

Matt's second talk 18th June 2025

What I want to do this morning though is to look at one of his letters; a letter we could say that gives us a very practical application of his teaching. It's John's teaching applied to a very specific person at a very specific time in her journey. And perhaps it might be helpful to us, for a little bit to reflect on that today, to get a sense of how John used his own teaching.

It's letter number 19 in this edition, though all editions aren't the same. It's the letter of October 12th 1589, two years before John's death. He is stationed in Segovia: the letter is to a lady called Dona Juana Pedraza, who lives in Granada. She is somebody he got to know during his six years in Granada 1582- 1588. He has now left Granada and is living in Segovia, but is in correspondence with Dona Juana, a person we know very little about. There are two letters that have come down to us that he wrote to her. We know little about her but she's somebody he got to know in Granada and came under his spiritual direction and is clearly living his spirituality. We'd love to have the letter that she wrote to him that he's responding to here but of course we don't. But we can pick up a few things from the letter that she wrote to him. She obviously reprimands him for not writing to her enough, and she thinks he's ignoring her because she's poor; and he's being idle or lazy. She also has, much more importantly, recounted to him her spiritual life; she's feeling very much in darkness, nothing is happening in her spiritual life; nobody understands her, neither human being nor God. She feels very much neglected and derelict in her spiritual life. And so this is John's response to her.

I think maybe I'll simply read it through first - we just listen to the letter and then I'll comment on various parts of it. Maybe we just listen first to what John says to this woman. It's not long but it's a very profound letter.

'Jesus be in your soul and thanks to Him that He has enabled me not to forget the poor, as you say, or be idle as you say. For it greatly vexes me to think that you believe what you say; this would be very bad after so many kindnesses on your part when I least deserved them. That's all I need now is to forget you! Look, how could this be so in the case of one who is in my soul as you are.

Since you walk in these darknesses and voids of spiritual poverty, you think that everyone and everything is failing you. It is no wonder that in this it also seems God is failing you. But nothing is failing you, neither do you have to discuss anything, nor is there anything to discuss, nor do you know this, nor will you find it, because all of these are doubts without basis. Those who desire nothing else than God walk not in darkness, however poor and dark they are in their own sight. And those who walk not presumptuously, nor according to their own satisfactions, whether from God or from creatures, nor do their own will in anything, have nothing to stumble over or discuss with anyone. You are masking good progress. Do not worry but be glad! Who are you that you should guide yourself? Wouldn't that end up fine!

You were never better off than now because you were never so humble or so submissive, or considered yourself and all worldly things to be so small; nor did you know that you were so evil and God was so good, nor did you serve God so purely and so disinterestedly as now, nor do you follow after the imperfections of your own will and interests as perhaps you were accustomed to do. What is it you desire? What kind of life or method of procedure do you paint for yourself in this life? What do you think serving God involves other than avoiding evil, keeping his commandments, and being occupied with the things of God as best we can? When this is had, what need is there of other apprehensions or other lights and satisfactions from this source or that? In these there is hardly ever a lack of stumbling blocks and dangers for the soul, which by its understanding and appetites is deceived and charmed; and it's own faculties cause it to err. And thus God does one a great favour when he darkens the faculties and impoverishes the soul in such a way that one cannot err with these. And if one does not err in this, what need is there in order to be right other than to walk along the level road of the law of God and of the Church, and live only in dark and true faith and certain hope and complete charity, expecting all our blessings in heaven, living here below like pilgrims, the poor, the exiled, orphans, the thirsty, without a road and without anything, hoping for everything in heaven?

Rejoice and trust in God, for he has given you signs that you can very well do so, and in fact you must do so. If you do not, it will not be surprising if he becomes angry at seeing you walk so foolishly when he is leading you by a road most suitable for you and has brought you to so safe a place. Desire no other path than this and adjust your soul to it (for it is a good one) and receive communion as usual. Go to confession when you have something definite; you don't have to discuss these things with anyone. Should you have some problem write to me about it. Write soon, and more frequently, for you can do so in care of Dona Anna when you are unable to do so through the nuns.

I have been somewhat ill. Now I am well, but Fray Juan Evangelista is sick. Commend him and me also to God, my daughter in the Lord.'

