

CARMELITE PRIORY, BOAR'S HILL

a retreat led by Fr Matt Blake, OCD

13th-15th May 2022

*THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE TEACHING AND WRITINGS
OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS*

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FIRST TALK: *ST JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT*

St John of the Cross and the Holy Spirit is our topic. To begin with, I will read a few lines of John's poetry to put us in the right state of mind. The poem I will read from is his *Romance on the gospel text 'In principio erat verbum'*, which he wrote while he was in prison.

At the start of the poem John has introduced the Father and the Word:

*And thus the glory of the Son
was the Father's glory,
and the Father possessed
all his glory in the Son.
As the lover in the beloved
each lived in the other,
and the Love that unites them
is one with them,
their equal, excellent as
the One and the Other:
Three Persons, and one Beloved
among all three.
One love in them all
makes of them one Lover,
and the Lover is the Beloved
in whom each one lives.
For the being that the three possess
each of them possesses,
and each of them loves
him who bears this being.
Each one is this being,
which alone unites them,
binding them deeply,
one beyond words.
Love that unites them,
for the three have one love
which is their essence;
and the more love is one
the more it is love.*

I just want to read a few more lines of John's poetry and these come from *La Fonte – The Spring*, or *The Fountain* – however you want to translate it. And here in this poem there is a similar theme – knowing the Trinity, knowing the spring, the fountain, from which everything draws life and then the stream that flows from it and then, in the eighth stanza:

*'I know the stream proceeding from these two,
that neither of them in fact precedes it,
although it is night.*

*This eternal spring is hidden in this living bread
for our life's sake,
although it is night.'*

So those two little pieces of poetry give us a starting point for our subject: the nature of God and the fact, the wonder, the awesome reality that we can know God. These two things fascinated John of the Cross, and the first poem was, for John, the beginning of everything, and is our first introduction to the Holy Spirit in John's writings: we could say that the Spirit is love

and the Spirit is relationship – relationship between the Father and the Son, and then, by extension, the relationship that we have with God. The Spirit is love, the Spirit is relationship – it is the Spirit that unites them – it is this love that is the essence of the Trinity. The Spirit is love.

And then in the second poem, *La Fonte* (The Spring) – here John is giving us very traditional Catholic or Christian teaching on the Spirit, but giving it in a very unique language – proceeding from these two – for John it is the wonder of knowing, and it is in the dark night; that whole refrain *although it is night*. It is always night, the night of faith, the dark night, so central to John's teaching. It is the night of faith that enables us to know, to know the Trinity, to know God – we can know in faith. And then I read on a little bit because the poem moves on from knowing the Trinity to now being able to see because of the Spirit; being able to see that all of this is in the living bread, in the Eucharist that we can hold in our hand; we can touch the full reality of God, the fullness of God, always, of course, in faith. This is our God that we can touch, that we can eat, that we can see, that we can behold, that we can know.

So that sets the scene for us. The God who has made himself known to us, the God who has given us the capacity to know him, that's what all of St John of the Cross' teaching is about, and in a sense one could easily say of this retreat – *The Holy Spirit in John of the Cross* – that everything John of the Cross says is about the Holy Spirit. One could say it is everything, because John's concern, what John is always teaching, always speaking about, is the spiritual life and the spiritual life is the life that the Spirit brings about in us, the life that the Spirit nurtures in us.

It is the Spirit that gives life, it is the Spirit that nurtures life, it is the Spirit that brings about the change and purification that enables us live life, that enables us to be alive. So everything that John is speaking about is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and as a consequence of that, the Spirit in each one of us, the spiritual life that we live, which is of course our real life, there is no other life. The one life that is real, that is true, is the life that the Spirit brings to reality in us and enables us to live.

But we have got to go a bit further in this retreat and look more specifically at where John speaks about the Holy Spirit, where he brings the Holy Spirit into his teaching, gives us a more specific insight into who the Holy Spirit is for him, going beyond just speaking about God in the general sense. Most of John's teaching is about God or the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, but in particular we want to look at where he speaks about the Holy Spirit.

In this first session I am simply introducing this subject. I want to start with one of John's letters. Very few letters of John's have come down to us, but we have a few precious documents and this one he wrote in the days coming up to Pentecost in the year 1590, about a year and a half before he died. It was written to a Carmelite nun who was suffering greatly interiorly – suffering from scruples, from worries, anxieties – and John was writing to console her and encourage her and strengthen her. It also gives us in this little paragraph I am going to read an insight into how personal this is for him and how personal the Holy Spirit is. We know from John's writings and the testimonies of people who knew him how important the feasts were to him. John celebrated the Christian feasts, he lived the various feasts, and Pentecost is one of these feasts that John celebrated, that he lived, that he very personally entered into and that's what he's encouraging, exhorting this sister to do. So here is what he says to her:

In these days, try to keep interiorly occupied with a desire for the coming of the Holy Spirit and on the feast and afterward with his continual presence. Let your care and esteem for this be so great that nothing else will matter to you or receive your attention, whether it may concern some affliction or some other disturbing memories. And if there be faults in the house during these days, pass over them for love of the Holy Spirit and of what you owe to the peace and quietude of the soul in which he is pleased to dwell.

So here, to this troubled nun: just pray to the Holy Spirit, put everything into the hands of the Holy Spirit; leave everything else – trust in the Spirit. It's a beautiful prayer and a beautiful way of seeing the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings peace and quiet to the soul. And John of course is speaking here from his own experience. It was the Holy Spirit that gave him peace, that gave calm to his soul in the midst of so many difficulties in his own life and he is passing on that wisdom. The Holy Spirit was, we could say, for John, a real friend, someone he was in relationship with, someone he turned to when he was troubled. So turn to the Holy Spirit when you're disturbed and troubled and worried, and there's a lesson there for all of us – we see how personal and real the Holy Spirit is. And this is important because there could be a tendency – particularly looking at John of the Cross – of seeing the Holy Spirit somehow as being way out there or being inaccessible or only there at the very heights of the spiritual life. But here John is showing us: when you're feeling troubled, disturbed, worried, tell the Holy Spirit, speak with the Holy Spirit, trust the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is always there within, the Spirit is always within us. And in particular this retreat is in the days leading up to Pentecost, so in this retreat we are doing what John was talking about – turning to the Holy Spirit in the days leading up to this very important feast for Christianity. So that's a little personal insight from John.

I would like to shift focus a little bit now to another dimension of John's teaching which we have to look at a little bit if we are to understand and see the importance of the place of the Holy Spirit in John's thinking and living and writing, and that is the scriptures. I want to look at two texts from two of John's Prologues, because the Prologues are so important to John's writings, because there he sets out for us what he is doing, what his intention is and what his method is. The first paragraph I want to read is from his Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. He is going to speak about the dark night and he's explaining why it is so important that he speaks about the dark night.

In discussing this dark night, therefore, I will not rely on experience or science, for these can fail and deceive us. Although I will not neglect whatever possible use I can make of them, my help in all that, with God's favour, I shall say, will be Sacred Scripture, at least in the most important matters or those that are difficult to understand. Taking Scripture as our guide we do not err since the Holy Spirit speaks to us through it. Should I misunderstand or be mistaken on some point, whether I deduce it from Scripture or not, I will not be intending to deviate from the true meaning of Sacred Scripture or from the doctrine of our Holy Mother the Catholic Church.

The other very similar paragraph I will quote from is the Prologue to the *Spiritual Cantic*, in which John is speaking about the deep desires and experiences that the person wants to express and that his poetry gives voice to.

