

## St John of the Cross and prayer in times of anguish

*A talk given by Fr Iain Matthew OCD on 13 December 2022*

This is from St Paul to the Corinthians, second letter: *Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings you will also share in our comfort, for we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely, not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers.*

Our time together on this vigil of St John of the Cross has the title *Prayer in times of anguish*. Now, in 2022, this feast falls in the ninth, going tenth month of the war in Ukraine and it's in reference to this that I'm reflecting and speaking and referring to anguish. So, prayer in times of anguish – not so much to answer that if you're happy you pray like this, or if you're anxious or anguished, you pray like this – rather, times of anguish in a more connected sense or a more global sense or ecclesial sense – a bit like the way that Jesus speaks in the gospel.

I have been trying to find just the phrase in the gospel and I think it's a phrase more in my head than in the gospel, but there are related phrases in the gospel, I'm pleased to say. Here is Jesus in this discourse about the end times – it's alarming stuff: *Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, for in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now and never will be* – that's picking a couple of phrases in Mark. And more drastically, if that's conceivable, in Luke, Chapter 21: *There will be signs in sun and moon and stars*. In Luke we have the phrase: *these are days of vengeance to fulfil all that is written*. So, days of vengeance, days of anguish – the word *vengeance* in the Greek is the same as the word that Jesus uses in his parable about the woman who keeps praying, who seeks vindication, *and will not God vindicate his elect?* So, that vindication gets translated as vengeance in Chapter 21 of Luke, but days in which justice is being done to evil and so there is suffering – if you can follow that.

So Jesus goes on, and this is the particularly alarming stuff – *there will be signs in sun and moon, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world*. And then there is what has to be one of the most counter-intuitive sentences in the whole of the scriptures where the Lord says in Luke's gospel, Chapter 21:28 – *Now when these things begin to take place, look up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*.

So, when I look for anguish in the scriptures – and we began with Paul's account of his anguish and how that led him to hope in God, who is greater than our anguish, who raises the dead; and then Jesus' account of anguish: *men fainting from fear*, and into that the Lord commands us to lift our heads high and to live in hope and to go forward in trust and in growing confidence because our redemption is at hand. So, whatever we're going to do about days in times of anguish, the answer is not going to be to

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succumb to that anguish or to let it simply overwhelm us, but somehow there is a call here to greater hope, greater hope than there was in times of serenity and tranquillity.

There is maybe a key in a word that Mark and Matthew use in their account of Jesus talking about the end times. This is Mark 13: *When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed.* I find that a little bit difficult when we are hearing about wars and rumours of wars. Anyway, it's what Jesus says: *do not be alarmed, this must take place, but the end is not yet, for nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.* This is but the beginning of the sufferings. And the word that Jesus uses there translates literally as *birth pangs, labour pains.* So this suffering is the anguish of giving birth, and the hope that Jesus would call for is a maternal and a paternal hope of new life.

Having tried to express that, I now turn to my text: *I ask everyone, I urge everyone to increase prayer for peace and to have the courage to show that peace is possible* – that was Pope Francis back in April. A couple of days ago he was still banging on, still banging on – can't he give us a break? Doesn't he see that there's no point? The war has gone on for six months – nine months now – so why doesn't he just give it a rest. What's the use, when he now says here a couple of days ago: *To her, most gentle Mother, we ask for comfort for those who are suffering from the brutality of the war, especially for martyred Ukraine. Let us pray for this martyred people that is suffering so much.* So there's Pope Francis who keeps saying it. He won't give up, he keeps on saying it – *keep praying.*

So, what I intend here is to look at the teaching of St John of the Cross on the prayer of petition, that is specifically on vocal prayer, prayer of intercession. And I want to situate that. We have already situated it somewhat in Jesus' alarming eschatological discourse (even though he says don't be alarmed) and Paul's alarm at what he's been through. I want to situate it now by recounting the question which these weeks of war have provoked in me. I have to admit what I'm going to read to you now is something I wrote at the end of May and now it's six months later and the situation is worse.

