

Matt's 3rd talk , morning, Thursday 18th June 2025

So then, to continue our exploration of John of the Cross' teaching. If we were to ask John the question 'What is authentic Christian prayer? What might it be like?' It's not something that John speaks at length about, for his concern is much more for the effects of prayer. But there is one passage that pretty much answers that question for us. It's in the Ascent of Mount Carmel, book 3, chapter 44. And here in this particular section he goes through all sorts of stuff, false interpretations, things we're doing for the wrong motive. The context here is ceremonies and rituals, things that are good in themselves; we can be putting too much trust in them or doing them for the wrong motive. And here now he comes to the people who pray in order to get something from God, in order that God may answer our prayers, in order that God may do what it is I might want Him to do, and that's what inspired John to give this reflection here. Ch. 44 :1 'Some pray more for their own aims than for the honour of God'. There's a certain amount of self-centredness there. 'Although they pray with the supposition that if God is to be served their petition will be granted, and if otherwise it will not. It doesn't work like that. 'They nevertheless over multiply their prayers. They are praying in this way because of their attachment to the desired object and their vain joy in it.'. Whatever, it's their motive he's reflecting upon.

And John's response here is twofold. 1. It's an exploration of scripture; what's prayer like in scripture? What can we learn from the Bible? John's a great listener to the Bible. Everything John teaches is from the Bible; particularly for the more difficult issues, the Bible has the answers. 2. What does Jesus teach us? And of course, it's principally the Lord's Prayer, but also other teachings of Jesus. They're the two places John looks to for his answer. And the first of those answers in para 2 is a fundamental principle for John of the Cross.

'The Lord has promised in the Gospel: 'Seek first and chiefly the kingdom of God and His justice and all these other things will be added unto you', Mt. 6:33, part of the Sermon on the Mount. And that's John's fundamental principle here. If we seek the things that God wants then everything we need is given to us; rather than seeking the things we want or think we should have, or think would be good for us, seek the greater things that God wants. Seek the kingdom of God, the will of God, and then everything else you have. Because everything else is contained in that, and our greatest good is in what God wants, not in what I want or think I want, or enjoy or aspire to, but in what God wants. So seek first the things of God, the kingdom of God and His justice.

John goes on to comment on that. Para 2. 'This is the aim and petition that is most pleasing to God. To obtain an answer to the requests we bear in our hearts, there is no better means than to concentrate the strength of our prayers on what is more pleasing to God'. To please God more than pleasing myself, to seek what pleases God. And John goes on to say 'Then He will give us not only the salvation we beg for but whatever else He sees is fit and good for us, even though we do not ask for it'. So, will we seek what He wants to give, what is most important? He will give us what we need even if we didn't ask for it. We don't have to ask for it, if it's something fit and right for us He will give it.

Then John backs this up with two quotes from Ps 145, 'The Lord is near to those who call on Him in truth', v 18; and then 'He will fulfil the will of those who fear Him, He will hear their prayers and save them. For God is the guardian of those who love Him', w19-20. Then John furthers his argument by going to Solomon and his famous petition. Solomon had asked for something pleasing to God, that is wisdom. John quotes then from the Second book of Chronicles. 'Because wisdom pleased you more than any other thing, and you did not seek victory through the death of your enemies, or riches, or a long life, not only will I give you the wisdom you seek to rule my people justly, but I will even give you what you have not asked for, that is riches and substance and glory so that no king either before you or after you, will be like you'. 2 Chron. 1:11-12. So Solomon did not ask for what a king would be expected to ask for, he asked only for what God wanted, the greatest gift God gives, wisdom, and God gives everything else as well. John goes on to expand on that 'And God in fact did this and pacified Solomon's enemies too, so that all who were around him paid him tribute and did not perturb him'. 1 Kgs. 4:21-24.

Then he gives the example of Abraham and the promise to Abraham's posterity. In all of this John of the Cross is exploring the scripture and how God dealt with these great figures of scripture: and here they all carry a lesson for us in our prayer. So we direct our prayer then to God in every way, and why? The Ascent of Mount Carmel, book 3, ch. 44:3. 'For God is such that if people live in harmony with Him and do His will He will give them whatever they want, but if they seek their own interests it will be useless for them to speak to God'.