If these similitudes are not read with the simplicity of the spirit of knowledge and love they contain, they will seem to be absurdities rather than reasonable utterances, as will those comparisons of the divine Song of Solomon and other books of Sacred Scripture where the Holy Spirit, unable to express the fullness of his meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses. The saintly doctors, no matter how much they have said or will say, can never furnish an exhaustive explanation of these figures and comparisons, since the abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be caught in words. Thus the explanation of these expressions usually contains less than what they embody in themselves.

Those two texts give us some important fundamentals to understanding John's thinking and teaching. For him, the scriptures are written by the Holy Spirit – he doesn't mean that in the literal sense of the word, but rather, the Holy Spirit is writing and speaking through the writers of Scripture, through the words and stories and imagery and poetry and all the other aspects and dimensions of scripture. The Holy Spirit is speaking through scripture and whenever we read scripture, listen to scripture, meditate upon scripture, we're listening to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is speaking to us, and that listening, that speaking, that wisdom that is being

given goes way beyond what is expressed in the words because what the Spirit is saying cannot be contained in the words of the stories, books, psalms, or the poetry, because the Spirit is saying much more and that's what enables John and encourages John to use scripture and write about scripture in the way that he does. Going through John's writings, sometimes it is astonishing the way he explains certain passages of scripture and the meanings that he draws out of it. It might be a story about a war between David and the enemy, but John will draw out something that's not being said there at all because the Holy Spirit speaks through these stories and these happenings and is always speaking through them and is speaking now to us as we listen. And so John, we might say, writes with a great freedom when he listens to the Holy Spirit speaking, and John in his writings goes all over the scriptures and sometimes to the most obscure passages we would never go near and he will draw something out of there because it's the Holy Spirit that is writing this and the Holy Spirit can speak through this and if it fits what the Holy Spirit is saying here, then that's what the Holy Spirit is doing.

And then John tells us in both of these passages in different ways that everything that he is teaching is according to the teaching of the Church. And we might think oh, yes, John is putting a limit here, and in a sense he is. Everything he teaches is faithful to the Church, but John does not see it as a limitation, rather as a further expansion, because the Holy Spirit speaks through all these doctors and fathers of the Church and the whole tradition that has gone before and that has already expanded greatly what the Holy Spirit is saying. There is no limit to what the Holy Spirit is saying, we will never reach the limit of what the Holy Spirit is saying through scripture and all these doctors and teachers bring out some aspect, something of what the Spirit is saying, but there is more and there is more. And John then applies that to his own writings, because his writings, as we know, are commentaries on his poetry and his poetry here is the *Spiritual Canticle*, which is itself a poem but it's also a commentary on the *Song of Songs* from scripture. He very specifically tells us here the Holy Spirit wrote the *Song of Songs*, therefore the Holy Spirit wrote the basis of John's poem, the *Canticle*: therefore John is listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to him as he listens to what the Spirit wrote in this book of Scripture. So the Spirit has spoken through the book of Scripture; the Spirit is speaking to John now as John meditates, reflects, sings and celebrates this book of Scripture and the Holy Spirit is going to go on now to speak as John writes a commentary on it. But the commentary – as he wants us very much to understand – will never state everything that the Spirit is saying in these verses, just as his poem will never say everything that the Spirit is saying in the *Song of Songs*, because we never get to the end of this, because there is no limit to what the Holy Spirit is telling us.

So it is the Holy Spirit that gives the power, the breadth and the depth to the word of God. Everything that John of the Cross writes, that he teaches, is a reflection, a meditation on, a praying of the Scriptures. It is a listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through scripture. So how John sees Scripture, how he listens to Scripture, how he speaks about Scripture, how he uses Scripture, is very much founded upon his understanding of the Holy Spirit and his perception of the Holy Spirit – how the Holy Spirit works in us, how the Holy Spirit communicates with us, how the Holy Spirit enables us to enter fully into relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit.

One other thing I want to give in this first session is how John understands living by the Holy Spirit. Today is the feast of Our Lady of Fatima and it's good to bring a mention of Mary into what we are speaking about today. This is from Book Three of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Chapter Two, and John is speaking now about those who are moved by the Holy Spirit and he says this was the prayer of Mary, it was the prayer and the work of Our Lady.

Such was the prayer and work of Our Lady, the most glorious Virgin. Raised from the beginning to this high state, she never had the form of any creature impressed in her soul, nor was she moved by any, for she was always moved by the Holy Spirit.

That, for John, is what it is to live the fullness of the Spirit, to be always moved by the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit is there, within. Just as we saw in the poem of John's that I read at the

beginning of this talk, everything that is happening in the Father and the Son – in the Trinity – is the Holy Spirit. The love that is between them, that's what they are living, that is what their life is. So he sees Mary here, right from the beginning, throughout her life being moved always by the Spirit. In other words Mary, in John's understanding, lives the fullness of the spiritual life from the beginning. What everybody else throughout a lifetime grows and matures into has to be purified and transformed. Mary lives that from the beginning, but of course always in faith, always in darkness. She wouldn't have been aware of it, because she was simply being herself; she was simply living true to herself.

That's what the spiritual life is: living true to oneself, because to be really living true to oneself one is constantly moved by the Holy Spirit. If one is moved by anything else, then that is not really true – there's only the Spirit. If there is anything else that is moving one, it's one's ego or one's self-centredness, or one's ambitions or one's goals or it could be somebody else's, some other force, some other love that would be moving the person, but if it is moved by the Spirit then the person is living authentically. The reason is, John tells us, that God alone moves these souls towards those works that are in harmony with his will and ordinance and they cannot be moved towards others. Thus the works and prayer of these souls always produce their effect. They always work in harmony with God's will. That for John is the high point of the union of God's will and the person, because then the person is living what's being lived in the Trinity, living by that same love – moved by the Holy Spirit, moved by love. Everything that the person prays, everything that the person does, is love, is an act of love, is motivated by love, produces love.

We will pick that up tomorrow. The kind of structure I am using is based on the two books and poems in which John puts a very strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit: *The Spiritual Cantic* and *The Living Flame*, particularly *The Living Flame*. Tomorrow morning I want to look at the Holy Spirit in the *Living Flame* and in the afternoon The Holy Spirit in the *Cantic*. On Sunday morning I will go to a few specific places where John speaks about the spirit in the process of spiritual growing and maturing.

Today I have set the scene so that we can see who the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is for John. The Holy Spirit – the love relationship in the Trinity – is the one who enables us to hear and to enter ever more deeply into the word of God. The Holy Trinity is the one who the spiritually mature, the spiritually purified – the saints, holy people – are always moved by and with whom they live, think, act and pray in full union and communion. That is who the Holy Spirit is for them and therefore we could say the whole of St John of the Cross' life and teaching is the Holy Spirit, because it is the spiritual that is his concern, that's what he wants us to know. He wants us to have an understanding that essentially we are spiritual people and it is the Spirit, to use the words of John's gospel, that gives life, and how this works and plays out in our lives. The life that the Spirit gives is the life of the Trinity and those who grow into this grow into the fullness of life. Mary is the first person to do this, she is the example of a person living totally in union with the Holy Spirit, at one with the will of God, always open and ready and available to say yes, to do the will of God in everything.

SECOND TALK: *THE HOLY SPIRIT IN 'THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE'*

Our topic is St John of the Cross and the Holy Spirit and I just want to begin this morning, giving the briefest of run overs of what I did yesterday, aware that not everybody was able to be present and because some people did not pick up all the references that were used.

