

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH AND FREEDOM

A multi-faceted image

The 'dark night of the soul' is John's most famous image and was used by him to convey the most original and profound aspects of his teaching on the spiritual journey. Yet the phrase 'dark night of the soul' is frequently misunderstood and has entered into common parlance meaning something like 'I'm feeling a bit down', or 'Everything seems to be going wrong in my life.'

For John, the term 'night' does not describe a bad patch in an otherwise satisfactory life, and a person experiencing it will not see just getting back to how things were before as the solution. Certainly, John warns that the dark night can involve great suffering and disorientation, but he also describes it as a 'glad night', and a 'night more lovely than the dawn' (DN, st. 3 & 5). For John, it is a multi-faceted image. But there is one constant: it always has to do with the relationship between the soul and God.

The 'soul', in John's writings, does not denote simply an immaterial part of ourselves: he uses the word to mean the human being in all its dimensions. And it is his conviction that we can only fully know what it means to be human if we see ourselves in relation to God, understanding ourselves as *created* by God in his own image and *called* to receive his

love and share his joy. But there is a difficulty, caused by the fact that the relationship between the soul and God differs from any other relationship. On the one hand, this relationship is as natural and essential to us as breathing; but on the other, it is a mystery, and hidden from our sight. It encompasses every aspect of our being, and yet it is possible to go through life without consciously adverting to it. Those in whom the innate desire to know and love God is awakened and actualised find that their ordinary ways of knowing and understanding fail to provide direct access to God. This can become the starting-point for the most important of all journeys: the journey of transformation – a journey that has to be travelled, at least in part, by night.

‘Light shone through’

John of the Cross saw that many people who had set out on this journey became discouraged along the way and failed to make further progress. He used the image of the ‘dark night’ to explain what was happening to them and encourage them to persevere. Unfortunately, this phrase taken out of context can suggest a rather gloomy outlook! I’d like to begin, therefore, by looking briefly at what we know about John as a person.

In his commentaries, John tells us very little about himself. His poetry and the small number of his letters that have survived give us more of a sense of his personal warmth. But it is particularly the testimonies of those who knew him that convey a fuller picture of his personality. He was evidently a man of great kindness, humility, and patience, who

was highly esteemed by people in many walks of life. When he was appointed prior of El Calvario in Andalusia, after his escape from prison, the friars were somewhat apprehensive, expecting a strict and forbidding superior; but they were won over at once by his peaceful and gentle character and the pleasure he took in sharing their simple and hard-working life. We know that John always showed compassion for the sick, and special care for those in any kind of need. He enlivened community recreations with his sense of humour, and had a great love of nature and sensitivity to beauty. A nun testified of him: ‘He was a small man, not handsome, but light shone through.’

Created to be a bride

Clearly, then, John was not a gloomy character. And his worldview is likewise far from gloomy. It is expressed succinctly in his ‘Romances’, which he composed while in prison in Toledo – that is, at a time of extreme darkness and suffering. These nine poems recount the story of the Incarnation in the style of popular ballads, describing how the Father’s overflowing love for the Son prompted him to create the world to be a bride for the Son and to share in his rejoicing over such a Son. Into this world he placed both angels and human beings. While human beings were made lower than the angels, they were given the gift of faith, and the Son promised that one day:

he would make himself
wholly like them,
and he would come to them
and dwell with them (R 4)

until the consummation of the world. Then he would lift his bride to the Father, to that realm

where God's very joy
would be her joy.
For as the Father and the Son
and he who proceeds from them
live in one another,
so it would be with the bride;
for, taken wholly into God,
she will live the life of God. (R 4)

The vision and the gap

She will live the life of God. This is John's vision not only for creation as a whole but for every individual soul. We have a transcendent destiny which is intrinsic to our being: we are made for everlasting joy in communion with God and one another. There could hardly be a loftier vision of the meaning of human life. Of course, John did not invent it: it is the ancient Christian tradition in all its fullness. But it is all too possible for it to remain on a theoretical level. During the months he spent in his dark and airless prison cell, the truth of this vision imprinted itself on John's heart so deeply that it informed all his subsequent experience and writing.

Where, then, does the dark night fit into this picture? For John, it is an inevitable consequence of the difference between our human nature and God's divinity. God is the Creator of all; we are contingent, finite creatures. God is the source and ground of all being; we receive ourselves from God. It is this gap that makes our relationship with God

different from any other. God is incomprehensible mystery; but we, created in his image, are called to enter into that mystery.

We are made for *more*

God can never become an object in the world that we could know in the way we know other created things. But he is present in the world, and he desires a reciprocal loving relationship with each one of us. This precludes overwhelming our humanity with his divine power. So as not to compromise our freedom, he has to be hidden from our normal sensory perception.

We find, then, that when we seek God, he eludes our grasp. In the created world, on the other hand, there are multifarious good and beautiful things that we *can* grasp. However, if we put any created thing in the place of God, no matter how good, it will not satisfy our deepest desire; rather, we will end up diminished and stunted. For our deepest desire springs from our innate capacity for union with God: we are made for *more* than created reality can give us.