From Segovia, October 12, 1589

Fray John of the Cross

So that's his letter, responding to very specific questions that his listener, disciple, spiritual daughter has posed to him: and the response is, as I say, a synthesis of John's teaching, particularly his Ascent of Mt. Carmel and Dark Night. Simply this person is living what he teaches there. And we could say that there are two principal paragraphs that are the centre of this letter. She's walking in this darkness of spiritual poverty, and he gives a very good description of this darkness, this spiritual poverty and it's very much 'you think everyone and everything is failing you, and it seems that God is also failing you'. That kind of experience a person has, 'Nobody understands me; nobody helps me; nobody seems concerned about me; God doesn't answer any of my prayers; prayer is totally empty and dry; nothing is happening, it's not like it used to be. I've gone backwards,

I've slipped away. etc,etc,etc. It's very familiar, everybody has found themselves there, in various forms. It's going to vary with each individual, but that kind of 'Nothing seems to be working, nothing seems to be going right', and John says of course it's the opposite. Nothing is failing you and you don't have to discuss anything, there's nothing to discuss, there's no problem here. But you don't know this, for you have no way of working this out for yourself. You're not going to find this. All these doubts have no basis.

The reality is the complete opposite. And the fundamental reality is this - that she, Dona Juana is someone who desires nothing else than God. She desires nothing other than God; and this is the experience of one who desires nothing else but God. All others desires are secondary to the desire for God. And whoever desires nothing else but God never walks in darkness, rather walks in the brightest of light, however poor and dark they are in their own eyes. Of course, she at the moment is very poor and dark in her own eyes, and the poverty which she is referring to, whether it's material or spiritual, presumably spiritual poverty when she says he's neglected her because she's poor. This poverty she's living in, the darkness, the poverty, the sense that she's got nothing, when in reality God's light is shining. As we know, John of the Cross' Dark Night is never the absence of light but always the super abundance of light, and the brighter the light, the deeper the darkness is going to be. Clearly he is saying to her, 'Juana, the light is very bright' and therefore she's in greater darkness and the closer one comes to God the further away one seems to be etc, and the closer one gets to God the less one understands.

So she's in a place of great closeness to God, because her desire is only for God, and God is shining his light upon her but she cannot see it. And he goes on 'And those who walk not presumptuously, or according to their own satisfactions, whether from God or from creatures, nor do their own will in anything, have nothing to stumble over or discuss with anyone'. So that's what God does, he takes away all the things one could stumble over. We'll look at the text in a few minutes in another part of John's writings where he shows us this very clearly: what God does he removes whatever one could stumble over; and the things one could stumble over, presumptuousness, complacency, pride, or one's own satisfactions. If one is getting satisfaction from something, one can misinterpret it, whether this comes from God or anything else in this life. Creatures for John means everything, everything of this world, whether it be spiritual or sensual, to use John's own terms; or from one's own will, something one may have done or achieved or brought about, anything like this. God removes all of this, so there's nothing to stumble over. So he says to her 'You are making good progress, don't worry but rejoice, be glad, celebrate. It's good.' 'Who do you think you are, trying to guide yourself?' There is a tease in there as she's trying to work it out for herself - but of course a person can't. If we try to work this out for ourselves we'll get nowhere. Just stop and accept.

So that's his first response to her; then he goes on to focus more on what God is doing, and what following God in this life is really about: and where she really now is as distinct from where she's not. All these things have been taken away and she's put into darkness;

but now he's going to show that's the best place she could possibly be. And he starts the next paragraph by saying 'You were never better off than now' and how she may have heard that already, or read it, as he has probably said many times before, 'This is wonderful, this is great.' But sometimes for people it can be very shocking when they come and their spiritual life has gone all wrong, it has gone the wrong way and someone like me says 'This is great', it must seem like 'Has this guy gone mad!'

That's what John is saying, 'It's great, you've never been better off than now.' She thinks she's miserable and has gone the wrong way, and everything has gone wrong and her spiritual life has fallen apart, when in reality she couldn't be in a better place. And why couldn't she be in a better place? Because, he said 'You were never so humble or so submissive. (Humility, always a sign of God's work.). Or that you considered yourself and all worldly things to be nothing; both yourself and all that you possess and all that you had and everything else the world could offer you is all nothing. I said nothing of course because it's seen now in comparison with God.' Though the person can't work that out for themselves, but nothing else seems to matter either, because of course they're seeing it now in a very unfamiliar way; seeing it as God sees it. 'Nor did you know that you are so evil and God is so good'. Again that could be misinterpreted or could be shocking to say that she is evil, of course she's not evil, she's good and she's getting better and better, but in her own eyes she can seem to be evil. Because that's a characteristic again of someone coming closer to God; the light is shining brighter so the smallest little thing will appear much bigger and any darkness, any evil, any sinfulness, will seem much bigger than it did before. Of course sin is not seen at all if there isn't some of the light of God there. Without the light of God we would never see sin, we would never know that something is sinful. Now she's getting closer to God she sees her own worthlessness, her own evil and sinfulness and therefore could well consider herself sinful, even though in reality she's getting better, she's living a better and better life: or that God was so good, because God gets bigger and bigger and greater and greater and more mysterious and more incomprehensible and everything else. We tend to reduce God to our own terms and understand Him on our own terms, and now that no longer works and something of the real light of God is shining in, not the illusion of God nor the God created by our own way of seeing things. And so God is bigger and greater.