From my place in distant Rome and without being involved in care for refugees, I have been afflicted with anguish and with some fear. I'm struggling with questions, both in the weeks of lead up to the war – will they – surely not, how could they? – and in the unspeakable awfulness of the war itself. I'm a child of the Cold War, born in 1960, and I think that that makes me especially susceptible to anxiety when aggression comes from Russia. The talk of escalation into nuclear war which happened and then faded and then it's come up again. How mad, how mad that would be. Nobody would do that, would they? The talk of nuclear war hasn't helped. God, please stop this! Mary, our Mother, powerful in your intercession, bring a stop to this! Christ, put this enemy, this work of death, put this under your feet. "He must be Lord, until he has trampled all his enemies under his feet and the last of the enemies to be destroyed is death." Jesus, crush death, don't wait, please do it now – here!

But then, why stop this war and not others? Perhaps worse – barring nuclear wars – are taking place. Surely global abortion is a worse assault on humanity and what about starvation in Afghanistan or East Africa or meltdown in Venezuela?

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There's news of brutal war in Yemen and Ethiopia and Congo. But, God forgive me, these wars don't have the same effect on me as war in Ukraine.

So I'm praying for peace, and for all that peace involves. What does it involve? It involves grain for the starving, grain for Lebanon too, there's been some progress in that, thank God. It means help for refugees, there's been some progress in that; it means re-opening of dialogue and indeed of friendship between geopolitical enemies, it means that men of violence would back down, see light, would like Paul fall off their horse and come to Christ. So, God, why don't you do this? You can, I believe you can.

But the war is still going on. Could it be that God doesn't want peace on earth for humankind, that that is not really important? "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, don't be alarmed this must happen." Well, there is truth in that. Bodily survival on this earth is anyway only of limited duration, we're all going to die, and anyway it's not the ultimate goal. And the Christ of whom Paul boasts is the crucified one. The best kind of human life is the sort that accompanies Jesus through his Passion into his risen life, the kind that experiences the birth pangs.

So, to want to shield everyone from pain is not the answer. It's not realistic and anyway it's not the answer. Suffering is part of life and Hebrews says "It is for discipline that you have to endure." Of course...but not this, not this this lava flow of evil. God, please, intervene! Or could it be that I, Iain, am the cause, that my sin is clogging up the channels of grace? Yes, there is truth in that too and this whole scenario is an on-going summons to me, to convert, to address the warfare in my own heart.

But why would my guilt stop God from intervening when his beloved little ones are being desecrated? Just look at the children, look at their mothers, the bleeding victims. Just think of those who are set to starve if the war goes on, or set to freeze. God, can't want this, "Thou shalt not kill"—it's that basic. *God of life and reconciliation, and healing, peace, kindness; tender, all-powerful Holy Spirit, Please come into this desecration.*

Well, such questionings as these are the context of what follows. For, in my struggle to make sense of, among other things, the meaning of prayer in the face of this war, many lights and many voices and many people are, thank God, providing help. In what follows I want to present just one of those lights: some teaching from St John of the Cross on intercessory vocal prayer. John's response to suffering and conflict of course goes way beyond praying vocally, but he does include praying vocally. As the master, Federico Ruiz notes, *vocal prayer is for John of the Cross a permanent form of communion with God, not just an initial stage.*

I have got three texts from John on which to concentrate, two from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and one from the *Spiritual Canticle*, but what we need to do first is to take some time to set those in a wider context of John.

Historically, John's writing begins with a question. In his imprisonment in Toledo in 1577-78 he began the composition of his great poetry and the first words are an appeal:

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*¿Adonde te escondiste, Amado, y me dejaste con gemido? – Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me groaning?*

At this point in his life, wasting away in a dungeon, John had many acute needs – physical, mental and social needs. What this all leads him to beg for, however, is not the resolution of those needs, but the presence of the Beloved. Translating his *Song of Songs* poem there into ordinary talk: *God, where are you? I'm looking for you, but you've gone away.* John doesn't say, "Where is there food, medicine, fresh air?" but "Where are you?" His poverty discloses his truest identity: he knows himself here to be in need of Christ and his anguish is longing for Christ. In that other prison poem, *The Ballads on the Incarnation*, this longing for Christ is ascribed not just to himself but to the people of Israel. So it's an Advent longing, you might say an Old Testament longing, a John the Baptist longing, in that this blessed hope would reach them from above. So, the slow grind and their hardships were easier to bear – this hope for the Messiah. But the long-drawn time of hoping and their increasing desire to rejoice with their Bridegroom was continual affliction. Accordingly, with prayers, with sighs and with anguish (a literal translation here is *agonia – death cries*), with tears and with groaning, they begged him night and day that he now would determine to give them his companionship.

