding, humiliated face, the Holy Spirit's focus is not first and foremost on suffering, or even on sin and its consequences, but on a love that is absolute, 'out of this world', 'other', 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived'. We must gaze and gaze with fullest attention and then affirm: this is God; this is what God is really like. Through this vision we have the certainty of what is beyond our comprehension, that God is love and nothing but love, and that he is love to and for us What we see in Jesus is a Self-gift on God's part that is the fullest content of love.⁶

What Burrows is really interested in and focuses upon is the fact that human beings are created to participate in the life of the Trinity. She is adamant that the dogma of the Trinity should not remain an abstraction—'mere information ... kind of God to give us, but quite irrelevant in our earthly existence'—but that we should recognise and live by the truth that 'Trinitarian life is also our life'.⁷

Burrows perceives that, just as the crucified Jesus is the icon of the Trinitarian life of ecstatic love, he is also humanity's gateway into participating in this life of love. She explains,

In principle, we are taken with our risen Lord into the very heart of the Trinity. It is given to us to know God even as God knows himself As Jesus shared our flesh and blood in the time of his kenosis, now that he is glorified we share his divine life, a life that belongs to no creature by nature, but is proper to God alone. This life comes to us through Christ In a way we cannot fully grasp we are 'in' Christ, incorporated in him.⁸

⁵ Ruth Burrows, 'Quis ut Deus? Who Is as God? Meditations on the Kenosis of the Son of God' (unpublished manuscript, June 2013), 51.

⁶ Ruth Burrows, 'If You Knew the Gift of God ...', in *Essence of Prayer* (London: Burns and Oates, 2006), 46.

⁷ Burrows, *Love Unknown*, 29; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 228, cited in Ruth Burrows, 'Prayer in the Trinity', in *Essence of Prayer*, 65.

⁸ Burrows, *Love Unknown*, 135–136.

So, Burrows's understanding of our sharing in the Trinitarian life, our deification, is thoroughly christocentric. We are held in the complete self-emptying 'Yes' that Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, gives to the Father.

The burning core of Burrows' insight about humanity participating in the life of the Trinity is that being united to Jesus, being taken in him into the Trinitarian communion of love, means embracing the inescapable limitations and vulnerability of our human existence: our 'human poverty'. Our poverty and dependence, when accepted and incorporated into Jesus' self-surrendering 'Yes' to the outpoured love of the Father, are nothing other than capacity for the divine life.

The Merciful Trinity

Burrows uses what I think is a very striking image to communicate the richness of our neediness as the entry point into the Trinitarian life. It is a ceramic by Caritas Müller entitled *The Merciful Trinity*. She offers this commentary on the image:

Can we believe that God comes so close, is so bound up with us as this image reveals? See how, of the four connecting circles, the centre one is the focus of the other three. Within that circle lies helpless 'man'. The divine Trinity comes down to his aid, the Father gently lifting him up and tenderly pressing his holy face against the leprous cheek; the Son kneels to kiss his dirty, crippled feet delighting in being his servant; as a dove in flames, the Spirit, mutual love of Father and Son, swoops down to complete 'man's' enfolding into the unspeakable glory of the triune life.⁹

So what, according to Burrows, does it mean *in practice* to be taken into the Trinitarian life, in Jesus, by accepting the essential poverty of our human existence? What are the real implications of her Trinitarian insights for our daily living? It is a matter of choosing to stand unflinchingly and trustingly exposed to God's outpoured love amidst every experience of our basic powerlessness. As Burrows puts it, 'God can ... increase your trust so that you yourself choose to become at the root of your being a little child'.¹⁰ *Trust* is the key word here, and Burrows perceives this trust to be the work of the Holy Spirit: we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to incarnate

⁹ Burrows, 'Quis ut Deus?', 1.

¹⁰ Mark Allen and Ruth Burrows, *Letters on Prayer: An Exchange on Prayer and Faith* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 50.



The Merciful Trinity, by Caritas Müller

Jesus' self-emptying surrender to the Father's love by refusing to run away from our inescapable vulnerability. What Burrows is saying here is perhaps best summarised in a simple prayer composed by her dear friend Wendy Beckett: 'Whatever the past, or my fears of the future, here and now, O Holy Spirit, utter within me the total Yes of Jesus to the Father'.¹¹

When Burrows explores the lived reality of her insight that human poverty plunges us into Trinitarian depths, she focuses on three main areas: the experience of prayer, the experience of ourselves, and the experience of daily life.

Prayer

Burrows points out that in prayer—and she is thinking of times of solitary, personal prayer: 'What is likely to happen is that, at least from time to time, we simply cannot think useful thoughts, nothing helps us and we are in a state of rootless helplessness which is hard to bear because drab and unsatisfying'.¹² Burrows regards such encounters with our limited humanity

¹¹ Wendy Mary Beckett, 'Simple Prayer', *Clergy Review* (February 1978), cited in Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love: The Spiritual Teaching of St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 68.

¹² Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored: St Teresa's Teaching on the Life of Deep Union with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981), 69.