I began yesterday this general introduction to our topic with two pieces of poetry. One was from John's *Romances on the Incarnation*, first section, and the second piece of poetry was from *La Fonte (The Fountain, The Spring)* stanzas 8 and 9. Then the first paragraph of a letter that John wrote to a Carmelite nun. The letter is dated just before Pentecost 1590. It is published as Letter 20 in the edition I am working from but this may vary in other editions.

Then I was looking at John's use of scripture and the connection to understanding the Holy Spirit in John's teaching and writing. It's important to know how he uses scripture and sees the Holy Spirit as the author of scripture and the one who is speaking through whoever reads, listens to or interprets and teaches scripture. The two pieces we looked at were two Prologues: the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (2nd para) and the Prologue to the *Spiritual Cantic* (para 1, last part).

Then I concluded by looking at a text from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* [Book 3, Chapter 2, para 10], really because yesterday was the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. We will be revisiting that paragraph tomorrow morning. John was pointing out that Mary lived her whole life from the beginning, always moved by the Holy Spirit, so she was ready, or always had the right disposition of mind and heart to respond to the Holy Spirit. The rest of us struggle or have to grow into this or be purified to arrive at that.

Today we will look at the first stanza, the early paragraphs of the *Living Flame*, the poem and commentary. Obviously the flame is an image of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is flame which came upon the apostles at the feast of Pentecost as fire, as flame. To begin, perhaps a few fundamentals about this work so that we get an overall sense of the place of the Holy Spirit in it. Everything that John is speaking about in this work happens, takes place, resides, in the deepest centre of the human being. What I am just coming to is this key idea in the *Living Flame*, the idea of glory. Difficult to define what is meant by glory, but maybe a way of seeing it is the gospel that we have tomorrow, Sunday, Chapter 13 of John's gospel. There, in that gospel, we're told Judas left and then Jesus immediately goes on to speak about glory – the son of man being glorified – now he is being glorified. We might see Judas as representing betrayal, representing everything that is contrary to glory, everything that compromises and distorts it, everything that is evil, that is bad, that is not life-giving, everything that needs to go or that we need to be set free of or be purified from. Judas has left, John's gospel tells us, and Jesus immediately speaks about glory. Glory is what is left when Judas has departed, it is what can now happen, what can manifest itself: glory can be seen and experienced. In John's gospel the glorification of Jesus is the Cross – because he goes to the Cross free, totally free, free of everything, at every level of freedom, it's the greatest expression of human freedom.

What John of the Cross is attempting to do here in the *Living Flame* is to give us a sense of what that might be in our lives, what that reality is, or perhaps, more fundamentally, to show us that this reality exists because the Father, Son and Spirit dwell within, and therefore we take what Jesus promises as being true, as being real, as existing, as now.

I want to go into this and I want to look at the first few paragraphs of the Commentary on Stanza 1. All of this, remember, is what the Holy Spirit is doing. In the first poem I read yesterday, John defined the Holy Spirit as love. The Holy Spirit is that relationship, that life-giving, dynamic relationship within the Trinity – between Father and Son – and that dynamic relationship between all who are drawn into, brought into, who grow into that relationship.

The soul – the person; I am quoting from the very beginning – *now feels that it is all inflamed in the divine union*. Just take that phrase for a moment: the divine union is of course the Father, Son and Spirit – that’s the Trinity, the divine union. The person is now set on fire by the Holy Spirit and that flame brings the person into that relationship. That’s where the person lives, that’s where the person is drawing life from and now John wants to express some of the effects or consequences of this. So he says: *its palate is all bathed in glory and love* – it is submerged in glory and love. Glory is the essence of God, that atmosphere, environment of God. Love is God’s very nature – God is love. Then he goes on: *that in the intimate part of its substance* – and here is another attempt to express that deepest place within. He struggles – *the intimate part of its substance* – everything is happening very deeply. In the *intimate part of its substance it is flooded with no less than rivers of glory*. Another way of putting that is that there is no limit now to what God can do.

Let us go back to Chapter 13 of John’s gospel: Judas has gone out, so there is no limit to what God can do, what God can give, to the life of God that can manifest itself here. No less than *rivers of glory flooding in, abounding in delights*. [John 7:38] Joy, peace, celebration – they are all characteristics of the Holy Spirit. We see it in how Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit at the last supper in John’s gospel. The Holy Spirit is spoken about as joy, delight, happiness, peace – effects of the Holy Spirit. So now there is an abundance of this: *and from its depths flow rivers of living water* – that’s John’s gospel again – because that’s the other characteristic of the Holy Spirit here in the *Living Flame*. The person, the soul, is alight, on fire. The flame has so totally taken over; but it doesn’t stop there, the flame is giving out other flames, it’s going out from the person. In other words, it is affecting so many others, and the whole world and is changing everything in the effects that it has.

So in this entire work – the poem and commentary – what John of the Cross is attempting to express for us in words and in symbolism is what it is to live inflamed or transformed by the Holy Spirit, and the effect that is going to have – not only on the individual, but on the whole world; the effects are limitless. Just as there is no limit now as to what God can do in the deepest place within the person, there is no limit to the effects that this can have or where the effects can reach, where these rivers of living waters can reach. There’s no limit, it seems, John goes on to say, because it is so forcefully transformed in God, so sublimely possessed by him and arrayed with such rich gifts and virtues, that it is singularly close to beatitude – so close that only a thin veil separates it. So the person is almost on the edge of eternal life, of the other world; there is only this thin veil that separates them and we might be tempted to think that this person is now living an angelic life, not really living in this world. The opposite is much more the case – the closer the person comes to the heavenly world, the more deeply they are engaged in the life of this world. In other words, the closer the person comes to God, the heavenly world, the more human the person becomes, the more truly human. John’s *Living Flame* here is a testimony to humanity at its most mature, most beautiful, most productive, most fruitful. The more that God lives within, the more this flame does to the person, the more human the person becomes. But the person has the desire for eternal life. That’s the last stanza: *tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!* Out of love for God the person has ardent desires – the Holy Spirit.

The third paragraph: *This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels him within itself not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it but as a fire that burns and flares within it, as I mentioned*. So one of the characteristics of this work, the *Living Flame*, is that John takes us back to look at the journey that the person has come on, and to see that every stage of the spiritual life is a work of the Holy Spirit. The same flame that now gives us such light and healing and wisdom and strength here is the same flame that purified it and plunged it into darkness and accompanied it through the difficult times. Now the person can see that with a new or renewed clarity, so those of you who are familiar with John of the Cross’ writings – and most of you are – remember his teaching of the *Dark Night*, where he takes us into the most difficult and challenging places where one can be along the

spiritual journey, and now in the *Living Flame* he revisits that place, showing that what we perceived as darkness was really the brightest of lights.

Looking at it from another perspective – the perspective of the work of the Holy Spirit – what John shows us in the *Living Flame* is that the whole spiritual life, spiritual journey that a person comes on in this world is all a work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one that brings about the purification, the change, the transformation; the Holy Spirit accompanies the human being throughout their entire spiritual life. And now the person who has arrived at these heights or these depths can see this in a new light. I quote from paragraph 3: *Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love* – it is love that enables the person, it is love that gives the light because the person now, he says, *loves most sublimely. The interior acts he produces* – and note that phrase, *the interior acts* – all the actions of this person come from the deepest place within, they come from that place where love is – that's where everything is. *The interior acts he produces shoot up flames, for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely. Thus these acts of love are most precious; one of them is more meritorious and valuable than all the deeds a person may have performed in the whole of life without this transformation, however great they may have been.* Because of the love, whatever this person does now is greater than anything they may have achieved in their whole life, no matter how great that might have been. The principle of John of the Cross' teaching is that the value that anything we do is not in the work itself, but in the love with which it is done. It is love that gives any action, any decision, any thought, any attitude, its value. Here specifically the love is a sign of the fruits of the action of the Holy Spirit, the work that the Holy Spirit has brought about in this person.