So, a little commentary on that – in the *Canticle*, John longs for the nearness, the togetherness, the presence of the Beloved. He doesn't say 'What must I do?' He says 'Where are you?' He doesn't want guidance, he wants presence, he wants the presence of the one for whom he is in his human constitution created. He's been created as a space for Christ and when Christ seems not to be filling that space, the anguish, the death-like anguish, is unbearable and it calls for a 'gemido', a cry, a groaning. That word, 'groaning', we're familiar with it from St Paul. In the Prologue to the *Canticle* John quotes Paul in *Romans 8*: 'The spirit of the Lord who helps our weakness dwelling within us begs with cries beyond words'. 'Gemido', the same word in the Spanish – and now the *gemido* is what the Holy Spirit gives voice to in you. And it's a voice or a cry that is deeper than words, just as you, your heart, your soul, is deeper than words – 'begs with cries beyond words on our behalf for what we ourselves cannot well understand, nor comprehend so as to set it forth.' So, this is a kind of anguish that you can't exactly say in a way that would put it in a box, you can't exactly say: 'Well, I need this.' What you need is beyond any definition that you could give it. This anguish, that is an unspoken or indefinable *condición* where not everything is OK. And when the anaesthetic wears off, there it is again – not everything's OK. And what is it that's not OK? Well, ultimately that you're not seeing God face-to-face, that you are not transformed in the Beloved in pure vision and total communion. And until that takes place, John says – we call it heaven – not everything will be OK.

*Who could ever express in writing what the Spirit gives loving souls where he dwells to understand? And who could ever manifest with words what he gives them to feel? and who, finally, could express what he makes them desire? Surely no one could, not even they themselves could, and that's why they cry out with 'gemido'. Well, just one more 'gemido', one more groaning, one more crying. This is in his commentary to that first stanza of the Canticle in the first redaction. Again, he's quoting Romans 8 – a slightly clunky rendition of it – 'We, within our very selves have the groaning, hoping for the adoption and possession of the sons of God', which John paraphrases: 'There in our*

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*heart, where we have the pledge, we feel what pains us, which is the absence. This then, is the soul's constant groaning as she feels the absence of her Beloved.'*

Thus, the pledge is that the Holy Spirit has impressed God's self upon us and it's exactly there, and exactly because we possess the first fruits, the foretaste, the pledge, that we feel the absence. If God wasn't in you, you wouldn't feel his absence, if God wasn't touching you, you wouldn't feel this longing for him. Or putting that another way, we know how much we love someone when they've gone away. Or when you have been standing in a place for a while on grass and then you go away and lift your foot, the grass releases, and as it were, comes after you and it wouldn't do that if you hadn't impressed yourself upon it.

Now, back to our text. What we're seeing here is that John in his imprisonment experienced in a mystical and a visceral way his need for Christ, and then we see how that is the fruit of grace. It is ontological in a certain way, it's to do with being human. Because you're human, because you have been touched by the hand of the Beloved and because grace has blessed you, then you long for him as for nothing and no one else. Most of the time that's anaesthetised, but when the anaesthetic wears off, that need aches, profoundly. And then in the *Romances*, we are seeing that ache in John, in us, it's the ache of the people of God. It's in fact the ache, the longing of humanity. So, it's the whole of humanity that is crying out – if it knew it – *God where are you? I need you! And because I don't realise that I need you, I stuff myself with all this other stuff and I thrash out and I try to conquer and I trample on other people and I think that having the Crimea is going to make me feel OK*, etc.

So, humanity is a puzzle to itself and is thrashing around, and at the root of that is that we have abandoned – John quotes Jeremiah – *the fountain of living water, and have dug our own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water*. To be made able for the total reception of the living Christ, that as John understands it, *the person must be taken beyond her own resources, journeying as if in a dark night. There, free from herself, she can be tuned to the peace which Christ is*. This is from the second book of the *Dark Night*. So, it was in the heart of this undoing that John knew were our birth pangs. *Since by means of this night the person is being made ready for that peace which is beyond all telling, it's fitting for her first that all earlier tranquillity and peace which was awash with imperfection and so wasn't peace – even though it seemed to her that because she felt good about it, that it was peace – be purged. Such is the work which this night does in her, this night, which shrouds the hopes of the light of day*.