**To remain
surrendered
in trust to
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in prayer as opportunities to choose to be held by the Spirit in Jesus' surrender to the Father's love. To this end, she commends a stance of 'non-passive passivity'.¹³ She insists that we must do whatever it takes to convince ourselves of God's outpoured love and to remain surrendered in trust to that love—no matter how empty our prayer may feel. This is not a matter of grim determination, but rather a practical affirmation of the glorious riches of the impoverishment we may feel in prayer. Our prayer may seem lamentably shabby, insufficient or downright boring to us, but all the while we are being drawn into the Trinitarian communion as the Holy Spirit unites our resolute small 'yes' to Jesus' great 'Yes'.

Self-Knowledge

Burrows' second locus of the human poverty that can plunge us into Trinitarian depths is our bitter experience of ourselves as sinful, weak, limited creatures. With her characteristic living wisdom she writes,

Is there one of us who has not, at some time or other, been forced to look in the glass of self-knowledge at an unflattering image? We cannot live with other people and not get our corners knocked off. The trouble is that we do not use this grace—for grace it is—as we ought.¹⁴

Burrows is adamant that we must not evade our painful experiences of ourselves as imperfect and broken but, instead, with Spirit-infused trust, resolutely accept the reality of our limited humanity. Her point here is that God has made *Jesus* our 'righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1:30) and this truth is realised within us when we allow the Spirit to hold us in the reality of our own unpleasant insufficiency. In her book *Living Love*, Burrows offers a distillation of this insight that our daily experience of imperfection can take us into the life of the Trinity:

There is One who always did his Father's will; who offers the Father perfect love and worship. And this One is the Father's gift to us. From the shelter of the Son's heart we go on trying, with him, to do always what pleases the Father; but at the same time never wanting to feel we are becoming holy and good, without spot or wrinkle. Never are we more truly in Christ Jesus than when, deeply conscious of our sinfulness, we peacefully rest in the heart of our Redeemer.¹⁵

¹³ Allen and Burrows, *Letters on Prayer*, 66.

¹⁴ Burrows, *Love Unknown*, 11.

¹⁵ Ruth Burrows, *Living Love: Meditations on the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 22–23.

Burrows acknowledges that, just as in his day Jesus was more likely to be rejected by the self-consciously pious, the danger of resisting this work of the Spirit is ‘far greater among what we might call professionals—priests, religious, and lay people who are bent on “living a spiritual life”.’¹⁶ The dreadful irony is that those who claim to be closest to God can actually be holding themselves aloof from Trinitarian communion because they are determined to cultivate their own safety, goodness and spiritual success. They doggedly refuse to accept those chinks in their armour that are, in fact, the entry points to Trinitarian glory.

Daily Life

Burrows’ third and final ‘place’ of human poverty is our experience of daily life. What she means here is our powerlessness before the people and circumstances that constitute our world. Despite our innate drive to the contrary, we cannot ultimately control the way in which life unfolds or justifiably infringe the otherness of others.

For Burrows, to live the Trinitarian life is to abandon our futile attempts at manipulating life for our own ends and instead maintain a generous self-surrender before the otherness around us. She claims, ‘In spite of all appearances, in the very midst of our abounding weakness, we are *enabled* to live God-life, to be for others, ecstatic, willingly laying down our life.’¹⁷ In the face of our powerlessness before the unfolding of life, the Spirit empowers us to make a leap of trust and enter into Jesus’ perfect self-emptying receptivity to the Father’s love. Burrows is typically unrelenting in her vision of what is involved in sharing in the radical self-expropriation of Jesus:

Union with Jesus consists not in sitting in glory but in sharing his cup of shame, opprobrium, dishonour and powerlessness How can we share this cup in our daily life? By renouncing all power and every desire for it, every manoeuvre to obtain what we want, to prevail over others; by taking an attitude of unimportance and subjection to the community; by rejecting the right to insist on our rights; by sacrificing the image we have of ourselves and which we sensitively want upheld in our own eyes and those of others; renouncing all desire for status, of being important to others. The cup Jesus wants to share with us is that of selfless love, which is its own reward—he offers no other.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ruth Burrows, *To Believe in Jesus* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978), 94.

¹⁷ Burrows, ‘*Quis ut Deus?*’ 7 (emphasis original).

¹⁸ Burrows, *Living Love*, 38.

Trusting in God

In the preface to her autobiography, Ruth Burrows tells us her purpose in writing:

What I want to show people is that what really matters is utter trust in God; that this trust cannot be there until we have lost all self-trust and are rooted in poverty; that we must be willing to go to God with empty hands, and that the whole meaning of our existence and the one consuming desire of the heart of God is that we should let ourselves be loved.¹⁹

She could be describing here the essence of what she conveys in her writings on the mystery of the Trinity. For Burrows, we have been created to share in the life of the Trinity, and Jesus is our way into this communion of love. The Spirit can utter Jesus' definitive self-emptying 'Yes' to the Father's love *within us* in so far as we lay aside our attempts to be spiritually impressive and to purchase divine favour through our own merits. So our manifold experiences of fragility and inadequacy—so naturally abhorrent, but so rich in divine potential—must be resolutely embraced and surrendered to God in empty-handed trust. As we try to let God love us within the raw reality of who we are, we may not feel that we are sharing, through the Spirit, in Jesus' intimate communion with the Father; we may not feel that our poverty is plunging us into the Trinitarian depths. But Ruth Burrows assures us that this is the glorious truth—if only we have the eyes to see.

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¹⁹ Burrows, *Before the Living God*, 2.

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