

25 June 2016

Night: St John of the Cross (Luke 14: 25-33)

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What, or who, is a mystic? Scholars offer various definitions, but essentially a mystic is someone who has entered into the deepest dimensions of relationship with God. In the Christian tradition, we speak of mystical union – a union with God that transforms us so completely that we come to share in God’s own knowledge and love. William Johnston, a scholar of mysticism in both Western and Eastern traditions, notes that ‘there are flashes of mysticism in the life of anyone who prays’ – experiences of insight, wisdom and radical compassion. ‘But some people’, he goes on, ‘reach a *state of mysticism* ... where this formless wisdom is always in their consciousness. This is the mystical state’.¹

The New Testament insists that this state is not reserved for a spiritual elite or a chosen few, but is the vocation of all who follow Christ. Hear this, from the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Eph. 3: 18-19). And yet, as the New Testament also warns, the way is narrow that leads to life. Union with God, said Julian of Norwich, is a ‘condition of complete simplicity that demands not less than everything’. Most of us hold back at least something!

So what may we learn for our own deeper journeys to God from the great mystics of our tradition? Tonight we seek the wisdom of St John of the Cross, whom Thomas Merton called ‘the greatest of all mystical theologians’.²

¹ William Johnston, *Arise, My Love ... Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p.xvi.

² John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ed. and modernized by Henry L. Carrigan Jr (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), p.xiii.

Born in 1542 in rural Spain, John died in 1591. He was a friar of the Carmelite Order, whose entire adult life was bound up with the Reform movement initiated by his older contemporary Teresa of Avila. She too was a Carmelite, dismayed by the laxity of her convent, and eventually given permission to adopt a stricter rule of life and to found a convent of her Order based upon it. Thus there came into being the 'Discalced' or 'Barefoot' Order of Carmelites.³ Early in his monastic career, John and Teresa met, and he joined her in this work of Reform. Simple enough, it would seem. But the ferocity of the conflict that ensued over the years between the original and the reformed houses was astounding.

The whole background of the period was clouded by the increasing activity of the Inquisition, and the struggle for control of the Carmelite Order became intensely political. In his middle years, John was kidnapped and imprisoned for several months by a monastery which opposed the reforms.⁴ He was kept in a tiny windowless cell, taunted, half-starved and beaten. Comments Rowan Williams: 'What John wrote cannot be properly understood except in the context of the struggles of his life ... To know that – for example – John escaped from prison in Toledo with a notebook containing some of his poetic masterpiece, the *Spiritual Canticle*, which he had composed in his cell, tells us much about how that dense and demanding work is to be read'.⁵

Nor was his escape from prison the end of his difficulties. His work to create within his order a style of life authentically reflecting Christ's poverty, detachment and availability continued, and in his old age even 'those who had supported the reform' turned against him, stripping him of office and confining him to a remote priory.⁶ Little wonder, it would seem, that 'night' became his prevailing metaphor for the journey to God. Yet it was *night*, he says, that guided him, 'night more lovely than the dawn'; it was

³ E. Allison Peers, *Spirit of Flame: A Study of St John of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1943), p.18.

⁴ Peers, *Spirit of Flame*, pp.37-42.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.173.

⁶ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.172.

the darkness of this night that drew him into union with God.⁷ And in his major works, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, he shares what he has learned. As he puts it, he offers instruction ‘to beginners as well as to seasoned practitioners’, explaining ‘how the soul may prepare itself to reach divine union in a short time’.⁸

So how? For John, the spiritual journey is about progressive detachment from all that is not God. This doesn’t mean devaluing or despising the world. God, John insists, is present ‘in all created realities, by his sustaining power, without which nothing would have existence’.⁹ Yet, God also transcends creation. The more we are attached to finite things – including our own desires, actions and abilities – the less receptive we are to God, who is not like anything else. We must let go, therefore, of all the ordinary sources of fulfillment and identity so as to allow God to purify our will and desire. John takes utterly seriously the words of Jesus in Luke’s gospel: ‘So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions’ (14: 33).