So, the context for John's teaching on intercession includes his experience that all needs point to an ultimate need, to the all-consuming desire for Christ. That's what's throbbing away at the heart of humanity and the context is that the divine answer to that longing has to take the person beyond her own competence, in darkness, perhaps bewilderment, beyond her easy peace to a deeper peace. A third aspect of the context – and this backs up something that we said a bit earlier – is the mystic's discovery of the extent of human capacity. So, John understands that the Holy Spirit is committed to searching out the furthest depths of the person and to make that person available for love.

An image that comes to me, which is only applicable to a certain extent – it could be completely misapplied: In the anguish of the first days of the war, the outpouring of

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love, welcome, the sweeping aside of obstacles to refugees from Ukraine, also in Britain, was extraordinary. It was a kind of a discovery for us Brits, maybe we didn't know we had it in us. So, the Holy Spirit is committed to searching out and releasing, making available new depths of humanity. Thus, we read in the *Living Flame* [3: 18,22]: *'These caverns of the soul are the powers, memory, understanding and will... The capacity of these caverns is deep, for that which can fill them – God himself – is deep, infinite. So in a sense their capacity will be infinite, their thirst is infinite, their hunger too is deep, infinite, and the deconstruction they suffer will be an infinite death...a kind of disposition in the soul to receive what will fill her'*.

*"When these things begin to take place stand erect, lift your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand"* [Luke 21:28].

Well, with that context, which encourages me to set my sights high, to expand my expectations of what divine love intends for us, I've now got the three texts which are helping me and which I want to propose here.

**The first** is from the second book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. As we know, in the *Ascent* John is seeking to free the reader from dependence on securities that will blow up in our face, securities that don't go far enough; to free the reader from dependence on securities other than the security of faith and hope. He does this, not only because other lights when they are absolutised are prone to deceive, but more because it is in faith – the faith expressed in the Nicene Creed – that the goal of human existence is reached, that the person is united, is made one with God – *The more faith the soul has, the more is she made one with God*. [2 *Ascent* 9:1] *Where have you hidden Beloved?* Well, have faith, and you are made one with God. Surely you don't feel, you don't see, you don't have the consolation, but if what you want is the presence, even without seeing, faith gives you Him. Supernatural experiences, which offer reassurance may be good in themselves; but they're not enough, and if the person bases her security upon them, she short-changes herself. John reserves his strongest reproof for people who *want to know things through supernatural means.... There's no need for any of this*, he goes on, *since there is natural reason and gospel teaching*. [that's 2 *Ascent* 21:4] You don't need to go and look for the witch of Endor to give you a clue. *There's natural reason and gospel teaching, teaching of the Church, which are entirely sufficient and most pleasing to God*. So you don't need to go after something extraordinary. But it's not just that if you do that you might end up with egg on your face, it's rather that by doing that, by going there (even if it's something positive, some experience that's entirely from God, not like looking at the horoscope, something sinful and magicky). The trouble with going there is that not only might you get it wrong but rather that you close down, you home in on that and clutter up your space from what God most wants to give, which is God's self. Rather than going after something extraordinary, we have the first of the three bits of advice from John that I'm finding helpful:

### 1) Ask

Ask God to bring peace, ask God to bring healing, ask God to convert hearts, first of all, your heart. Ask God to do what God most wants – go ahead, just do what you most want, let your love let rip – I trust you! There's no need for anything extraordinary, it's in the simplicity of such faith that intercession is most powerful. Here is John in 2 *Ascent* 21:5 – *so in all our needs, struggles and difficulties, we have no better, no surer way than prayer and hope that God will provide by the means he desires*. John then refers to a passage from Chronicles 2, the plight of king Jehoshaphat, who here as king

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is representative of the people of Israel before God at a time of extreme peril. I think it is just the Moabites who are about to destroy Israel, not one of the superpowers like Assyria, but it's bad enough and Israel has its back to the wall. There is Israel in extreme peril and what does Jehoshaphat do, he goes into the temple and asks God. It's quite beautiful and tender: *Behold the men of Moab have come up against us. O my God wilt Thou not execute judgment upon them, for we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.* I love the commission that that gives – I've got this problem, I don't know what to do, so I'm looking to you. John then paraphrases it: *When means fail us* – and again the context of this being in 2 *Ascent* 21, where John is trying to ease people off dependence on insufficient securities and here they're pretty spectacular, the securities of some supernatural experience – no, don't take that as ultimate, instead if you're in anguish, in faith ask God to help you. *When means fail us and we cannot see a way forward in our needs, all that remains for us is to lift our eyes to you that you might provide in the way that most pleases you.* So that's the lesson – the first of the three – ask God, even when the situation seems hopeless. You must trust that God will provide in the way God sees to be best. Lift your eyes to him.

