

The Spiritual Canticle – The Prologue. Fr. Matt July 11th 2023, Aylesford, Talk 2

We will continue with the Spiritual Canticle and what I want to do this morning is to look at the Prologue. In John's writings Prologues are very important; and John wrote his Prologues at the beginning. Prologues are where John explains to us his intentions, what he sees as the purpose of the work, and he gives essential guidelines for how we should read this, how we should approach it. This one for the Canticle is particularly important, indeed not just for the Canticle but for all John's writings and for the way we approach the spiritual life. He gives some very good guidance here. He begins by setting out what he's speaking about; I referred to this last night, this mystical understanding which fits so well with the Book of Proverbs that we had today at Mass (feast of St. Benedict. Prov. 2: 1-9) It is this wisdom of God and this love of God or charity as its translated here. These two gifts that God gives are something of the nature or essence of God that He puts into the human being. He gifts to the human being something of Himself and with that something of Himself, (which are probably the best words we can come up with) the person is able to see and to perceive things; to know, and it is a very different kind of knowing and the person is able to love in a very different and new way. The whole Canticle takes us into the process of growing and maturing in that love, this wisdom and love of God of course and these stanzas are composed for this. That's where the whole work is coming from. This is so vast that it reaches everywhere, John is quoting from the Book of Wisdom, She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well. (Wis 8:1) .

Take note of where John references Scripture, sometimes he doesn't even quote, just puts in a little reference, but it can be so important. The vastness of wisdom is limitless and so this work is about going beyond limits. When the wisdom of God speaks to a person and it is heard or perceived, they are taken outside of normal experiences, so something of this the person experiences. So then John says "I can't explain this". This is his problem with the whole Spiritual Canticle, he can't explain what he wants to explain; he can't explain because it's impossible and yet there's a need for it; the two things John is trying to hold here, he has to respect the fact that he's writing about something that's impossible to explain but there is a need to put it into writing; and in putting it into writing he's not setting out to explain for he knows that's not possible. What he is setting out to do is to give people a language, that's what his writings do, just as he says that's what the Scriptures do, it gives us a language with which to understand and express. If we've no words to put on something then we can't say anything about it, express it, describe it. We're completely helpless without language, and here we're speaking about something that's beyond the boundaries of all our language, our thoughts, our words or understanding.

So John is giving us a language of symbolism, of art of beauty, a language that scripture uses, which is how John is always reading the Scriptures which give us symbolic language. So John says "It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding like these stanzas, are fully explainable". (Prologue para 1) It's interesting that he puts the word 'foolish' in there because the fool in Scripture is someone who does not know God. The person who really knows God knows that this really cannot be explained. He then goes on to make reference to St. Paul's letter to the Romans 8:26 A very important passage for understanding spiritual matters. Sometimes reading St. John of the Cross we have to be very attentive to what appears to us to be throw away comments, a fleeting reference to something, but in John's thinking it can be essential for the understanding of the whole passage, for the whole argument he is making, and he is assuming that his readers are very familiar with this. And in fact, the whole of Romans 8 is about the work the Holy Spirit does in the believer. "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in

groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God". if we were to read this text in terms of what John is speaking about here, the person themselves faced with the total impossibility of expressing something here, no words can be found, no images; what's happening does not fit with any of the perceived understandings that have been received. We cannot choose words in order to pray properly: in other words, the person thinks she is not praying properly, doesn't know how to pray properly, doesn't know what proper prayer is here, doesn't know what the right response to God here is, doesn't know how to deal with this, doesn't know how to react at all. Here the Holy Spirit takes over. This inner conversation that's taking place, the Holy Spirit is within the person; the Holy Spirit and the Father are communicating. There's an interior conversation taking place. The Spirit as we know is the conversation, is the love that there is between the Father and the Son.