God is always looking for ways to bring us to himself. It is he who takes the initiative, calling us through creation, through other people, through the Scriptures and, above all, through his Son. When we realise that we are *being addressed* and become aware of a desire to respond, we will find that there is no way forward except through the night.

The two nights

John's poem 'The Dark Night' describes the soul's journey through the night, and he expounds this poem (at least partially) in his commentaries *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*. In the Prologue to *The Ascent*, he explains that he is undertaking this task because he sees that 'God gives many souls the talent and grace for advancing' to divine union, but often 'they do not want or know how to advance' (A Prol. 3). They either remain where they are or only advance slowly and with great difficulty, since they do not understand the need to allow God to lead them through the dark night.

There are, John says, 'two principal kinds of night' (1A 1:1). The first of these brings about the purification of the sensual life of the soul, while the second brings about a deeper, more interior purification of its spiritual life. Both nights can be further divided into active and passive modes: in the active mode, the soul is doing what it can do for itself, while in the passive mode it is surrendering to God's work within it.

Essentially ineffable

John had spent four years being trained in scholastic methods at the University of Salamanca, and he is very fond of divisions and subdivisions. In both *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night*, he proposes a schema at the outset, but in neither work does he actually

complete what he had promised, and he also introduces other patterns as he goes along. These various patterns provide him with useful tools for analysing the journey of transformation, but they constantly interpenetrate each other – just as in life there is no neat succession of stages in the spiritual life. We therefore needn't worry about holding the overall schema in our heads, since John himself was unable to do so!

His prose works bear the traces of hurried composition and incomplete revisions. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that practically all his writing was done in a period of about eight years, when he was extremely busy with the affairs of the Order and other duties. But it is also partly due to the essential ineffability of his subject matter. It is no accident that he first expressed himself in poetry, where he could convey meanings that were not susceptible to precise expression. The commentaries were written afterwards, when he was asked to explain the poems, but he was always aware that his words fell far short of what he wanted to say.

The three reasons

In *The Ascent*, John treats of the active nights of sense and spirit, while he deals with the passive nights in *The Dark Night*. The two works are complementary but have come down to us in separate manuscripts. It is in these two works that we find John's most systematic teaching, and the fullest exposition of his doctrine of the dark night. He asserts at the beginning of *The Ascent* that there are three reasons for calling the journey towards

union with God a ‘night’:

The first has to do with the point of departure, because individuals must deprive themselves of their appetites for worldly possessions. This denial and privation is like a night for all one’s senses.¹

The second reason refers to the means or the road along which a person travels to this union. Now this road is faith, and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night.

The third reason pertains to the point of arrival, namely God. And God is also a dark night to the soul in this life. (1A 2:1)

Here, we find all the principal aspects of the dark night – the point of departure, the road, and God himself. Let us look at each of these in turn.

THE ‘POINT OF DEPARTURE’

Setting out and letting go

The first reason, then, for calling the journey a ‘night’ has to do with ‘the point of departure’. If we are to attain union with God, we have to *set out* – we have to leave behind anything that would hinder us on our journey, just as the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. In the passage quoted above, John was focusing on the denial of sensual appetites, but later in *The Ascent* he shows the deeper implications of this departure:

¹ ‘Appetites’, in the sense that John is using the word, are something we have to get rid of! They are described in the Glossary to his works as: ‘inordinate affective desires in which the will participates; that is, wilful desires not rightly ordered to a moral or spiritual good’. See *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991, p. 767.

Obviously one's journey must not merely exclude the hindrance of creatures but also embody a dispossession and annihilation in the spiritual part of one's nature. Our Lord, for our instruction and guidance along this road, imparted that wonderful teaching – I think it is possible to affirm that the more necessary the doctrine the less it is practised by spiritual persons... 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.' (2A 7:4; cf. Mk 8:34-35)

A radical self-denial, then, is the practice that frees us to set out. John knows that, for most people, 'setting out' will *not* mean literally leaving home. However, we still need to let go of anything that hinders us from giving ourselves entirely to God. It doesn't mean rejecting the things of this world: rather, it is a matter of not allowing them to usurp the place of God in our lives.

Freeing ourselves from attachments

As we go through life, we develop all kinds of attachments at every level of our being, some of which we may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge. As John sees it, *anything that we cannot choose to do without*, even temporarily, holds us back from the freedom to which we are called. We are inclined to make idols of wealth, status, the good opinion of others, our favourite religious practices, and all kinds of other things. John therefore recommends a thorough-going practice of self-denial and detachment, for it is only when we have emptied ourselves of all our false gods that we can fully belong to the true God.

In this, as in all things, Jesus is our teacher and our model. In him we see the utterly free, self-emptying love which caused him to become incarnate and give his life for our sake.

