

As we saw a little bit this morning, about how John of the Cross sees things, how he sees God, how he sees all of creation, and most importantly, us, in relationship with God; and the central place of Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son of God, in all of that. All of creation is the bride of Jesus Christ, of course, and that image of the bride he uses for every Christian; every person in relationship with Jesus Christ is bride in relationship with the Bridegroom. I'd like to continue with that now, Jesus Christ and the place of Jesus in the spiritual life. I'd like to start with that 'Prayer of the Soul Taken with Love'; the soul that's enamoured with God, in the *Sayings of Light and Love*. Nos 26/27 in the newer edition, and page 668 in the older edition.) It's a beautiful prayer, a prayer of a person who is now totally taken up with the love of God and we see in this prayer that God has given everything in giving His Son, Jesus Christ; the person who has received Jesus Christ, which is all of us, has everything. Whoever has Jesus has everything; and yet as the prayer shows us, this person is experiencing emptiness, and longing, and is questioning. That's where the prayer begins with the person questioning God and herself, questioning the situation that she finds herself in. There are really two halves to the prayer, so let's take the first half.

It is a series of questions, a series of affirmations, a series of statements. For it begins by addressing God 'Lord God, my Beloved'. It begins with this affirmation of love, God is whom I love, whom I'm loved by; that relationship of love. That's the opening statement: she believes in that love. Then the first question, 'If you still remember my sins in such a way that you do not do what I beg of you, do your will concerning them, my God, which is what I most desire, and exercise your goodness and mercy, and you will be known through them'. Why is God not answering her prayers? Why is God not doing what she begs? Maybe it's my sins that He remembers? If it is, then God, only you can deal with those and why don't you? So that's the first thing that comes into the soul's mind, is it the sins? Is that's what's stopping God? There's a sense that God is not giving, not revealing Himself, God is not answering her prayer.

Second question, 'But if you are waiting for my good works?' The first one is, is it my sins that are the obstacle? Now is it my lack of good works? Something so human in this; and here it's somebody at the very heights of love and relationship with God. Is it my lack of good works? If it is then grant me the good works, because if it is I can't do them myself, only God can do it. Real good works can only be done through God through us; so grant them to me, and work them for me: and if it's suffering you desire to accept, let that be done; whatever it is that you're asking for. In both of these you see, she's expressing her total dependence upon God. Sinfulness, I cannot get over without your help; good works cannot be done without God doing them. Both are expressions of dependence upon God. Humility, submissiveness, etc.

Then the next question; 'But if you're not waiting for my works, what is it that makes you wait, My most clement Lord? Why do you delay?' If it's not good works why do I have to wait? What's the purpose of this waiting? The sense that there's something missing. 'For if, after all, I am to receive the grace and mercy that I entreat of you in your Son, take my mite, since you desire it, and grant me this blessing, since you also desire that'. So if I'm to receive everything, your grace, your mercy, that I'm asking for in your Son Jesus Christ, take the little I'm giving you, which is everything, because that you desire that I give everything, and grant me this blessing since you desire that.

Because the nature of God is that God wants to give, we've seen that and she knows that God wants to give. God's greatest desire is to give and there will be no limit to the giving. She also wants to give, however little or nothing that giving might seem to her, she wants to give. It's like she's saying all the pieces are in place here, yet there is this great sense that something is missing, something is not being given. This is the first part of this person's prayer, and we've seen it already in various ways, the person who is really close to God has that sense that they are not, or that there is something missing or they are longing for something.

