

Aylesford retreat 2023

Talk 5: Solitude

Welcome back. At this stage, one realizes that we're only dipping our toes into the Spiritual Canticle. There is so much that we could look at, speak about, explore. We are just dipping into certain parts, with the purpose of getting an overall picture of what John is presenting here, which is the whole spiritual journey, the growing and maturing in one's relationship with God. The bride is growing and maturing in her relationship with the Bridegroom.

We are exploring the fullness of that relationship, what it is, what it looks like, how it's experienced. And as we saw in the previous session, its purpose, love. What one was created for. The very purpose for which God created us.

Now in this session, I'd just like to explore one stanza, and it's stanza number 35 of Canticle B or 34 of Canticle A. This one is on solitude. It is one of three stanzas that nobody knows when John wrote them, this stanza was not written in prison. He came out of prison with 31 stanzas, that is, one to thirty-two of Canticle B, leaving out stanza 11.

Then 33, 34 and 35, he probably wrote within a year or two of his escape from prison when he was in Andalusia, either in El Calvario or Beas, but nobody knows exactly when or what the circumstances were. And then the last five stanzas, he composed as a result of his conversation with a Carmelite nun. When he asked her about her prayer she said, "Meditating on the beauty of God, rejoicing in God's beauty." And John just spent days reflecting on that and wrote the last five stanzas.

So this particular stanza 35, with the one before it, are sung by the Bridegroom. In the whole process it comes just before we enter the last section, the last five stanzas. It is not a new stage or a new phase in the journey, but rather it is more a looking in another direction. It's looking towards eternity. The gaze is upon eternity. Or another way of putting it is that something of the light or the life of eternal life creeps into life in this world.

So John presents it as a section in itself. But just before entering it, he gives us this stanza on solitude. It's very deliberately put here in this particular place. It fits so well with John's overall scheme of things. And so, solitude. And remember of course most of the Canticle, and the whole idea of the Canticle, is born in the solitude of his prison. But the kind of solitude John is speaking about here is not a physical solitude, though the desire for that is undoubtedly there. John tells us many, many times that it's a sign of an authentic experience of God. As does Saint Teresa. It is one of her key signs to determine whether something is an authentic experience of God.

The person might have no idea what they've experienced, but they will feel the pull towards solitude, the desire to be alone. That doesn't necessarily mean that being alone is possible. Very often it's not, it's

not about whether it is possible or not. It's about the pull towards it, the desire for solitude. The kind of solitude John is speaking about here is a much broader solitude than just physical solitude. It's a solitude of the mind, a solitude of the heart, a solitude in all the dimensions of that solitude. Really the person is on her own before God. That's probably the best way we could put it.

One is on one's own, on the journey and when one has arrived. And the way that John presents it here, as we'll see, is the journey itself. It is a journey of solitude and into deeper solitude. When one has arrived, it is in solitude, and this stands as really a celebration of solitude. The amount of times he puts in the word solitude, the repetition, is one of John's poetic techniques. It is to repeat something, repetition. Here he repeats the word solitude over and over and over again, both in the stanza and in his commentary.

This is because solitude is such a key to bringing about everything that the bride is now living, everything in which she is rejoicing and celebrating. And this stanza, is spoken by the Bridegroom or sung by the Bridegroom. He is rejoicing that for his bride, solitude has made it possible for him to do in her what it is he wanted to do: to bring this union about.

I'll begin by reading the stanza itself:

She lived in solitude,
and now in solitude has built her nest;
and in solitude he guides her,
he alone, who also bears
in solitude the wound of love. (SC 35:1)

So we can see the different solitudes. She lived in solitude. That doesn't just physically mean she put herself there in solitude. It means that solitude was the source of her life. She drew life from solitude. Solitude was quite literally the air that she breathed, what kept her alive and kept her going on this journey.

Now in solitude, she builds her nest, she makes her home. Solitude is now her home. She then turns to him, the Bridegroom; he guides her in solitude.

He alone, he is in solitude also. The bridegroom is in solitude. God is in solitude, who also bears in solitude the wound of love. And of course the whole Canticle began with the wound of love. The wound of love is what gave the bride the energy, the impetus, the inspiration to set out in the journey. And now see also, he bears the wound. It's a total reciprocal love.