So, God is speaking within the person. Yesterday, when speaking about scripture, I said that in John of the Cross' way of thinking everything in scripture is written by the Holy Spirit, not in some literal sense of the Holy Spirit holding the hand or the pen of the person, but rather the person is writing or expressing in words a reality that is far greater, that the Spirit is communicating to the person. And so that's what's happening here; the person is listening, is receiving from the Holy Spirit and it is a new language, this *language of God*. *These words are perceived by souls who have ears to hear them, these souls, as I say, that are cleansed and enamored.* A new way of hearing God. *Those who do not relish this language God speaks within them must not think on this account that others do not taste it.*

The example that he gives is Chapter 6 of John's gospel, where Jesus speaks about the Eucharist. If we read that chapter carefully, we see at the beginning of the chapter there are huge crowds, and the deeper and more profound the teaching of Jesus, the more people strongly object and the crowds get less and less. Therefore at the end there are only the disciples left; everyone else has gone because they have not the capacity to hear, in John of the Cross' words, *the language of God*, the language that the Holy Spirit teaches, therefore it does not make any earthly sense. So the Holy Spirit here enables the person to hear God's language, to hear God speaking in the deepest place within – something that will not be understood by others – something that is quite literally a taste of eternal life. I am looking at paragraph 6: *Since this soul is so close to God that it is transformed into a flame of love in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are communicated to it, how can it be thought incredible that it enjoy a foretaste of eternal life? ... because of this effect; it makes the soul live in God spiritually and experience the life of God ... the spirit and the senses, transformed in God, enjoy him in a living way ... although not perfectly, but as though by a glimpse of eternal life.* [Stanza 1, para 6]. Because God is living within and the soul is living in God. The person has some sense here, a little glimpse of eternal life and yet is living fully and more productively, doing more good in this world than anything else it could possibly have done or achieved in their life.

I just want to look at this paragraph from the commentary on Stanza 2 paragraph 10. What is going on deep within us? John takes us right in here to the depths, gives us a glimpse of what's happening when this flame, this Holy Spirit strikes us. Remember, this is the seed of the Church at the Feast of Pentecost; the Holy Spirit came in fire and in wind upon the disciples and they

are completely changed and the people who were there witness this. But what actually happened? John of the Cross here tries to give us a sense of it. He has spoken about how the Holy Spirit wounds. It's a very traditional image – the Spirit wounds and heals – imagery that John uses. Love wounds and it heals – it is the very same love that wounds and heals. *Who can fittingly speak of this intimate point of the wound, which seems to make its mark in the middle of the heart of the spirit, there where the soul experiences the excellence of the delight?* [Stanza 2, Para. 10]

Let's pause here for a moment. We can see John's struggle with language; he's trying to get to some place deep within the person – *the intimate point of the wound* – it's not just the wound; there's a depth, there are deeper layers: *in the middle of the heart of the spirit*, right in the deepest place within. There are a few things behind that; one is John's image or understanding of the human being. We can never grasp the dignity, the beauty, the wonder of the human being. We only get a glimpse of it when we see the human being in terms of relationship with God; it's only in terms of relationship with God that we can get some glimpse of what it means to be human. Fundamental to John's teaching and the foundation of it, the basis of it, is his teaching on the incarnation. If God became human in Jesus Christ, then we can't possibly realise the full extent of what it means to be human, and now he wants to take us to the very core of that and it is the Holy Spirit here that is enabling us to see who we really are, what it really means to be human.

The soul feels that the point is like a tiny mustard seed, very much alive and enkindled, sending into its surroundings a living and enkindled fire of love. The fire issuing from the substance and power of that living point, which contains the substance and power of the herb, is felt to be subtly diffused through all the spiritual and substantial veins of the soul in the measure of the soul's power and strength. The soul feels its ardour strengthen and increase and its love become so refined in this ardour that seemingly there flow seas of living fire within it, reaching the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or centre of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love. [Stanza 2, Para. 10]

The deeper it goes within, the further these rivers of love reach; there's no limit, the whole universe is involved – the earthly and the heavenly worlds. There are no limits to the effect that this has, all coming from that point in the deepest place within the person where God and the human being are united, the place where God makes his home, the place where God reveals his presence and reveals the true nature of what it means to be human, to be made in the image and likeness of God. That idea of the image and likeness of God we will pick up this afternoon when we look at John's teaching in the *Spiritual Canticle*, but here we have some glimpse at least of the workings of the Holy Spirit in a person. It's the Holy Spirit that brings all of this about. What John shows us in the *Living Flame*, where he enters deeply into the workings of the Holy Spirit in the person, is that these workings are limitless – they are not just limitless in the effects they have upon the person, but they are limitless in the effects that these can have upon others, upon the whole world, the universe, even the heavenly world – everything can be affected. How can John say this? He can say it from his understanding of the incarnation: God became flesh; the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. That same Word, that same God unites himself with everyone who is disposed to that. The Holy Spirit brings about that same union, brings about that same transformation, so that God lives within the person. As Jesus in the gospel said: *the Father and I, we will make our home in whoever loves us*. John quotes that in the Prologue to the *Living Flame*. If Jesus said this, then we must take him at his word, if Jesus said this, then what Jesus said is real, is true, it happens. It's not a theory, it's not something way out there in the future. It is real and because it is real, these are some of its effects, this is a little glimpse of its effects and it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to know this and get the slightest little glimpse of the effects that this has – and it is only the slightest little glimpse. The reality, John tells us over and over again, is far greater and reaches much further than anything that the language he uses could express.

THIRD TALK: *THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE*

So we come to our third session now on the Holy Spirit in the writing and teaching of St John of the Cross and I want to look this time at the *Spiritual Canticle*. Basically all the texts I will be looking at and the quotes will be from Stanzas 38 and 39.

As regards the *Canticle*, in the general sense of the word, we saw yesterday when we looked at the text of the Prologue to the *Canticle*, and at the *Song of Songs*, that book in the Bible – that biblical song – what all of this is based on. John tells us that it was written by the Holy Spirit, but contains meanings and depths that the words cannot express, that what the Holy Spirit is speaking about through these verses, this great love song, goes way beyond what the words themselves are saying. That's true, as I said, for all of scripture as John sees it and it's even more true here.

John wrote thirty-one of the forty of these stanzas while in prison. So he wrote them in the darkest place, the darkest time of his life. He turned to this biblical song, which he didn't have with him physically – he had it all only in memory, he obviously learned it all, he knew it by heart. It's a song and a prayer that he had sung and prayed over and over again throughout his life and clearly he turns to it in this time of great darkness and suffering and danger. In listening to it he hears the Holy Spirit speaking and therefore he is able to write this most beautiful poem to express what he's experiencing.

The *Canticle* covers the whole spiritual journey. While it might appear to us that John seems to speak mostly of the Holy Spirit at the end of the journey, at the point of arrival of the journey, in reality the Holy Spirit is there all the time. We wouldn't even think about God or prayer unless the Holy Spirit had put the need there.