That's a very important principle for John of the Cross. It's the very nature of who God is and of how God deals with His people. Those who live in harmony with God and do God's will, they have everything. He gives them everything that they want, they could want nothing else. And if we look back to the letter that we looked at this morning to Dona Juana, there she thought she had nothing, but John points out to her that she has everything, because she only seeks God and therefore God is giving her everything that she could ever want. She doesn't see it, she's in darkness, she's not able to see that, but he has shown her that she in fact has everything. What else could she want? John says to her 'What else could you desire? You have everything'. And so that is the very nature of God. The person who is in harmony with Him, in a right relationship, they have everything; but those who seek their own interests, they're not speaking to God, they're not praying, they're speaking to themselves. That principle, as I say runs through John's writings.

I'll just look very briefly at two other examples, and then we'll come back to this chapter again for the second point. But just two places where this comes up again might help to throw a little light on this point. They're both from the Spiritual Canticle. The first one is from the commentary on stanza 1 of the Canticle no. 13; and here he's commenting on love and the Lover, the Beloved. John says she calls Him, Beloved; the soul calls the Bridegroom Jesus Christ, Beloved. 'She calls Him 'Beloved' to move Him more to answer her prayer'. When God is loved He very readily answers the requests of His lover. So that's what it means to be in harmony and a right relationship with God. To love, when a person responds in love, knows that they are loved and is requesting from God who

loves them, because God is love and the very nature of love is that the one who is loved will always want to give to the one who loves them. And that's the very nature of God, so when a person truly loves God, God cannot not give that person what they need. He cannot not respond to their prayer. It's the very nature of love, it's the very nature of God.

Spiritual Canticle, stanza 32:1, Introduction. Now we're at the very heights and union with God. 'The power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God Himself'. The power and tenacity of love captures and binds God, that's the power of love. 'Happy is love loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner, and He is surrendered to all her desires. God is such that those who act with love and friendship toward Him do all they desire, but if they act otherwise there is no speaking to Him, or power with Him, even though they go to extremes.' That is what John is warning about in The Ascent of Mt Carmel. People who think that going to extremes by doing this or that, or speaking these words or those words, or doing this ceremony or that ceremony will win God over, they won't. It's only love. It's only when one's will and God's are totally united, it's only through love. 'Yet by love they bind Him with one hair.' So, this binding of God, the power of love when a person is united with God, that power, that oneness with God, that's the very nature of God, and so God gives everything because of course God gives Himself. The very nature of God is to give and to give everything. And that's expressed in Jesus Christ, who gave everything.

Ok, so then, the second part of this, as I said, the second answer in the sense that John gives here, is what does Jesus Christ tell us? What does He tell us in the Gospels? And here in The Ascent of Mt. Carmel book 3, stanza 44:4 is a summary of the teaching of Jesus Christ regarding prayer; but it's both the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ, because Jesus teaches what He does or to put it another way, Jesus teaches who He is. Because prayer is the very nature of who Jesus is. So when His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, and Jesus as One who knew His Father's will, would have told them all that was necessary. So Jesus would have given them an answer, and would have known what to give, and whatever is necessary to obtain an answer from the Eternal Father. So Jesus would have given them everything that they needed. And John now makes the point that Jesus told them very little. He just said the Our Father, the seven petitions of the Pater Noster, that's all. They include all our spiritual and temporal needs, everything is contained in that prayer. He didn't teach them other ceremonies or prayers, just that one.