The first step in this process of detachment is what John calls the ‘dark night of the senses’. This is something we must do, actively weaning ourselves off our desire for material pleasures and comforts, and our worldly ambition.¹⁰ It’s not that these things are necessarily wrong in themselves; the issue is to do with where our heart really is, what it is we really want. Do you want God? Or something less than God? At every moment we must be choosing God, and the dark night of the senses is about liberating ourselves from attachment to and domination by the world of sense.

This is the necessary first step, but it’s only a beginning and it’s never an end in itself. For the spiritually ambitious, it’s relatively easy to give up material delights but much, much harder to give up the subtler, seemingly more ‘spiritual’ pleasures of

⁷ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, p.5. The words quoted are from the poem, the *Songs of the Soul*; they are the basis for the prose commentary of *Ascent*.

⁸ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Preface.

⁹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.176.

¹⁰ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.177.

righteousness, pride and self-defense. And this, for John, is where the 'night of the spirit' begins.

This night of the spirit also involves an active dimension – things we can do which deepen our detachment, and bring us more fully to poverty, beyond self-sufficiency and the impulse to control, beyond spiritual possessiveness and the desire for consolation. Meditation, I take it, is this kind of practice. But the night of the spirit also involves a passive dimension, and this is the darkest part of the night, what John calls 'the soul's midnight'.

We cannot manufacture this 'night' – it's not about a self-conscious program of suffering or self-immolation. We undergo it, and more often than not, it feels not remotely spiritual. 'For John himself', suggests Williams, 'the hostility of his brothers and associates, the petty spite with which he was treated in his last months of life, would have been intrinsic to the experience of the passive night'. Its characteristic feeling of 'alienation and dread' are produced by the 'frustrations and humiliations of daily life',¹¹ by experiences of failure, inadequacy and abandonment. In this night, we undergo the 'felt absence of consolation', and maybe even 'the sense of God as distant, as rejecting, as hostile'.¹² We are brought to the place where all there is, is faith – except that often we feel at that point, that our faith has collapsed. 'The sense [is] of the impossibility of pleasing God, or even of believing in God enough to want to please him'.¹³ No experience of spiritual progress here. It's the place of Jesus' dereliction on the Cross, and the final purgation of our religious illusions. And for John, utterly paradoxically, 'nothing else can serve as a preparation for the authentic union of the self with God'.¹⁴

This is not punishment. It's simply that the closer we get to God, the more acutely and painfully we're confronted by what in us is illusory, unlovely, fearful and

¹¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.186.

¹² Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.179.

¹³ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.187.

¹⁴ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.187.

self-obsessed, the more we suffer the impossibility of being able to free ourselves from all that. But at the time it's not even as if we see *this* very clearly – it's night after all. Yet, as we consent to remain here, we are becoming empty enough, handed over enough to receive God's fullness. In this sense, such an experience can be grace, the mark of God's intimacy.

It was Teresa of Avila who said, as she was bucked off her horse into a river on the way to visit one of her monasteries: 'Dear Lord, if this is how You treat Your friends, it is no wonder You have so few!' Reading John's account of the journey to union, likewise makes the prospect of being God's friend seem pretty daunting.

Yet it is John's uncompromisingness, his utter lack of sentimentality, that is his gift and challenge still. He knows that spirituality can be itself an escape from reality, from Christ's uncompromising call to die to illusion and self-possession. The new life we're promised is no cheap grace, but life which encompasses the Cross. It is our willingness to go by way of the cross that transforms us more and more completely into sharers in and bearers of God's love, until in John's words 'the soul feels itself to be at last wholly enkindled' by the living flame of love.¹⁵ May it be so with us.

¹⁵ Saint John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, trans. E. Allison Peers (London: Burns & Oates, 1935), p.19.