Let's have a look and pick out some things from John's commentary here. We're speaking about the solitude in which she formerly desired to live. As I said, that's what the person desires, solitude, whatever she may be experiencing. The Bridegroom continues the explanation, John said, of his

happiness over the blessing the bride has obtained. The Bridegroom is rejoicing in the happiness of the bride. God is rejoicing in the happiness of the human being.

That's a characteristic, this gives God happiness. This is what gives God joy. This is what God is. We read:

When the soul has become established in the quietude of solitary love of her Bridegroom, as has this one of whom we are speaking, she is settled in God, and God in her, with so much delight that she has no need of other masters or means to direct her to him, for now God is her guide and her light. (SC 35:1)

The solitude that she has settled in is God, and God is settled in the solitude that is in the bride. Each is settled in the other, in solitude. And John will go on a little bit later to say that this is in the nature of lovers. They want to be alone together; John reaches to where each of the other is solitude. He draws this from the prophet Hosea, "I shall lead her into solitude and there speak to her heart," (Hosea 2:4) that beautiful text where you have God leading the soul, leading the person into solitude, into the desert to speak to her heart. God is leading her into solitude.

So that's solitude. Now "to speak to the heart is to satisfy the heart," John said, "which is dissatisfied with anything less than God." That's what satisfies the heart, which is dissatisfied with anything that is less than God.

We see the two things, the two types of solitude that John is rejoicing in here. First, he said he praises the solitude in which the soul formerly desired to live. Now the wording here is important, "the *solitude she desired to live*." He doesn't say the solitude she lived in. To get there it is not necessary to be a hermit out in some mountain away from everywhere. That's not the kind of solitude. It's the solitude of the heart, the solitude of somebody who is truly detached. The solitude of somebody who has this inner freedom that we've been speaking about. The solitude of somebody who has their heart set on nothing else but God. It's that kind of interior solitude that she was drawn to, that got her here. John goes on to say how it was a means for her to find and rejoice in her bridegroom. That was the means, the detachment, that got her here, "withdrawn from all her former afflictions and fatigues. Since she wished to live in solitude, [and the *wish* is the important word here], apart from every satisfaction, comfort, and support of creatures in order to reach companionship and union with her Beloved, she deserved to discover the possession of peaceful solitude in her Beloved, in which she rests, alone and isolated from all these disturbances." (SC 35:2)

And as we've already seen, it's isolation from the disturbances, not from the things in themselves. The things in themselves don't matter, it's the *relationship* with them. The disturbance they cause are the attachments that limit a person. It's freedom from that. It's that kind of solitude. One can be the midst of everything but be free of it. This is celebration of solitude.

Now John goes on to the new kind of solitude, or the solitude of the person now living this relationship of union with God. He states that in so far as she desired to live apart from all creative things, in solitude for her Beloved's sake, he himself was enamored of her because of this solitude and took care of her by accepting her in his arms, feeding her in himself with every blessing, and guiding her to the high things of God. That's what's been going on. That's what God has been doing in the person in her solitude. John goes on:

He asserts [as the Bridegroom] not only that he guides her, but does so alone without other means, (angels, humans, forms, or figures), for she now possesses, through this solitude, true liberty of spirit that is not bound to any of these means. (SC 35:2)

This is solitude that enables, God is guiding the soul. This is so important for John.

As we saw at the end of the last session, the person has gone beyond all modes and methods of prayer, and though she may still use them if they're helpful, she is not bound to them. It's gone beyond the limits. Now God is directing her, guiding her. This is where the great concern for John is, where does the spiritual director come into this? He speaks so strongly at this stage to spiritual directors. Because the person herself has no understanding of what's going on here. Even less so does the director.