'Nor up until now did you ever serve God more purely and more disinterestedly'. Service, she's serving God with no self interest now, with no other motive, with purity and no self interest. 'Nor do you follow after the imperfections of your own will and interests', your own will and interests no longer have control over you, they are no longer luring you, like you were accustomed to before. So then he poses the question to her 'What do you desire'?, a very good question it is. The answer of course is only one thing, it's God. He's already told us the answer in the previous paragraph, but he's putting it to her now when he's analysed the life that she's living and set out before her the reality. 'What are you looking for, what are you desiring'? Then he poses another question 'What kind of life or

method of procedure do you paint for yourself in this life?’ There’s no method or procedure, it’s been taken out of her hands. That can be one of the very difficult things for people, How should I be praying now, what should I be doing? There’s no answer to that; there’s no method, procedure, or road map, and to be desiring one is to be looking for some kind of crutch, a prop, when none is needed. God has taken over, God is doing it. To be trying to put something in place here is to get in God’s way, so why are you looking for something?

The questions in this letter are very good. John puts very good questions here. Then he poses a third question. ‘What do you think serving God involves?’ and John answers the question for her; a sort of rhetorical question but has a very simple answer – fundamental Christianity – three things – avoiding evil, which she’s clearly doing; keeping God’s commandments; and being occupied with things of God, as best as one can, or to the best of one’s ability, or of one’s resources, or one’s means, serving God. Avoiding evil, keeping the commandments, serving God, the scriptures, life of a Christian, put very simply, but now being lived at a very deep level. Then the next question he poses, ‘Well, you have all of this, you’re doing all these things, why do you need other apprehensions, or lights or satisfactions from this source or that? You need nothing, you don’t need anything else, why are you looking for something else, any kind of satisfaction, light or understanding or wisdom?’ he goes on to say ‘In these there is hardly ever a lack of stumbling blocks and dangers’. And he comes back now to the fundamental stumbling blocks or dangers. One’s understanding can be charmed and deceived by one’s understanding or one’s appetites. What does John mean by that? It’s fundamental to all of John’s teachings. Whatever we understand, whatever can be formulated in our minds, what ever can be put into any kind of worldly, human or scientific terms is not God. God is going to take us beyond the boundaries, so if we get caught in an understanding or way of seeing things, or our appetites which for John is anything that one sets one’s heart upon which is not God. An appetite is something that has control over us; an addiction, an attachment, something that I cannot live without, or without which I cannot function, it’s a false god in scriptural terms. Scriptures are all the time speaking against the false gods, the idols – since John’s appetites are effectively the same thing, they’re an idol, a false god. The. False gods demand sacrifice, sacrifice to the gods, they’re demanding, they take from us, there no freedom in that kind of a god. So our understanding and our appetites are the sources of the stumbling blocks that enable us to err. ‘And if one does not err in this, what need is there in order to be right other than to walk along the level road of the law of God and of the Church and live only in the dark and true faith . . .’ Now theological life, dark and true. Faith, certain hope and complete charity, that is the life of the Christian, expecting nothing else, looking for nothing else, attached to nothing else in this world, only where God is. And he give s a lovely description of life in this world – the life of a Christian he said ‘ Living here below like pilgrims the poor, the exiled, orphans, the thirsty, without a

road and without anything, hoping for everything where God is'. It is a wonderful description, it's a description of John's own life, and a life in this world.

A PILGRIM - a pilgrim of course is always somebody on a journey, they haven't arrived, just temporary wherever one is. One is passing through, one is going somewhere, and one's on a journey of change and transformation. Pilgrimage changes the person on a pilgrimage and all the wisdom and tradition that's behind the idea of a pilgrimage. Life in this world is a pilgrimage.