(recording interrupted/broken) ...it is a response to the wound of love; it's a journey of love, a response of love. There are two words or concepts that are particularly important here. One word I have already used a few times, but haven't spoken about specifically, and that is the word *transformation* – that comes into so much of John's writings and particularly here, towards the end of the *Canticle*. The person is transformed, that's the goal of the spiritual journey, that is the effect that a mature spiritual life has upon a human being – the human being is transformed. By transformation, John means, obviously, change, total change, change that comes from that deep place within that we spoke about this morning, that deepest centre, that part of the centre within, the change that comes from there. But transformation means more than that, it means – it's difficult to put this into words – it is somehow like stepping into another way of life, another way of being. It's as if one has stepped into a more true or more real, more authentic way of living – as I said, words here are inadequate. For John, transformation is radical change, irreversible change, entering into a new way of living and a way of living that we have seen is so totally human, authentically human – the most authentically human way of living that there is. So we try to get a sense of this then, of what this is.

In the commentary on Stanza 38 of the *Canticle*, John first reminds us of where this has been going, what the desire of the person all the time has been. It is to love God as purely and perfectly as he loves her, in order to repay him for such love. That's the aim, that's the purpose; the person has learned throughout this whole life experience how much God loves her. But that is never satisfactory. To know that one is loved by God doesn't fully satisfy, because the very nature of love is that one needs to, wants to, desires to respond with reciprocal love. But of course that's impossible, humanly speaking; we can't love like the love that's in the Trinity, but the desire is there to do so, to love as purely and perfectly as God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – loves her, in order to repay that love with a similar love. Now God makes that possible – with a love equal to God's love and that is of course that God enables her to love.

This is from the *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 38, Para.3. *The soul's will* – and when John uses the word *soul* it's perhaps more appropriate for us to use the word *person* here; he means the

whole person, the authentic person. *So the soul's will is not destroyed* – love never destroys, God never destroys – he transforms. *So the soul's will is not destroyed there, but is so firmly united with the strength of God's will, with which he loves her, that her love for him is as strong and perfect as his love for her; for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God's. Thus the soul loves God with the will and strength of God himself, united with the very strength of love with which God loves her. The strength lies in the Holy Spirit in whom the soul is there transformed, for by this transformation of glory he supplies what is lacking in her, since he is given to the soul for the sake of the strength of this love.*

What does that mean? How can we understand that? There's a line in St Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul is speaking to the Christians in Rome: *When you don't know how to pray, when you cannot find words to pray, the Spirit prays in you and the Spirit prays in you in words that are according to the mind of God.* So, in other words, the Holy Spirit has been given, as St John of the Cross said, has been put into the soul, and somehow God and the Holy Spirit take over the praying and the loving when we have reached our limits – when we can't pray – and the Spirit does it for us.

John of the Cross says: *the soul's loving has been transformed by the Holy Spirit.* We saw yesterday in the very first poem that I read that: *the Holy Spirit is the love that there is between the Father and the Son.* That's John of the Cross' first statement about the Holy Spirit. He, the Spirit, is the love that there is between the Father and the Son, he is the love that unites Father and Son and he is the love that proceeds from Father and Son. Now, here, John of the Cross is speaking about the souls that have been transformed in this love, that they are now loving with this very same love, with the strength of this very same love that is given by the Holy Spirit. And John goes on to explain that a little bit further, but we haven't got the time to go into it now. Basically, the way he describes it is that God gives the person the instrument to love. It's like giving the person a musical instrument, and God works with them and plays it with the person. The two love together, the two loves are one. Transformation – the person is living a new kind of life, has stepped into somewhere. And that somewhere new is the other term we need to think seriously about; it comes in so much in this last part and that is what John calls *God through participation*. We don't become Gods, we don't become equal to God, but rather God enables us to participate in his love, participate in his word, we're transformed into something that enables us to partake of his love and the expression used is: *the breathing of the air of the Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is air.

The two images that we find in the Acts of the Apostles on the feast of Pentecost when the Spirit came upon them are fire and wind – air, breath. Jesus upon the Cross in John's gospel, when he gives the Holy Spirit, he gives his last breath, he gives the Holy Spirit from the Cross. He gave his breath, he gave up his Spirit, he gave us the Spirit from the Cross, he gave us the life that he was living. Similarly, when he appears to them after the resurrection he breathed upon them, he gave them his breath. Jesus gives his breath, gives his life, so the person is living his life, that's how the Holy Spirit enables us to live God's life because he is the breath. There's another life within us that breathes, that lives by, that draws life from God's breath. Spiritual life is life from God's breath.

Coming to Stanza 39, paragraph 3, we might say this is the real point of arrival in the *Canticle*, this wonderful spiritual adventure that this great book of Christian spirituality takes us on. This is where John wants us to get to. *This breathing of the air is an ability that the soul states God will give her there in the communication of the Holy Spirit.* When he gives his Spirit, that's what he gives, the capacity to breathe the air, which is God, to take in God. He goes on to explain a little bit more: *by this divine breath-like spiration* – taking in the air of God – *the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father.* That's an incredible statement, that a human being can live by what it is that sustains the Father and the Son. *This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to himself.*

It's the breath of the Holy Spirit that unites us with God. For John of the Cross the goal, the point of arrival of the spiritual life is union with God. That's his favourite expression, that's the goal. He prefers that to other more traditional terms like holiness or sanctity. He prefers union with God, because that helps John to express the whole journey in terms of relationship, relationship brought about by the Holy Spirit. The very nature of relationship is that it is a relationship of equals. For a relationship to be healthy, life-giving, it must always be a relationship of equals, but how can that be possible when we are human beings in this world and God is in the divine heavenly world? The two can have nothing in common; the two are completely different spheres. How can there be equality of relationship? The Holy Spirit makes that possible, because the Holy Spirit is the life that Jesus Christ lived and died to be with us. *I must go away so that the Spirit may come. It is so important for you that the Spirit comes.* That emphasis that's put in John's gospel – the Spirit has to come, *I am sending you the Spirit* – he keeps giving us his breath because it is the Spirit that enables us to live and to love in this new way, this transformation. *There would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed in the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity in an open and manifest degree* – nothing less than this – it can't be less – a true and total transformation.

I am now going to skip on a little bit to the second part of paragraph 4. This is one of John's great challenges in writing this and it is always going to be the challenge that we face. *One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God through participation as God breathes in her.* That, for John, is one of the great obstacles. John tells us that he faces two obstacles in his writings: one is to explain what can't be put into words. I have already mentioned this: we are beyond the boundaries of language, we are beyond the boundaries of what any imagery can trace – no matter what beautiful poetry or works of art, imagery, similitudes, anything we come up with, we can never express what's being experienced. The other difficulty that John faces – he expressed this very strongly in the *Living Flame*, Stanza 1 paragraph 15 – is that the very difficulty, whatever explanation he gives, whatever he may say – people will think that that's what it is; or people will think that it is less than this; or it can't possibly be like that; he's exaggerating a bit; or now this isn't really like that; we're down somewhere less than that and it's not quite that. Of course the opposite is true – it is much more than that. We should not be surprised, for one fundamental reason, God does not have limits, there are no limits to God. God is limitless; that is fundamental to God. The God of the Bible, the God of Christianity has no limits; therefore there can be no limits to the relationship that a human being can have with God. We can never say: thus far, and no further, we can never say that, there can be no limits. If we put in limits we're denying a fundamental truth of who God is, but of course we do it all the time, it's human, we put limits. And that's what John is trying to get across, because when it comes to the action of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no limits. Any human being on the face of this earth can breathe in the breath of God as God gives his breath, as Jesus gave his breath – it's not impossible that the soul be capable of such a sublime act. That is *God through participation*.