And of course John refers to St. Luke's Gospel and St. Matthew's Gospel also (which we'll have for tomorrow's Mass, so it fits in very well with that). So everything is contained there. Lk. 11:1-4; and then he quotes from St. Matthew's Gospel 'At another time He told them they should not desire much speaking because our Heavenly Father clearly knows our needs. Mt. 6:7-8. So not much words as the Father already knows. He only exhorted them, John said to persevere in prayer, and persevering in prayer is the Pater Noster, pray it over and over again. Pray without ceasing not with words but just with silence, trusting that God already knows. Jesus did not give us quantity of petitions just these seven to be prayed with fervour and care. John goes on to say 'In these, as I

say, are embodied everything that is God's will and all that is fitting for us. Accordingly, when His Majesty had recourse three times to the Eternal Father, all three times He prayed with the same petition of the Pater Noster, as the Evangelists recount 'Father, if it cannot be but that I drink this chalice, may your will be done.' (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14.:36: Lk. 22:42.). And he quotes from the three Gospels that give us that petition, 'That your will be done'. That is Jesus Himself, His own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane; he prays that the chalice may be taken from Him, but 'It is your will not mine'. If it be your will, whatever may be your will, is the example of perfect Christian prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In that moment of greatest need in the life of Jesus, that's how he prayed, and John of the Cross is singling it out here as an example for us of how to pray, and particularly how to pray when we are in great need. Jesus teaches us by word and by example. And as John of the Cross has so often pointed out to us in his writings, 'To fix one's eyes on Jesus', never stop looking at what He is doing, how He is living, and listening to His words. And nowhere is that more important than in His teaching on prayer, so, the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father.

And then John picks out two other messages or examples from the life of Jesus; the first one is praying in the concealment of our inner room. Going into the inner room where we can pray with a more perfect and pure heart, without any noise, without having to tell anybody, that inner room that's there within us. 'When you pray enter your inner room, and having closed the door, pray', Mt. 6:6. That inner room that's deep within each one of us, that place within. It's what Jesus exhorts His disciples and of course it's what He does Himself. And the other one is the prayer in the wilderness, in the best and most quiet time of night; and we know from many testimonies in the life of John of the Cross, that he loved to go out at night; out into the dark night; out into the countryside late at night, to the mountains or the woods and pray there. He loved to spend hours in the darkness. He points out the fact that Jesus did that, we know that John did it himself, we know that it was something he really liked doing; and it's another part of the background to his most important image of the Dark Night. Out there in the darkness and the wood, and the hills and the mountains one has the entrance into a whole different world. A world that speaks. So John of the Cross, we know, did what here he's pointing out that Jesus did. So in the inner room within, in the silence, in the quiet, the remote places at night, that's the teaching of Jesus; that's the example that Jesus gave.

John of the Cross goes on to clarify that he's not condemning feast days or ceremonies or practices, he's simply looking at the motive and saying do not complicate prayer, keep prayer simple, keep prayer close to the prayer of Jesus and of the prayer of the Bible. Keep listening to the scriptures, they're the greatest teaching, and here of course in this passage, no doubt, we're coming very close to the prayer of John himself. John doesn't give us anything we might say explicitly autobiographical in his writings, yet everything at another level is autobiographical; his experience or the experience of others.

This prayer that he outlines for us here in this chapter, is really how he prayed himself, because all his writings are the fruit of this. His writings are just full of scripture; they're the writings of someone who has spent his life listening to the word of God in the scriptures; and listening to the word of God throughout scripture, not just one particular part or particular parts that are used a lot in the liturgy, or are popular, but everywhere, he goes everywhere. And he seems to be able to quote at ease, he's very familiar with scripture and in a particular way with the prayer of Jesus Christ; the teaching of Jesus because there we have everything that we need. What is of fundamental importance here, as you can see looking at this, is one's image of God. Who God is for us. That more than anything else determines if we are praying in the right way or not; that we have a right understanding of who God is.

If we rightly understand the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus, if we rightly understand what Jesus has taught us, then we will pray in the right way. Our prayer will be genuine. But of course the struggle that there is throughout the scriptures is that people have a false or distorted understanding of who God is; the false gods of the Bible, all the times that the people stray away from the authentic God, then they lose the favour that God gives them, and God's support and help. And that's fundamental to how John sees prayer; if we know who God is, if we've a right understanding of who the God of the Bible is, then we will know who we are in relationship with God, and we will relate to God as did the people in the Bible who prayed in the right way; effectively Solomon, David, Abraham, all these figures there, and of course first and foremost Jesus Christ Himself.