I mentioned last night when mentioning the key passages of Scripture that help us to understand this entire work, critical to this is John 17 (he doesn't quote it here at all but it is very much behind John of the Cross' thinking). Jesus prays at the Last Supper that the love that's between the Father and Him will be in them, that is, in the disciple and the believer, and the love between the Father and the Son is, of course, the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the same communication that there is between the Trinity is what's happening within the person, it is what the Holy Spirit is bringing about. We'll see this much later when we get towards the end of the canticle, stanzas 38 and 39 in particular, where John illustrates this for us; this is what's going on here, this is what conversation with the Holy Spirit is carrying on here. We're back to the letter to the Romans here, the Spirit expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words; there's a prayer going on in the person that can never be put into words, the person simply can't, but it's happening, it's real, and God is listening. God Who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what He means, the wisdom that's listened to in the heart, as we heard in the first reading at Mass today. That comes through the heart not the head; the truth that is heard in the heart, the truth that the heart hears, the truth that's conveyed, experienced through love, that's what the Holy Spirit is bringing about. So the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God, not according to the mind of the human being or the mind of this world; but of course that effects the person, hence the need for John to give the person a language, for whatever affects us humanly, whatever that may be, at any dimension of our personhood, we've a need to express it. That's true psychologically, it's true at every level of our being. When something profoundly affects us, we have to express it, whether in words, anger or emotions, however it's expressed, whether it's expressed artistically, when something profoundly touches us, we have to express it. John here is delving right into the very depths of spiritual experience. Then he goes on to say what this something is that has to be expressed. "Who can describe the understanding he gives to loving souls in whom He dwells? And who can express the experience he imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires He gives them? Certainly, no one can! Not even they who receive these communications". (Prologue 1). In particular those who don't. If you think you can explain this, you can't, you haven't experienced it. The more a person experiences this the more they have a sense of 'I can't say this, I can't speak this it is too profound'. So no one can. Then he goes on to the need for images and similitudes and the whole way that scripture speaks.

He now explains to us the way in which he listens to Scripture; he sees it very much as an allegory. Often he says what scripture will say will seem like absurdities rather than reasonable utterances, therefore it has to be read with a simplicity of spirit, of knowledge and love. His verses have to be read with that simplicity of spirit, knowledge and love just like the Scriptures must be. He makes a special reference to the Song of Songs which of course is his main source here. But all of Scripture,

because for John, and this is a key line in John's teaching, the books of sacred Scripture where the Holy Spirit is unable to express the fulness of his meaning in ordinary words, utter mysteries in strange figures and likenesses. That's how John listens to Scripture. The Holy Spirit is trying to tell us something all the time in Scripture, whatever passage we pick up even the most obscure passages, perhaps these passages even more. The Holy Spirit is trying to tell us something that cannot be put into the language of this world, that cannot be put into the minds of human beings; cannot express the fulness of this meaning. So the strange mysteries, figures and likenesses, all the various stories of the Bible and the various imagery that's used is the Holy Spirit attempting to tell us something.

The saintly doctors can never exhaust the explanations of Scripture. The abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit can never be caught in words; so John is applying the same logic to his own poems. "Thus the explanations of these expressions usually contain less than what they themselves embody". (End of Prologue para 1). The explanations always say less than the reality. That's always so important and we must be careful with that. John is coming back to this point as he has an even bigger problem when he comes to the Living Flame. He outlines for us the problem. "I do not doubt that some people not understanding what I'm talking about through their own knowledge or knowing it through experience will think one of these three things – they'll either fail to believe what I'm saying or they'll consider the account to be an exaggeration or they'll think the experiences are less than they really are".(Living Flame 1:15) So one of those three things, maybe all three mistakes; we make it with the Scriptures, we make it with John's writings. We either don't believe it, it's not really like this, this is not really what happens, God really doesn't live in us, we don't believe it really, or it's an exaggeration. God couldn't do all this for a human being, God really couldn't be everywhere and have created all of this. Or we think the experiences are less than they really are. Here he is telling us that the experiences are more than that, more than anything that can be put into words, not less. No matter how exalted the language or images John uses for describing what God does for a human being it will always be saying less than the reality. God is always doing more than that for the person. We must remember this if we're to understand well what John is telling us. It's the explanation that's inadequate not the reality. The reality is always greater than the explanation.