Let's just hear how John puts it: *For, granted that God favours her by union with the most Blessed Trinity* – that's the gift God is giving here, union with Father Son and Spirit, union with the Blessed Trinity. That's what Jesus prays for in the last supper, that's what Jesus has lived in life, that's the gift he is giving – *God favours her by union in the most Blessed Trinity in which she becomes deiform* – she becomes like God, she becomes the image of God – *and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love – or better than this be done in her – in the Trinity together with it, as does the Trinity itself!* [Stanza 39: para. 4] Now he's going a step further than where he has been going up until now. She's not just loving as the Trinity loves, but understands and knows – that a person can understand and know this. Of course understanding and knowing is not an intellectual understanding and knowing. That's impossible, that's why the person cannot explain this. This is beyond them because it is not an intellectual knowing; no science, no research expresses it, but it's true. As the Trinity itself knows, understands and loves. God puts in that level of understanding.

The only way one can get a sense of this is when one picks up John of the Cross here or something in scripture or somewhere else, and you read it and you've never read this before, never seen it before, but you just know it is true, you just know it is real. You don't know how you know, where it has come from, and that is a sign that it's a reality. It's already a reality, just that up until now the awareness hasn't been there, or the understanding, the knowledge. What John is doing is putting words on something that so many people experience but have no words for, have no idea that this is even possible, that this is even real, that this is even true until suddenly it jumps out of the page somewhere in St John of the Cross. That's how the Holy Spirit works, that's why John is setting out to write this. He tells us in his Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* that everything he is writing is not because he desires to, or wants to, or has any ambition to, but because so many people need this, need to hear this. However, the experience will be very different for each person, but somehow or other, when a person picks up and reads it they feel this man understands me, this man knows what is going on within me, this man knows what I can't put into words, or nobody around me knows or understands, this man knows what the rest of the world seems oblivious to. To know, understand and love as the Trinity itself.

John goes on to say: *Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation.* God accomplishes it – not you. And here in a sense is his conclusion to this: *This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in his image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance.* [Stanza 30: para.4] That of course is in the very first page of the bible, that God created human beings in his image and likeness. He did so that the human being, the person, has the capacity to grow into this image and likeness. That is what John of the Cross is teaching here. He is effectively teaching the truth, that most fundamental truth at the beginning of the bible when the bible is speaking about creation. If we are made in the image and likeness of God, then that is what we are, that's what we are made for, that's the purpose of our existence, that's where the fullness of life, our fulfilment is, that's where it is to be found. That's what Jesus came into this world for, to show us this. He is the image and likeness of God, the life that he lives, the image and likeness of God. But that's a truth for all people and Jesus tells us that.

Next, Stanza 39, paragraph 5. Now John of the Cross goes on to show, drawing heavily on John's gospel, that this is the purpose for which Jesus came into this world. *No knowledge or power can describe how this happens*, – of course it can't, it's impossible, it's a work of the Holy Spirit; there's no knowledge or power that can explain it – *unless by explaining how the Son of God attained and merited such a high state for us, 'the power to be children of God,' as St John says [Jn.1:12]* – the power to become children of God, to grow into being children of God, to mature into being true children of God, to be a true child of the Trinity, to be truly the image and likeness of God. That's from the Prologue to John's Gospel. To those who accept Jesus, he gives the power to *become children of God*. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

John of the Cross has been showing us here in the *Canticle* how that evolves, this work of the Holy Spirit, to fulfill the purpose for which Jesus came into this world, drawing very heavily from Chapter 17 of John's gospel, the last supper, that priestly prayer of Jesus, when Jesus puts his whole life and destiny in prayer – everything is put into that prayer. And what does that prayer pray for? It prays that: *Father, I desire that where I am, those you have given me may also be with me, that they may see the glory you have given to me*, etc. He quotes in various places this love that's between the Father and him, that that same love would be in them, which of course, as we have seen, is the Holy Spirit. So this is the fulfilment of what Jesus prayed for at the last supper and of course what Jesus died on the cross for. We could put it like this: to follow the rationale of John's gospel, the logic of John's gospel, Jesus died on the cross to give us the Holy Spirit, that's the last thing he did as he died and the first thing he did when he appeared to his disciples. He died on the cross, *that the love that there is between the Father and the Son would be in these*. And we saw in the opening poem on this retreat that that's the

Holy Spirit, the love there is between the Father and the son, and Jesus prays for that at the last supper.

And what John of the Cross is attempting to do here in these last stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle*, he's attempting to express for us what that might be, what that might look like. What kind of a life is this? What kind of a life is the person's life transformed into? What kind of a life is a person living who is living this God through participation, the person who is breathing the air of the Spirit as they live their lives – what kind of a life is this? And as we've seen, the two principal features or characteristics of this life are the ways of love and glory.

FOURTH TALK: *RELATED ISSUES:*

- 1) *Spiritual direction; 2) Obstacles; 3) How do we speak about spiritual matters?*
- 4) *John's advice to preachers; 5) Spiritual works;*
- 6) *Wisdom, knowledge that the Holy Spirit gives; 7) Silent music*

We have been looking at the Holy Spirit in the teachings and writings of St John of the Cross. We have looked at the core of the subject, the essence of it: the place of the Holy Spirit as the one who unites us with God, who brings about the change and transformation in the spiritual life.

1) Spiritual Direction

This morning I want to complete the picture, looking at some related issues, issues that surround this and are important to an overall understanding of our subject, and the first one is spiritual direction. John speaks at length about spiritual direction in the *Living Flame* – a large section in the third stanza, and in the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and in other places throughout his writings he very directly addresses the question of spiritual direction and his concern is for the welfare of these souls, these people, that he is writing for. The need, he said, is to take great care into whose hands one is putting one's spirit, because for John the spiritual director is the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit is always the director of souls. We have seen how it is the Holy Spirit who brings about the purification, change, transformation; the Holy Spirit that accompanies the person throughout the entire spiritual journey. Therefore it is the Holy Spirit who is directing one and whoever one is supporting or helping or guiding, on their spiritual journey. And so it is essential for spiritual directors to respect the work of the Spirit. We don't understand how the Spirit is working in our own lives, so it is even more difficult for us to understand how the Spirit might be working in another person's life, because the Spirit works differently and uniquely and very personally in each individual. So respect for how the Spirit is working in each person is essential, and the most important obligation or duty of any spiritual director is not to get in the way of the Holy Spirit. John is so aware of the damage done by people who get in the way of the Holy Spirit, who think they know better than the Spirit of God, who is directing the person. So tread very, very, carefully in the life of another person and do not tread upon what the Spirit is doing. This is a huge issue for John of the Cross and one of the main motives, he tells us, of why he writes what he writes because he has seen first hand over and over again the damage that spiritual directors do.

2) Obstacles

The second area to look at – what is the main obstacle, we might say, to the working of the Holy Spirit? In John's teaching the word that he uses is the *appetites*. We might perhaps use words like addictions or attachments or obsessions or a whole range of other words. John uses the word *appetites*, and so much of John's teaching is taken up with showing us the damage these do and guiding us on this journey to real inner freedom. I just want to read a line from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 1, beginning of Chapter 6. He wants to tell us the damage that these appetites do. Principally there are two ways in which they damage: *Firstly, they deprive the person, the soul, of God's spirit*, and secondly, *they weary, torment, darken, defile and weaken that*. That's the damage, that's the obstacle to the working of the Holy Spirit. We've seen what the Holy Spirit does. These are the main obstacles – to deprive one of God, because God's Spirit can only work in the soul, in the person, in the heart that is free. Otherwise it can't, and the result then is this weakening, sapping away the energy, impoverishing the person. The person isn't fully who they are.