And so this solitude is something that needs to be respected. I'd just like to jump to a text in the Living Flame. It is part of the long discourse John gives on spiritual direction in his commentary in stanza three, where I want to read a few bits from paragraph 46. Here again, he speaks about this solitude and these spiritual directors:

These directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls in this matter, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who's never neglectful of souls, and they themselves are instruments for directing these souls to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the Spirit given by God to each one. (LF 3:46)

He tells us to respect the Spirit and how the Spirit is working in each person. It becomes ever more important that the person has the freedom to allow the Spirit to work in her in a way that is truly right. And the more one grows and the deeper one goes, the more necessary this is.

John goes on here:

Thus the whole concern of directors should not be to accommodate souls to their own method and condition". [The director can think, "well I know best"]. But they should observe the road along which God is leading one. If they do not recognize it, they should leave the soul alone and not bother it. And in harmony with the path and spirit along which God leads a soul, the spiritual director should strive to conduct it into greater solitude, tranquility and freedom of spirit. He should give it latitude so that when God introduces it into this solitude, it does not bind its

corporeal or spiritual faculties to some particular object, interior or exterior, and does not become anxious or afflicted with the thought that nothing is being done. (LF 3:46)

... et cetera. It's that kind of solitude that must be respected by anybody who is supporting, helping, guiding another person. Give the person latitude, as God is working in the person.

Solitude is the key. Solitude is the guide, that pull to solitude, that desire for solitude. Solitude is a safe place from all kinds of things. The person doesn't need to read every book that exists, in fact doesn't need any probably. The person doesn't need all of these because God is the guide. Of course, the person doesn't know this or has very little sense of it. Just let the person be, let God guide the person. Solitude is so important to John's whole way of thinking. This is the place where the person is really nourished.

Let's just take a little bit more from John:

In this solitude, away from all things, the soul is alone with God and he guides, moves, and raises her to divine things. That is: he elevates her intellect to divine understanding, [which of course is not natural understanding] because it is alone and divested of other country and alien, he moves her will freely to the love of God because it is alone and freed from other affections; and he fills her memory with divine knowledge, because now alone and empty of other images and phantasies." (SC 35:5)

God in this solitude is speaking to the person at every level of her being. "It is God who guides her in this solitude, as St. Paul declares."

John goes back to chapter eight of Paul's letter to the Romans, which we've already seen, now to a different verse, Romans 8:14. That whole chapter is such an important chapter for understanding the spiritual life. It is so influential on John of the Cross.

The line that John is referring to is,

Everyone moved by the Spirit is the son of God. The Spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again. It is the Spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God, and if we are children, we are heirs as well, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory. (Rom 8:14)

That perhaps sums up what John of the Cross is attempting to explain or to simply put into words. The person moved by the Spirit of God is a son of God like Jesus: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, so the person is united with the Son of God. The two spirits are one. And that's what the solitude is, that place where the two become one.

John goes on to explain: "The meaning of this, [Rom 8:14] is not only that he guided her in her solitude, but it is he alone who works in her without any means". (SC 35:6) That is something we see more and more in the last five stanzas. How God works in her. Her works, whatever they may be, are the works of

God. He is working. God and the person become one, the work of the person and the work of God are one. So he's not just guiding her here, he's working in her and through her, and that's what the solitude makes possible.

This is a characteristic of the union of the soul with God in spiritual marriage: God works in and communicates himself to her through himself alone, without using as means the angels or natural ability, for the exterior and interior senses, and all creatures, and even the soul herself do very little towards the reception of the remarkable supernatural favors that God grants in this state. (SC 35:6)

So, the person is doing less and less herself and is receiving less and less help from all around, all the natural and supernatural helps she would have received, because God is giving himself. That's the nature of God as we've seen in this whole spiritual marriage: that God gives himself.

Jesus Christ, as we've seen, has already done that upon the cross, that total self-giving. Or in the thinking of John of the Cross, he did this at the Incarnation by God becoming human, giving himself totally to human life, from conception to death, giving himself totally to the whole of human life. Now that same process happens in the individual, what happens in a general sense through the cross. That's why John of the Cross tells us the Incarnation is the most important and greatest of all the mysteries, because God totally becomes one, gives himself totally to humanity, in every dimension of human life, from the very beginning to the very end.