So now he comes to his listeners, his readers, he has set out what it is he is trying to say. How are we to listen to this? How are we to go about this? He says "These were composed in a love flowing from mystical understanding, I cannot explain them adequately nor is it my intention to do so". (Prologue;2) So, something was composed out of love, not a desire to be wonderfully artistic, which of course it is. It is one of the finest poems ever written in the Spanish language; but that's not the aim here. This is an expression of love flowing from an abundant mystical understanding, in other words, an understanding that goes way beyond anything that can be understood by the intellect. So he's not intending to explain them because to do so would be to impoverish them. "I only wish to shed some light on them, since Your Reverence has desired it of me". (Prologue:2) A light that will hopefully enable the person to hear them in the right way and not be hindered or limited. Now he goes on to a very important principle, and this applies to all the spiritual life and all religious teaching. (This principle should be put up everywhere). "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 his spirit, rather than narrow them down to a meaning adaptable to every palate". So whenever something spiritual is being explained it must be done in a very spiritual and broad way so every person can draw from this what is right for them; and that is so important, for every person's spirit is different. There are 25 of us in this room and the Holy Spirit is working in each one of us in a different way. The Holy Spirit is saying something unique and personal to each

one of us; each of us has to listen in a way that's right for us that fits in with our mode and our spirit, not trying to adapt to someone else's way of thinking. Therefore spiritual things must always be put in a very broad way, so that everyone can draw from this what's right for them and not narrow it down which to exclude and to limit people. No teaching must limit what the Holy Spirit is doing in a person, 'can't go there' 'best not do that'; in John of the Cross we find nothing of this. It's a wonderful characteristic of John that there's nothing limiting, no do's or don'ts, no musts or shoulds, words like that don't come in to John's teaching because no one can say that to another person or should limit the Spirit in that way. So this must not be limiting, and that's John's great fear in writing the commentary that people will say, this must be what he means, this must be the way we must listen to it because John says so; but John already says 'No, don't be limited by what I say, because I'm not attempting to explain all this, I can't and it wouldn't be wise to. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you, not John of the Cross or even more so someone commenting on John of the Cross!' Let the Spirit speak. John wants to open the door to the breadth and depth of the Holy Spirit here, not be limiting. So he'll give some explanation but nothing detailed. Just a little.

For he says “Mystical wisdom, which comes through love and is the subject of these stanzas, need not be understood distinctly in order to feel love and affection in the soul, for it is given according to the mode of faith, through which we love God without understanding Him”. (Prologue:2) We don't have to understand this for it to do good in us. And that applies to Scripture as well, we do not have to understand it in an intellectual sense, we don't need to understand what John means by this or what he's saying here. We let it speak, and it can still cause love and affection in the soul, not necessarily in the mind or in the body. It's a spiritual love and affection, sometimes it might spill over into feelings, but usually it doesn't; but it can do great good in the soul, in fact it is doing great good without the person having any understanding of where that good is coming from, how it is happening or what it is doing. So John is going to be very brief he said, though at times he will say a little more, so as to explain some of the effects of prayer, not the how but the effects. He's going to pass beyond common effects and speak briefly about some of the more extraordinary ones; there are plenty of books written for beginners so he's not going to repeat that. But more importantly he's addressing Mother Ann. “And our Lord has favoured you and led you beyond the state of beginners into the depths of His divine love”. (Prologue:3) So that's how he sees Mother Ann, the person he's writing for. Someone who has been led by God beyond the state of beginners into the depths of divine love. That's John's reader; that's the person John is speaking to in this work. So John is speaking from the wisdom that comes from mystical understanding, and he is speaking to people who know this, in whom this is happening. We might think this isn't happening in me, this isn't happening in me; we might be inclined to think this, but listen to St. Paul, Of course the Spirit is within the person. The person listening doesn't have to be aware or to think that they're in some kind of mystical experience, because we shouldn't be thinking like that after all; if we were thinking like that then we can be absolutely sure we are not in it. Mother Ann would have said 'I don't have anything to do with any of that'. But it is the Spirit who is listening, it is the Spirit within the person that is listening. There's a deeper spiritual listening going on that the person's mind, head, brain is not aware of. So when one is reading this, and listening to it, be aware that there is a deeper spiritual listening taking place, at a deeper level than the physical listening so that's the listening that matters for the person who gives time to this, sits with it in silence. It's doing good even though for the most part the person is unaware of it. John is writing for these people in the depths of divine wisdom.