We saw yesterday that the Holy Spirit is the strength of the soul. When the Holy Spirit can act with freedom in the person, the person is filled with strength. John tells us elsewhere that everything he would want to teach the spiritual person is contained in the great commandment of Israel – *to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength*. And John puts particular emphasis upon strength, because he knows and sees from experience that these appetites, these attachments – whatever it is that one is not free of – take the strength, but when the person is free, detached, then the person has a strength. John uses a wonderful phrase: *it is freedom from one's own appetites and the appetites of others*, which is a very interesting phrase, because we can be really tied up and tied in knots through the appetites of others, the expectations of others, the subtle control that other people can have upon us, or attitudes or ideologies – all the different ways that we can be controlled, that our freedom can be held back, compromised. It is detachment, freedom from these appetites, because they deprive one of the Holy Spirit and they weaken, darken, damage, impoverish, the true person, the real person, the inner person – that place within.

3) *How does one speak about spiritual matters?*

The third area I want to look at is how does one speak about spiritual matters? John obviously has spent his life speaking about spiritual matters; he has spent his life teaching, guiding, educating, writing about spiritual matters, and I am going to now look at his Prologue to the *Spiritual Canticle*. I draw quite a lot from this wonderful Prologue and John's Prologues are so important, because there he gives us the guidance we need. Here in this Prologue [para 2] he gives us a very important principle when speaking about spiritual matters. He said: *It is better to explain the utterances of love in their broadest sense so that each one may derive profit from them according to the mode and capacity of one's own spirit, rather than narrow them down to a meaning unadaptable to every palate*. So to speak about spiritual matters, we need to speak in a broad sense, recognising that the Holy Spirit is working in a personal and unique way in each individual, and so whatever the speaker, the teacher, the writer is saying is to be put in such a way that each person can draw from it what's right for them, what speaks to them, what is relevant to them now for where their spirit is, rather than a spiritual director who says: this is what you must do or this is how it should be or if it is not like this then you are on the wrong path. No – there's a breadth as to how the spirit works and it is for each person to see what's relevant here, what speaks to you.

So the person who is writing or teaching or speaking about spiritual matters must do so in a broad way and that's John's own method, that's how he's going to write his commentary on the *Canticle* and all his writings and it is a guideline also for us as we approach John's writings. Read it with an open mind, with an open heart; let it speak to us as it will speak to us, because the spirit is in both the writer and in the listener and the reader. What speaks to you here? What's relevant now? What's important now? And leave the rest, because spiritual teaching must never be about putting a round peg into a square hole; it's not about fitting in to something, but respecting the breadth of the spirit and the way that the spirit works. So, speak in broad terms of spiritual matters.

4) *John's advice to preachers*

The next area I want to go to follows on from that. What would John say to the preacher? There's a text at the very end of the *Ascent to Mount Carmel* [Book 3, Chapter 45 Para 2]. How can the words of preachers benefit others?

As for the preacher, in order to benefit the people and avoid the impediment of vain joy and presumption, he should keep in mind that preaching is more a spiritual practice than a vocal one. For although it is practised through exterior words, it has no force or efficacy save from the interior spirit. No matter how lofty the doctrine preached, or how polished the rhetoric, or how sublime the style in which the preaching is clothed, the profit does not ordinarily increase because of these means in themselves; it comes from the spirit. God's word is indeed

efficacious of itself. [Ascent Book 3: Ch.45: para.3] and he quotes from the Psalm: 'God will give to his voice the voice of power' [Ps. 68:33].

So, it's what is happening within the preacher – it's the spirit – it is a spiritual attribute; it comes from the spirit; it is what is happening deep in the spirit; it's the spiritual life of the person. John goes on to say that a person's style and doctrine and learning and all of that of course helps, and one makes use of it, but it only has the power to change another person's life when it is coming from the spirit within, that hidden power that's there within. He makes a similar point in the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which I quoted on the first evening, looking at scripture: *I won't make use of science and learning* – but then he will, he said – *whenever it is useful*. So John isn't dismissing skills and learning and scientific knowledge and all of this. He said use them, whenever appropriate – and John himself does – but it is there to support the work of the spirit, not to supplant it. It is only the spirit that brings about real change, it is only the spirit that can make any words spoken effective, because the object for John is not to entertain or to give joy or satisfaction, but to bring about change, to bring about transformation and it is the work of the Holy Spirit that does that. So he gives strong words here to preachers and their spiritual lives. That's what really speaks – the spirit that's there within, speaking to the spirit of those who are listening.

5) *Spiritual works*

Going on from spiritual preaching and teaching to spiritual works. We only looked at a little bit of this text on the first evening. This is again from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Remember, the first evening, Friday evening – that seems a long time ago – we spoke a little bit about Our Lady, because it was the feast of Our Lady of Fatima so I wanted to bring that in – Mary always living by the Holy Spirit. In these paragraphs he is speaking about the operations, the works. As with the preacher, that person's spirit is truly alive and strong and if he or she is moved by the Holy Spirit, then the words spoken will have power – so it is with the works. The works of this person – the power, the efficacy – come from the spirit within.

These souls, consequently, perform only fitting and reasonable works, and none that are not so. For God's Spirit makes them know what must be known and ignore what must be ignored, remember what ought to be remembered – with or without forms – and forget what ought to be forgotten, and makes them love what they ought to love, and keeps them from loving what is not in God. Accordingly, all the first movements and operations of these faculties are divine. There is no reason to wonder about these movements and operations being divine, since they are transformed into divine being. [Book 3, Ch. 2, Para: 9]

The will of God and the will of the person are one – the person is so united in love with God. It is not God controlling the person or God taking away the person's freedom, it's the opposite of that. This is what true human freedom is, it's the freedom to act only and always in love. The person who is truly free only and always acts in love, because to act in any other way is to be controlled by one's own desires, one's own ambitions, one's own ego, one's own self-centredness, or to be controlled, as we have seen, by the appetites of others, or the controls of ideologies. True human freedom is love, so the person will only act in love and God is love. As John of Cross says elsewhere, God's language is love. Therefore this person only loves – nothing else comes into the person. And they do not love what is not God, that's what takes away the energy, when one's love is put into something that is not healthy, not life-giving. To know how to love and when to love, to always respond in love, to always act according to the will of God, that's true human freedom – anything else is not true freedom. This is not God controlling, but God rather setting the person free and when the person is totally free, then everything that the person does is according to the will of God, because that's true freedom.

6) *The wisdom, knowledge that the Holy Spirit gives*

I am going back again to the Prologue to the *Spiritual Canticle* to another aspect of the Holy Spirit and that is the wisdom, knowledge that the Holy Spirit gives, how the Spirit enables a person to hear, to know. There are so many places in John's writings where one could go for this. The knowledge, the wisdom, throughout the scriptures – God's greatest gift to the human being, the gift of wisdom, the gift of being able to read, being able to recognise the voice of God, to hear the truth.

So here he is writing to Mother Anne, to whom he dedicates this book, and he writes about what is called mystical wisdom: *For mystical wisdom, which comes through love and is the subject of these stanzas, need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul, for it is given according to the mode of faith through which we love God without understanding him.* [*Spiritual Canticle*: Prologue: Para.2] Everything that John writes is mystical wisdom, mystical theology – it doesn't come from the wisdom of his thoughts.