John is aware that we shall only be able to set out on this path of detachment if we are drawn by the love of Jesus. He affirms: 'A love of pleasure, and attachment to it, usually fires the will toward the enjoyment of things that give pleasure. A more intense enkindling of another, better love (love of the soul's Bridegroom) is necessary for the vanquishing of the appetites and the denial of this pleasure' (1A 14:2). In other words, one cannot be motivated by renunciation and detachment in themselves: this is a journey that begins and ends in love. And as our attachment to the Beloved deepens, we naturally grow in freedom from self-seeking attachments.

It is also worth mentioning that although detachment is associated here with the point of departure, it is actually needed all along the way. This is because we encounter fresh invitations to let go at deeper and deeper levels. In *The Living Flame*, John speaks of 'deep caverns' in the soul, which cannot be filled by anything less than God (cf. LF 3:17-22). But God can only move in when we have thrown all our other gods out. From then on, 'the more the soul desires God the more it possesses him, and the possession of God delights and satisfies it' (LF 3:23).

THE ROAD TO UNION

Unknowing in the light of faith

We move on now to the second reason John gives for calling this journey a 'night': it is that the road along which the person has to travel is faith – 'and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night' (1A 2:1). Faith takes us beyond the knowledge that our minds can grasp, and brings us to divinely revealed truths which, John says, 'transcend every natural light and infinitely exceed all human understanding'. And he adds: 'As a result the excessive light of faith bestowed on a soul is darkness for it' (2A 3:1). Just as the sun obscures the light of the stars, so the light of faith obscures that of the intellect.

How, then, can we walk this path in darkness? We need to proceed by a way of *unknowing*. As John puts it in his profoundly paradoxical way:

To come to enjoy what you have not
you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not
you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
you must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not
you must go by a way in which you are not. (1A 13:11)

Travelling in this way, the soul will have little idea of what progress, if any, it is making.

Here, the dark night signifies a time of transition, which often brings with it a painful consciousness of our wounded and sinful state. It may even seem as though we are going backwards! At times we will probably be tempted to give up. But we must never do that!

What is actually happening is that God is at work, bringing our imperfections to light so that they can be healed by his merciful love. John compares this process to a log of wood being consumed by fire: at first the wood hisses and spits, turns black and smells. But in the end ‘the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself’ (2DN 10:1).

Open to the gift of contemplation

At some stage along this road of faith, we are likely to find that we are unable to pray as we used to; it may even feel as though we are not praying at all. If we have been in the habit of using our minds in prayer by meditating on the Gospels or using other reflections (good as these practices are and remain), there may come times when ‘the soul no longer has the power to work or meditate with its faculties on the things of God. Spiritual persons suffer considerable affliction in this night, owing not so much to the aridities they undergo as to their fear of having gone astray’ (1DN 10:1). They try to meditate as before, and fear that if they cannot do this, ‘they are doing nothing’ (1DN 10:1).

This is a crucial moment. John offers reassurance: ‘Those who are in this situation should feel comforted; they ought to persevere patiently and not be afflicted’ (1DN 10:3). At such times, they should ‘be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God’ (1DN 10:4) and allow him to work within them. He will then be able to communicate the gift of contemplation to the soul. This is only possible when we let God

take over control. 'For contemplation,' according to John, 'is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love' (1DN 10:6).

GOD, THE 'POINT OF ARRIVAL'

We have to fall silent

The third and final reason for describing the soul's journey as a night is its destination: namely, God himself. God, John wants us to understand, 'is also a dark night to the soul in this life' (1A 2:1). For God is 'no thing' that we can see, imagine, control or define; in this way, he can be said to be *nada*, nothing. In the sketch of Mount Carmel which John placed at the beginning of his commentary, he wrote these words on the path that ascends by the shortest and straightest route to the summit: '*nada nada nada nada nada nada*, and even on the mountain, *nada*'.

He is not saying that it is all a waste of time and we will end up with nothing! Rather, he wants to convey that the dark night raises us above all that is less than us and unworthy of our attachment, into a mystery so much greater than we are that we have no words, no comparable ideas or experiences, with which to describe it. We simply have to fall silent.

A journey into mystery

The dark night, then, is a journey into mystery – a journey that is bound to take us through times of pain and suffering as we are confronted with the full depth of our weakness and sinfulness, deprived of precious helps that had previously shored us up, and bewildered by God's utter Otherness. However, anything we suffer on this path of transformation is only a means to a greater good. And when we finally come to stand before God with empty hands, we will be able to receive all that God wants to give us (cf. Lt 7). Then we will find that in possessing God, we possess all else – in complete freedom of spirit. John gives expression to this joyous, empty-handed possession in his 'Prayer of an enamoured soul':

Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. (SLL 27)

Just as we have to keep starting afresh all along the journey, so God, the journey's end, is in fact with us every step of the way. If we are able to persevere through every experience of loss, abandonment, and distress, and surrender to God in the night, he will bridge the gap between himself and our humanity and draw us into the 'sweet and delightful freedom' (Lt 7) of loving union with him.