**A second text** on intercessory prayer is near the end of Book Three of the *Ascent* and I'm calling it rather fulsomely:

### **2) Persevere in filial trust**

So, first advice: ask; second advice: ask again. Here we are in the third book of the *Ascent*. As you will remember, the first book points out the problem: how we are so obsessed with ourselves. The second book points out the solution: faith. Chapters 1-15 of the third book point out the solution: hope; and Chapters 16-45 of the third book, point out the solution: charity, love. So we're in the charity part – loving – and John says here that his purpose is to re-order the reader's heart and will in charity, because it's charity that unites her with God, charity will ease her off all alternative loves, set them in order, prioritise God alone, the only one who can fulfil her every and deepest longing. Now in Chapter 44 this applies to prayer, where John sees a danger in becoming too keen on personal preferences and even on obsessions in piety. So, how to pray rightly, how to pray correctly? Well, pray into God's unbounded love, don't limit your prayer to your own loves – pray into God's limitless love, don't limit your prayer to your own loves. This is how it is with God – if you come to him with goodwill and in harmony with God's character, with his *condición*, you'll have him do whatever you wish, but if you come in order to push your own agenda, you might as well not bother him. So to come open-heartedly, trusting in the fullness, the infinite fullness of God's love, that God's love is better than any solution that you could ever come up with for anything.

He goes on, how do we discover God's *condición*, God's character? Jesus in the gospel reveals it to us. When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he would surely tell them all that was helpful so that the Eternal Father would hear their prayer. Jesus, who knew so well his Father's *condición*, he who is on the Father's wavelength, who is in harmony with the Father as no one else is, he taught the prayer in which are included all our needs, both spiritual and temporal, insisting that we should persevere in prayer – that is in the prayer of the Our Father – urging, in another passage that we should always pray and never give up. That's the parable where the widow prays and

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the Lord avenges, vindicates her. Not then an elaborate form of words, but rather that these petitions of the Lord's Prayer both should be repeated very often with fervour and attention, because as I say, in these is contained God's whole will and all that is for our good. You might think of Augustine here in his letter to Proba. Augustine who speaks of how to pray, obviously you can use other words, but those other words must voice what Jesus has us voice in the Lord's Prayer. John then points to the example of Jesus himself, when His Majesty three times turned to the Eternal Father, repeating the words of the Our Father: *Father, if it cannot be but that I must drink this chalice, let your will be done.*

So there's the second advice, the first being, *ask*, the second being *persevere in filial trust, or persevere; or ask again, again and again*; ask on 24<sup>th</sup> April, like Pope Francis, and ask on 25<sup>th</sup> May, and still be asking on 7<sup>th</sup> December. What this is inviting is trust in the goodness of the Father's will that if I pray *Thy will be done*, that Fatherly will is going to be better, truly better than any recipe I come up with. Early on in the war I asked my spiritual director how should I be praying? I said to him, as I said to you at the beginning, God can't want this, why doesn't he intervene? And my director said, keep praying *Thy will be done*, pray for that. So, John's inviting this trust in the goodness of the Father's will, that if I pray *Thy will be done*, that Fatherly will is going to be better, truly better than any recipe I come up with. But this isn't just *insouciance*, like saying *well, God, you suit yourself, thy will be done, you're in charge, it doesn't bother me*, it implies concern for the kingdom to come, here and now in this situation, concern that God's name, which we have defiled among the nations, be held holy in this situation. This prayer has as its norm the concern for the kingdom, which characterises Jesus; this prayer has the seriousness of Gethsemane.

### 3) Intercession, petitionary prayer, vocal prayer

The third text that I'm going to throw at you is about intercessory prayer, petitionary prayer and vocal prayer. I'm saying intercession, petitionary prayer and vocal prayer really because of John's focus there on the *Our Father*. The third text about petitionary prayer in John of the Cross is from the *Canticle* and its context is therefore charged with the energy of John's longing for the absent Christ – *Where have you hidden?* In the second stanza the poet calls on those who may have seen the Beloved, to carry the bride's message of longing to the Beloved. *Shepherds, as you go up through the sheepfolds to the hill, if by chance you see the one I love so much, tell him I am hurting, aching, dying.*

The Commentary sees the soul's own desire as her messengers and she needs to keep sending them, until her desire is sufficiently seasoned and tempered to receive God's response. John says every person should realise that even if God doesn't respond immediately to her need and request, that doesn't mean that God will fail to respond at the right time – God who is the helper, as David says in the Psalm, God who is the helper in due time and in time of tribulation. That doesn't mean that God will fail to respond if she doesn't lose heart and give up. So there's a key – not to lose heart, not to give up.