Then we move to another paragraph, which is really an expression of profound humility. She is saying I can do nothing. 'Who can free themselves from lowly manners or limitations if you do not lift them to yourself, my God, in purity of love?' Who can do it? Nobody can. The lowly manners and limitations of life in this world and the human condition, only God can lift the person up from that; and He does so in purity of love, only true love, only God can do that. Now the second question, 'How will human beings begotten and nurtured in lowliness rise up to you, Lord, if you do not raise them with your hand that made them?' You made them, it's your hand that raises them; those two questions are expressing her total dependence upon God; her own weakness, the humble situation that she's in. This is a person putting into prayer what's happening within. The questions and doubts and the situations she finds herself in, this soul is totally taken up with the love of God. Totally living by the love of God. Now there's another shift, and it's the acknowledgment that she has everything. 'You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire'. Up until now, as we've been saying, she wants, wants, why have I not been given, why cannot I lift myself up? Now she's saying, you have already given me everything, and you're not going to take it away from me. You haven't taken away Jesus Christ, therefore you haven't taken away all the everything that you gave me. Now the waiting has been turned into a celebration. 'Hence I rejoice that if I wait for you, you will not delay'. So, the waiting, the pain, having expressed the pain of waiting, now the joy of the waiting, the rejoicing in it. God is both holding back and giving and has of course given everything in Jesus Christ, which is the point of the whole prayer, and the point it gets to. So this is how she's addressing God in truthfulness, opening her heart in love; it's the prayer of love.

And then the prayer shifts (again), the second half is not addressing God but herself, addressing her soul, her deepest person who she is, as though she is a different person, this is who she's addressing now; starting with a question. 'With what procrastinations do you wait, since from this very moment you can love God in your heart?' Why wait? What's this all about? What's the complaining all about? There's nothing to stop you loving God; you may think He hasn't answered this prayer or that prayer, or you may feel that you're very lowly or humble, or that your works are not good enough, or whatever it is, but none of this can stop you loving, none of this can stop you responding in love to the love that God is giving you. He has given that love in His Son Jesus Christ. That's the love that He has given. So now the prayer goes on to express in a beautiful sense what God has given, nothing less than everything.

It goes on then - 'Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine;

and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me'. The Father has given Jesus Christ, given Him before all eternity as we saw in the poem this morning; has given everything. It's the very nature of God to give, and when God has given Jesus He has given everything, because everything is the bride of Jesus; and therefore he lists out everything here, the heavens, and the earth, everything God has created. The nations, good people, bad people, just, sinners, all people. And the angels, and the Mother of God, His own Mother; and all things,, everything else, everything that could possibly be included, and God Himself. He has given Himself, in giving His Son He has given Himself; and I possess it all, I have it all. Here's someone who is looking for something, feeling that something is missing, and now is telling herself if you have everything, you couldn't possibly be lacking anything because Jesus Christ has been given to you. If you have Jesus you have even God Himself because 'Christ is mine and all for me'.

So then, back to questioning again 'What do you ask, then, and seek my soul'? You're asking and seeking when you have everything! That's one of the extraordinary paradoxes of the spiritual life; here's somebody asking and seeking, yet she has everything. There's a wonderful image John uses in *The Living Flame of the caverns*, and these vast caverns, as the person is getting closer to God are getting bigger and bigger, he says, and emptier and emptier, hungrier and hungrier, the closer to God the person comes: because the capacity for God is growing and increasing the closer one gets to God. The person has a great sense of that capacity for God.

God seems almost absent when He is closest and the person seems most empty when really God has given her everything. So why do you seek then? 'Yours is all of this, and all is for you'. And she knows that, that she has all of this, and it is all for her and yet she seeks and searches and he, John, is not in any way in this prayer condemning the seeking and the searching, or saying she's wrong to seek and search. No, this is the prayer, the seeking and searching is right. You keep seeking and searching even when you have everything, that is the prayer of the person. 'Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage yourself in something less or pay heed to the crumbs that fall from you Father's table. Go forth and exult in your Glory! Hide yourself in it and rejoice, and you will obtain the supplications of your heart'. You will obtain what you're longing, searching and seeking for, but go and exult, rejoice, don't pay heed to anything less; you have got all of this. So, rejoice, celebrate God's glory. So it is a wonderful prayer, the prayer of somebody living the fullness of love, transformed by love; yet in that place where that seeking, that searching is the Cross, and at every stage of the spiritual life the Cross is there. In one way and another it's always there.