So sometimes we might understand this mystical wisdom, but for the most part, because we are speaking about a wisdom, an enlightenment, a knowledge that is beyond the boundaries of human, earthly knowledge, scientific knowledge or any knowledge we can obtain in any other way, John makes use of all sorts of knowledge, but ultimately what he is writing about, what he is speaking about, is beyond those boundaries. The person has the capacity to hear and understand this mystical knowledge, this wisdom of the Holy Spirit, but often that understanding doesn't come in up here – the head – and that is why it is often impossible to put into words, to explain, because it is beyond these boundaries. But more importantly than being able to put it into words or being able to explain it, John tells us it brings about the right effects and these are always love because this mystical wisdom is known through love.

Maybe a good way of illustrating this is when two people are in love with each other and you ask them why not choose that person or that one, they are all the same – they've all got legs and arms and heads and hair – how do you know it is that particular person and not the other millions upon the face of the earth? But the person knows with an absolute certainty – they can't just take that person and put another one there, no matter how alike they might be. There's a certainty there that can't be explained, can't be rationalised, but they know for certain and nobody can ever talk a person out of loving this one and choosing another. It's impossible, because there's a certainty here that is beyond what can be rationally explained, something that goes beyond reason, though of course one hopes that one's using one's reason as well, but the certainty goes beyond that, there's an absolute certainty there that comes from love and if that is there at the human level and is known at the human level in all sorts of different ways, how much more so with the much greater love of God? The knowledge of this much greater love that God can put into the very depths of a person is just so strong – the person just knows – I don't know how they know or understand – but they know. And it's that kind of knowledge John goes on to tell us of here, that he trusts in as he writes this. He goes on to say to Mother Anne:

I am addressing Your Reverence, at your request. And our Lord has favoured you and led you beyond the state of beginners into the depths of his divine love. I hope that, although some scholastic theology is used here – scholastic theology would have been what John learned at the University of Salamanca, that's the kind of teaching he might have used a little bit here – in reference to the soul's interior converse with God, it will not prove vain to speak in such a manner to the pure of spirit. Even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology, through which the divine truths are understood, you are not wanting in mystical theology, which is known through love and by which these truths are not only known but at the same time enjoyed. [*Spiritual Canticle*: Prologue: Para. 3]

So there are a few things he is telling us here. He is telling the person transformed by the Holy Spirit who has entered these depths of divine love that human science – which is what scholastic

theology is – it's the way theologians can fill libraries with books about God and all kinds of theological things – can speak to the pure in spirit and can help the pure in spirit to grow in knowledge, but there is a knowledge that goes beyond that. The theologians give an understanding of these divine truths, yes, but there's mystical theology, which can't be found in books, which is the theology, the knowledge of God that comes through mysticism that comes through the Holy Spirit, he said, which is known through love. Its language is love, its language is not words, its language is not that of theological or philosophical systems or scientific knowledge. The knowledge comes through love, its language is love and these truths are not only known but they are also enjoyed or maybe experienced – they are known through experience. So this new or other kind of knowledge that the Holy Spirit gives, that comes to the person through the Holy Spirit, not only gives the person information about something, knowledge of the existence of something, but it gives direct experience of that. It's a knowledge from within.

There's an image that John of the Cross uses elsewhere, when he is speaking about Jesus Christ and knowing Jesus Christ and it might help here to illustrate what I'm trying to say. He uses the image of the thicket – the wood, the very dense forest – and we can go all around it and we can describe it and we can see what it is, and that's what scientific knowledge is. But if we really want to know it, we have to go right into it, we've got to feel this, we've got to feel the brambles and the nettles and the thorns, we have to push our way and struggle right into the midst of it; we have to go right into the darkness and experience the feel and the sound, and it is something like that here with the things of God. The Spirit enables us to know God at a level that cannot be known through other ways, that cannot be explained. The Spirit gives a deeper knowledge and that's what John is writing about and that's what he is trusting that his listeners, his readers will understand through the Holy Spirit. John is writing about matters that can't be put into words, matters that no imagery can ever express, but he knows for certain, with a certainty that goes beyond anything scientific, because it's the Holy Spirit – it's known through love. But he is also trusting that his reader is relying upon the Holy Spirit and therefore what the reader will hear might be very different from what the writer intends; what the reader will hear will be what's appropriate and right for the reader. We've already seen that in the way John uses sacred scripture, he's also saying the same for his own poetry, for his own writings. He's trusting that the Spirit is speaking with the person, and here he is addressing specifically Mother Anne, whom he knows has reached the very high states and therefore what she may know and will hear may go way beyond what John knows and hears, because the Spirit, this mystical knowledge, is speaking within her.

7) *Silent Music*

Here we are going to a broader knowledge again. In the *Spiritual Canticle* we're in Stanza 15. You'll notice that his comments on Stanzas 14 and 15 are together – these two stanzas are a very important part of John's whole system. We are going to go to the *Silent Music*, the sounding solitude. In paragraphs 25–27 he is commenting on the silent music – *la musica calada, la soledad sonora*. It's a beautiful piece of poetry in which he now speaks about this knowledge that comes – this is the Holy Spirit – this is the person listening to the Holy Spirit, listening to wisdom.

Now let's get a sense of what he's speaking about: *In that nocturnal tranquillity and silence and in that knowledge of the divine light the soul becomes aware of Wisdom's wonderful harmony and sequence in the variety of her creatures and works.* [Para 25].

So this wisdom, this knowledge of the Holy Spirit is everywhere, not just in the person or in souls or in people who have reached a very high level of spiritual maturity, but it's everywhere, in all creatures and in all works of God and in all of creation. Now the person, because they are able to hear this wisdom within themselves can hear it in all of creation, in all the world, in all the works of God – everywhere – the Holy Spirit is speaking in everything. Because they are free of everything, then the Holy Spirit can speak in everything, in all his creatures. *Each*

of them, John is going on to say, is endowed with a certain likeness of God and in its own way gives voice to what God is in it. So everything in creation is giving voice – those trees out there, those squirrels out there, those flowers – are giving voice to the spirit of God that's within them.

So creatures will be for the soul a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world. She calls this music "silent" because it is tranquil and quiet knowledge, without the sound of voices. And thus there is in it the sweetness of music and the quietude of silence. [Para. 25] This symphony of spiritual music one now hears in the Sounding solitude – solitude and silence. This praise is like music, for as each one possesses God's gifts differently, each one sings God's praises differently, and all of them together form a symphony of love, as of music. [Para. 26] And thus all these voices form one voice of music praising the grandeur, wisdom and the wonderful knowledge of God...This voice is the sounding solitude the soul knows here; that is, the testimony to God that, in themselves, all things give. [Spiritual Canticle: Stanza 15: Para.25-27]

So now the Holy Spirit has given the person the ability to hear all the praises of God that are going on all around in everything. So there's a whole new relationship with all nature, all creation, all people, because what the person is hearing is the praise of the very existence of all things and the gifts – that something of God that he has endowed in all that lives. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, working in silence and in solitude. We can only hear this in silence and in solitude and it is a silence and solitude that goes beyond any physical silence or any physical solitude. It's a silence and solitude of the heart, of the mind, that is totally open to hearing God, to hearing the Spirit and what one hears is something just so beautiful. John is a great artist, so he has a great sense of music and artistry and all of that. But there's a music here and a music that goes beyond all other beauty, all other music – it's a symphony of love that is all around us, that's what the Holy Spirit enables the person to partake in and to hear – this symphony of love that everything God created is giving back to God all the time.

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References

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