Stanza 2 of the *Spiritual Canticle* concludes with the bride's message itself: *Tell him I am hurting, aching, dying.* I love the way John here is surprised at his own poetry – what strikes him about his own verse here is the way that the bride, who is speaking,



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does not dictate to the Beloved what he must do for her, but rather the bride manifests to him her need, simply holding that need out before him, *Tell him this is how it is for me, this is what I'm going through, I'm feeling like this, I'm suffering this.* And John sees examples of such prayer in Martha's words to Jesus: *The one whom you love is ill.* [John 11.3]; and in Mary's words to her son: *They have no wine.* [John 2:3] That kind of prayer is the fruit of communion, it rests on knowledge of the Beloved's heart. Martha and Mary are, John says, friends of Jesus. They know his *condición*, and Mary knows her son's *condición* (character), and this is how they choose to pray – *The one whom you love is ill* – Lazarus; *They haven't got any wine* – this newly wedded couple. It's the fruit of prayer, of communion, as it rests on knowledge of the Beloved's heart, the assurance that he, seeing what she is going through, will not fail to respond in the best possible way, so she holds out her need so that, John says, the Beloved might do what pleases him.

*They have no wine – Ukraine is bleeding – your little ones are being destroyed – those whom you love are at war – women are being trafficked – people are starving – children are being killed – the elderly are freezing, dying, alone – they have no wine.*

John sees such prayer – holding out the need without imposing my solution – as especially powerful and this, he says, is powerful for three reasons: Firstly, to pray like this, to hold out the need: *they have no wine; Ukraine is bleeding; the one whom you love is ill.* Rather than saying: *and you should go to the supermarket, or you should apply this medicine,* holding out the need is a more powerful and a better prayer for three reasons. Firstly, because the Lord knows what's best for us, better than we do. It definitely doesn't mean that we can't also pray for peace – now – or healing for her – now – or safety in this pregnancy, or food for people in Afghanistan. But there's a particular power and a particular contemplative immediacy in *They have no wine*, holding out the need before the Beloved, letting him do, trusting him to do, what he knows best. A second reason why it is a good kind of prayer is because the Beloved's compassion is more deeply moved when he sees the need and the surrender of the one who loves him. Third, it's a more powerful kind of prayer because the soul is less vulnerable to her self-love and possessiveness when she holds out the need before him than when she spells out her own view of what it is she needs. In my rage I can think of lots of solutions to the war, which wouldn't be very nice – for the aggressors anyway. Maybe in that there's a lot of self-love, a lot of possessiveness. Maybe the fact that I'm focussing on this so much is that there's a lot of self-love, a lot of possessiveness.

To conclude, the way to respond well to the war and its effect throughout the world therefore includes this: ask, and ask again, and ask in trustful surrender. That includes: pray vocally, beg, petition, intercede. John of the Cross tells me that if I do so, God is trustworthy. He tells me that God's saving will is better than any solution I might come up with, that God's will for the world and for these people in the world is better, truer, more loving, more saving than what my own anguished demands specify. So, John tells me, pray like Jesus, in Jesus, and pray again, continue to pray and do so when the initial urge has slackened and when no answer seems to be coming. From the depths of your poverty, which only Christ can fill, from the depths of the world's poverty, which only Christ can fill, lift your eyes to him, like the handmaid on the hand of her mistress, like Mary at the foot of the Cross.

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So again, Pope Francis: *In these days we are close to the people in freezing Ukraine in our thoughts and we pray for all people whose lives are threatened and affected. For all those who yearn for the fullness of life that only the Lord can give, we implore his peace.*

We pray in the words our Saviour gave us:

Our Father, who art in heaven  
Hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
Amen

Mary, Queen of Peace, pray for us. St John of the Cross, pray for us.

*Transcribed, slightly abridged, from the recording of a talk given by Fr Ian Matthew on 13 December 2022, the vigil of the feast of St John of the Cross.*

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### **Reference**

*The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* Translated by Kieran Kavanagh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD. ICS Publications, Washington, 1991.