Right throughout John's writings we could go to so many places to the sense of who Jesus Christ is, and the place of Jesus Christ. I'll just pick out a few places worth looking at. There are three key chapters in *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* which really are the answer to the question Where is Jesus Christ in the one's spiritual life? The first is Book 1 chapter 13, there in that chapter everything hinges on motivation. Jesus is the motivation. It is for Jesus Christ, those three words, for Jesus Christ. He is the motive for setting out on this road, He is the motive for every sacrifice, every decision, everything that one does. Out of love for Jesus Christ there can be no limit for what one will do, and that chapter sets out in very clear terms, do this out of love for Jesus. There can be no other reason to set out on the spiritual journey. There is no other reason to live a spiritual life. In

John of the Cross' teaching; the motive always has to be love of Jesus Christ. The bride seeking the Bridegroom; the bride who has been wounded with love by the Bridegroom, that's the beginning of the Canticle, that's the motivation, there can be no other motivation. 'As one journeys along this road' a great John of the Cross phrase that we find over and over again, and 'Fix one's eyes on Jesus Christ'. Look to Jesus Christ, look at Him not at yourself. Keep looking at Jesus Christ, that's very much the theme of the second chapter of the Ascent, Book 2, chapter 7. Again a very profound chapter on Jesus Christ. There are two parts to the chapter. The first part is about listening to Jesus, listening to His words in the Gospels. And John in particular emphasises those sayings that were not so attractive; some of the things that Jesus said were very attractive. We like some of the phrases, some of the sayings, there are others we're not so attracted to. The ones we're not so attracted to, are because, John says, there's more of God being revealed there. Our inclinations, our preferences are very different to God's. God sees things in a very different way. So if we're not attracted to some particular saying, and we find it particularly challenging, go there he says, stay there; there is something there that God is saying to you.

The second part of that chapter is looking at the example of Jesus, how He lived, at the Cross. It's His self emptying, His giving totally of Himself, that total self giving, and there upon the Cross Jesus calls out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' John of the Cross focuses on that. Here's Jesus believing that God has forsaken Him. All the people have abandoned Him, all His friends have abandoned Him, He has given everything, He has died to everything, John said there is nothing more to die to. Now Jesus believes God has abandoned Him, yet that is the very moment John said, when God is doing His greatest work in Jesus Christ. He is uniting the world. It is the moment of the Spiritual Marriage; it is the moment of reconciliation of God and all of creation. It is the greatest work of God. Jesus could not be closer to the Father, the Father could not be closer to Jesus. And there is a lesson there in the whole spiritual life for us all. As we've seen over and over again in different ways, when we seen further and further from God that's the moment of greatest closeness. When we think God is missing or has abandoned us, or not answering our prayers, that's the moment of grace; that's when He's doing something beyond our knowledge, beyond our understanding.

The third chapter to pay close attention to in the Ascent is Book 2: chapter 22. Jesus is the Word of the Father. He is God's Word. Everything God has ever said in the past or would ever want to say is contained in Jesus. He is the Word. Everything we could ever want to hear, or long for is there in Jesus, listen to Him. All the Scriptures speak about Him; everything God would ever want to say to us is contained in Jesus Christ. John says don't be looking after other things, or seeking after other things, everything is in Jesus Christ. Just like this prayer The Soul taken in Love, God has given us everything in Jesus. Everything He would ever want to say is contained in Jesus. I'm very much reminded of one of the famous 'Sayings of Light and Love', 'The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul'. (Newer translation page 92:100, older book page 675:21). In all of history from the creation, God spoke one Word only and that Word is Christ, and that's the Word spoken in eternal silence and one has to enter that silence to hear that Word. It silences

everything else, every other word. Silence. So those three chapters of The Ascent of Mt. Carmel are worth pondering.

Jesus is the end of the spiritual life. When it comes to the final stanzas of the Spiritual Canticle, there we see that Jesus is the Bridegroom, all of the Canticle is an entering ever more deeply into relationship with Jesus, and that relationship keeps evolving, but it is always going to take a person to where life took Jesus Himself, to the Cross, because the Cross is the deepest mystery of Jesus. It's the most profound revelation of who God is. The wisdom of the Cross, as John speaks about, that's where we're drawn to, the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life. And the origin, the source of that is creation itself. This is what we're created for, we're created for a relationship with Jesus Christ, that's what we saw in the poem this morning, and as we grow spiritually, we grow into a relationship with Jesus Christ; and the motive is always love for Jesus Christ, and He is the model. He has gone before us, we follow Him, look to Him and live as close as possible to the life He lived. That is the life of a Christian as John of the Cross teaches it to us.