“I hope that, although some scholastic theology is used 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 in spirit”. He's not speaking here to people with theological training, that's the theology John would have been taught

at Salamanca, that's how theology would have been taught at the time. He's not speaking here to people who have theological training, He's speaking to the pure in spirit who will be able to hear what he's saying, it's the pure in spirit that he wants to address. "Even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology", she didn't go to university, in those days women couldn't, but even by the standards of the time Mother Ann was a highly educated woman. A very capable woman, but she's not trained as John is. He describes scholastic theology as "something through which divine truths are understood". That's the language of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure and all the theologians, that's how they wrote about the divine truths. "You (Mother Ann) are not wanting in mystical theology which is known through love and by which one not only knows but at the same time experiences". (Prologue:3) So it's not a knowledge of just knowing something, it's a knowledge which makes a person aware of something through experience. In ordinary knowledge we could be aware of something without having experienced it. People could tell us what it's like to walk on the moon, but as we've never walked on it, we have no experience of it. Whatever one knows through mystical theology, through God's work in a person, what's known is also experienced. To be aware of the love of God is to experience it; there's no division between knowing and experiencing, that's the different kind of knowledge he's talking about here. So whenever one understands something, when some light shines from John's Canticle, when something in the poem resonates with a person, that's because they have experienced it, not because they understand it, they might understand it but there are many understandings as we have seen, but because it's experienced. It's like reading a passage of Scripture that one's very familiar with and has heard many times, and then one day, a line simply jumps out of the page; I've never seen it that way before, never noticed that before, never heard it that way; it's because it's been experienced, but before there was no language so it couldn't be expressed. This line of Scripture, a line of John's poem, this painting or this piece of music, is giving one a way of expressing it, therefore one knows it, not just intellectually but knows through experience; It's a different kind of knowing. So John is speaking to those who know this through experience; it's a conversation: there are two conversations going on here. There's the love song between the soul and Jesus Christ or the human being and God, the love song that's constantly going on, through the poem, through the commentary and through his writings. The person who is aware of that love song and has entered deep into that love song is in a conversation and exchange with others who know this love song, who are part of this love song. So John is sharing his love song with others, Mother Ann and so many others whom he will have listened to and shared this with as this book was being brought to birth. Just as he has been listening to the love song of the Bible which is what the Song of Songs is and sharing in that love song. So to read this well then, to appreciate it in the way John wants, one listens with the heart, with the soul; the deep love song in each one of that is listening to the love song of the Canticle. Put it like this the love song of the Song of Songs in the Bible enabled John in his prison cell to really go in to his own love song at that very difficult and devastating time in his own life; so we can also listen to John's love song and let it speak to us, let it help and enable us to enter more deeply into the love song that's going on within each one of us. So that's John setting out what he intends to do here; how he intends to go about this.

How John uses Scripture is so important for our right understanding. Going back to the Prologue of the Ascent to Mt. Carmel and also of the Dark Night, a Prologue indeed to all John's writings. In para 2 he sets out his principle about Scripture which adds a little to what we see in the Prologue to the Canticle, he says". . .I shall not rely on experience or science, for these can fail or deceive us" and by science he means all knowledge and in particular of course, he means theology. Originally theology was the only science, then philosophy was added as another science and all the others have been added over the centuries. So by science he means all knowledge about anything and experience, though he will make use of them all the time. "Although I shall not neglect whatever

possible use I can make of them, my help in all that, will be 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". The Holy Spirit is constantly speaking to us through Scripture so we will not err, that's John's conviction. All the time in John's writings he is referring to, going back to, listening to Scripture; the Holy Spirit is constantly speaking to him as he grapples with trying to understand and guide people on the mysterious and life-giving journey which is the spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is constantly accompanying us through Scripture, that's John's conviction, and we could read the whole Spiritual Canticle with John guiding us to remain close to Scripture, as there's hardly a line that doesn't come from or quote Scripture.