Now that is what is happening: God is giving himself to the person, to the soul in the deepest place within. And that's what happens in this solitude. "Since the soul has left all and passed beyond all means, ascending above them all to God, it is fitting the God himself be the guide and means of reaching himself." (SC 35:6)

God is the guide; God is the means. And that's because all other guides and all other means cannot enter here. So God is purely God. And now we come back at the end to this wound of love, which is, again, an extraordinary statement.

God is totally sharing in the condition of the bride as Jesus does with the Incarnation, he totally shares in the human condition, including suffering and death. And of course the key moment at the very beginning of the Canticle is the wound, the wound of love. That is the Bridegroom's initiative. The Bridegroom has wounded the bride with a wound of love. And it's that wound of love that is the driving force, that is the energy of the whole Canticle, of the whole process.

So the person who seeks God, seeks God because of a love that God has already put there, long before it enters the person's head to start searching for God. Long before the person takes any decision to search for God, or comes to a point of feeling they need to search for God. God has already wounded the

person with love. He has done something in the person to make the person aware of God's love for them. And so that's what drives the whole Canticum.

But now we come to the point where he himself is wounded with love for her. It's a reciprocal process, he takes on even the wound, just like Jesus takes on the suffering of humanity and the darkness of human life and all that, out of love for humanity. So also here in the very individual case, God takes on whatever the suffering may be. Whatever the alienation or darkness or whatever form that wound may be, the Bridegroom now takes it on.

John the Cross beautifully expresses this same idea in the very last stanza of his Romances and the Incarnation. The very last stanza, have a look at it. There he's got Jesus in the manger, crying. Humanity is brought to him within the jewels of marriage, which is the pain and suffering of humanity. He has taken on the pain and suffering of humanity. Humanity has the joy and the peace of God. That's the conclusion, that's where it comes to. And now John is expressing that same idea here in this celebration of solitude.

That's what the Bridegroom does with the bride in this solitude. He's wounded with love of the bride.

The Bridegroom bears a great love for the solitude of the soul, but he is wounded much more by her love since, being wounded with love for him, she desired to live alone in respect to all things. And he does not wish to leave her alone, but wounded by the solitude she embraces for his sake, and observing that she is dissatisfied with any other thing, he alone guides her, drawing her to, and absorbing her in himself. Had he not found her in spiritual solitude, he would not have wrought this in her." (SC 35:7)

Everything that the Bridegroom does in her is brought about as a result of this solitude. The solitude is what enables this to happen, and that is the very nature of this love, the love in equality. Both have become equal to the other.

As I say, the Incarnation is critical to understanding this. The whole story of the Incarnation is being lived out, played out we could say, in the soul of the human. That's the extraordinary mystery that John has underlying his whole Canticum. Over and over again he tells us it's the greatest of all the mysteries, because it is the one that enables us to see truly what's taking place. And this solitude that he's speaking about here, that he's celebrating here, is that world, that environment where all this can happen.

It's the solitude of God and the solitude of the person, the solitude of the Bridegroom and the solitude of the bride. John loved solitude, he was fascinated by solitude. But it wasn't just the physical solitude. In that physical solitude, he came to know this deeper solitude, this deeper solitude of the heart, this solitude that enables a relationship with God to take root and to grow. So this stanza is particularly important and particularly important at this stage of the Canticum, because it enables us to see how what John is going to speak about in the next five stanzas is possible.

What actually makes this possible? How can this be? You could read the last five stanzas and the wonderful exaltation of things he speaks about there. But John wants us first to understand how and where all of this came about. It came about in this solitude. The solitude that gives life.

Then we switch into stanza 36, which is almost a complete change of tempo, a different atmosphere, an atmosphere that could be summed up really with one phrase. The bride now knows the secrets of God and of humanity. That, John says, is what now takes place. And that phrase we will find in number two of stanza 37. She knows the sublime mysteries of God and of human beings. That's what we find in the last five stanzas, these sublime mysteries.

And John needs first to show us how this comes about. This kind of all-embracing solitude, that includes solitude in every dimension of the word, that privileged place where God has the freedom to give himself completely to the person because the person has already demonstrated her freedom to give herself to God.

Okay I think that's probably enough about that.