POVERTY, THE POOR - He's already spoken about spiritual poverty. Being possessed by nothing; it's not about what one possesses, it's much more about what one's possessed by, what has power over one. What controls one. To be controlled by nothing, nothing has power over us, that's spiritual poverty.

THE EXILED - not in one's real home, our real home of course is with God. Life in this world is an exile and all the biblical tradition around exile is so fundamental to the whole understanding of God in the Bible. The exile is fundamental to how God is understood. We're exiles.

ORPHANS - again very biblical, the orphan is very much favoured by God, the one who is in need, neglected, excluded, does not belong, has no home, nobody to parent, to nurture. The orphan, the spiritual orphan.

THE THIRSTY - Again there's so much biblical imagery behind that. To be always thirsty, never satisfied. Never, because one can't be, because the object of one's thirst is God; nothing else. As we see in John's Spiritual Canticle the closer that one comes to God the greater the thirst becomes, because what might have satisfied the thirst no longer does. The thirst becomes greater. Like the deer that yearns for the running water. That kind of thirsting.

WITHOUT A ROAD - Now of course there is no way. A very John of the Cross image; go by the way that is no way. If you want a way, go where there is no way. There's no road, no road map. One has gone beyond the limits of every road. Without a road and without anything, hoping for everything in heaven.

So rejoice and trust in God, he said to her and says to anybody in darkness. Rejoice in it and trust in God that's what you must do 'For he has given you signs that you should very well do so'. You have all the signs here that you should rejoice and trust in God. That's what you must do and it would be very wrong if you didn't because you would be betraying God, and God might be very surprised and may even be angry that you should walk so foolishly when He is leading you by a road most suitable for you, and has brought you to a safe place. You simply rejoice and trust in Him. And that sums up the place of God in everybody's spiritual life according to John's teaching.

If we were to ask John of the Cross, 'John, what is God doing in my life, in my spiritual life?' John's answer, 'He's leading you by the road that is most suitable for you, has brought you to a safe place, so you simply rejoice and trust in Him'. That's the truth. Don't go looking for another path, just accommodate yourself to this and adjust to it;

there's no need to be discussing this because other people won't understand it. Don't be discussing it; go to Communion, confession, all of that, continue with your normal things. Write to me if you have a problem. He gives her means of writing because post in his day was difficult, so give it to Dona Ana. She's clearly a friend of Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa for whom John wrote the Living Flame. And then he says he has been ill himself; a bit of personal news, and Fray Juan Evangelista, John's secretary and close companion is ill, pray for him. So that's the wonderful letter applying John's reaching to Juana.

I just want very, very briefly, to go more deeply into this, to look at the Dark Night, book two, chapter 16, 1-2. Here John is commenting on the beginning of the second stanza of the poem, The Dark Night, the words are 'In darkness, and secure', that of course is where Dona Anna is. she is in darkness and he is saying 'You are very secure'. I'll read the first two paragraphs as they're really summing up the answer that John gives; it applies practically to Dona Juana.

'We already said that the darkness the soul mentions here relates to the sensory, the interior, and the spiritual appetites and faculties, because this night darkens their natural light so that through the purgation of this light they may be illumined supernaturally.' (The whole person, in other words, is darkened, for all the light that they could possibly have, because they're now being illumined supernaturally. The person is not yet adapted to seeing that supernatural light, in fact that comes in the next life. In this life as we know in John's teaching, the entire spiritual journey is a dark night. It is to be lived in faith.). So John goes on then (para 1) 'It puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens then and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything. It binds the imagination and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over all this hangs a thick and burdensome cloud that afflicts the soul and keeps it withdrawn from God. As a result the soul asserts that in darkness it walks securely'. That's where Dona Juana is; that sums it up pretty well. She thinks she's failed, even God has withdrawn; everything has been withdrawn at every level. But that's where the security lies.

Para 2 then explains the situation.

The reason for this security has been clearly explained. Usually a soul never strays except through its appetites, its gratifications, or its discursive meditation, or through its knowledge and affections. By these, people usually fail through excess or defect, or they change because of them or go astray, or experience inordinate inclinations'. (Anything that could cause you to go astray has been taken away). 'Once all these operations and movements are impeded, individuals are obviously freed from error in them, because they are not only liberated from themselves but also from their other enemies, the world and the devil. The world and the devil have no other means of warring against the the soul when

it's affections and operations are deadened. Para 3. In the measure that the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely'. So that's what the person is living, and that's what John is applying to her (Juana) life. It's a wonderful letter to take up and spend time with.