

For John of the Cross, of fundamental importance for the life of prayer, for spiritual growth, was a right understanding of God. The difficulty we have is, as he points out so often, is that we create God in our own image; we project onto God how we see things, our understanding of things, and our ways of relating. To get perhaps the best overall view of how John sees God, there are the wonderful poems that he wrote in prison; the Romances on the Word who became flesh, we're probably all familiar with them. I mentioned them already when we were speaking about La Fonte on the first evening. In so many ways they follow a very similar line. Take the very first edition of John's writings, these poems have been described as a prologue to all John's teaching. So even people who knew John of the Cross, who were familiar with him saw these 9 poems as a prologue to all of his teaching; the rationale behind that was that this is John's theological perspective. It's how John sees God, and everything else flows from that.

It's particularly important for a right understanding of the Spiritual Canticle, and indeed for all of John's writings; this is where John is coming from, this is how John sees God, this is how John wants us, wants the reader to see God: because this will enable the person to have a right understanding of what relationship with God is. These 9 poems are very well put together, very carefully constructed: they come really in 2,2,2,2 and then 1; and begin with the Trinity, and then predestination, creation, the Bible, the story of the Bible and particular people in the Bible. Then the Incarnation, and finally the 9th poem, the birth of Jesus. It follows that route. We can imagine John in his prison cell reflecting on all of this. He entitles it a Romance on the Prologue of John's Gospel; but it's really some aspects of that, but there is also much biblical imagery. And contained in it of course, as I say, are those key principles around which everything in his spirituality is built.

So it begins at the beginning, before there is any beginning. The Word is the beginning, so the beginning was God the Word. 'He was Himself the beginning and therefore had no beginning'. The beginning, back there before the beginning, which isn't the beginning, it's before the beginning. 'The Word is called Son; He was born of the Beginning Who had always conceived Him, and was always conceiving Him, giving of His substance always, yet always possessing it.' What a statement of the nature of God, of who Jesus is; all the time conceiving Him: all the time giving His substance away; giving, all the time giving. The very nature of God is to be always giving and yet always possessing. God is the One who can give, and continually give, and give everything and yet also possess everything at the same time. That very nature of God! The poem goes on 'And thus the glory of the Son was the Father's glory, and the Father possessed all His glory in the Son.' That word 'glory', such an important word in John's 'Living Flame'; the very atmosphere of God, the very environment of God; to be in the presence of God is glory; so the glory of the Father, the glory of the Son, one glory in the other. So then the person who is living the fullness of spiritual maturity is living in that glory. That word 'glory', the very nature of God, there before all. Then he goes further into the very nature of God 'As the lover in the beloved each lived in the other, and the Love that unites them is one with them, their equal, excellent as the One and the Other: Three persons, and one Beloved among all three.' The love, inspired of course by ch.17 of John's Gospel, the Love that there is between the Father and the Son will be in Them, it's the very nature of the Trinity. Each in the other, the Love into that relationship of the Trinity.

And we already mentioned it at some stage along the way when looking at the Trinity, what John has in stanza 39 of the Canticle, where he has the person who has grown fully into the image and

likeness of God. God is community, God is communion. So we're made in the image and likeness of God, then this is the image and likeness of God, this love, this communion of love, this indwelling. Just a little bit further on then 'Thus it is a boundless love that unites them, for the three have one love which is their essence; and the more love is one the more it is love.' In that first poem then, it's the very nature of God and the very nature of love, and what love is, and the two are equated; God is love, love is the very nature of God. John puts it elsewhere that love is God's language and he means that in two ways, both what God speaks, and the language through which God is heard; only those who listen through the language of love can hear God. So it's love that unites them, the Three have one love: and that of course is the nature of John's Spiritual Canticle, the person is transformed in love, in God's love. God gives His love to the bride and she is transformed in His love; there is only one love, and it is into that love that the bride is brought. So that's the first of the poems.

Then in the second poem again we're still before creation, we're still in predestination, we're still only the Trinity. This poem is the communication within the Trinity. The Father speaks 'In that immense love. Proceeding from the two (which of course is the Holy Spirit) 'the Father spoke words of great affection to the Son, words of such profound delight that no one understood them; they were meant for the Son and He alone rejoiced in them. What He heard was this 'My Son, only your company contents me and when something pleases me I love that thing in you; whoever resembles you the most satisfies me the most, and whoever is like you in nothing will find nothing in me.' Imitation of Jesus Christ. The Father only loves the Son and whoever resembles Him. Then another fundamental of John's teaching - be like Jesus Christ; The Father only loves Jesus. Only the person who resembles Jesus Christ will find favour with God. 'I'm pleased with you alone, O Life of my Life! You are the light of my light, you are my wisdom, the image of my substance in whom I am well pleased.' All the biblical imagery is there, the Baptism, the One with whom I am well pleased; the light has come into the world. 'My Son, I will give myself to him who loves You and I will love him with the same love I have for You, because he has loved You whom I love so.' That same love that He has for the Son, that's how He will love those who love the Son. Ch.17 of John's Gospel of course, that's what Jesus prays for there, that the love that there is between the Father and the Son will be in them, and I will be in them, that love. So they're the first two, the nature of God, of Trinity, of love, and love is the communication within the Trinity, the communication between Father and Son, Love is the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is Love; the communication of love.

So now we come to creation and hear this dialogue between Father and Son. Again we have two poems on creation. The first one has us again prior to creation, before the beginning, the Father and the Son speaking, 'My Son, I wish to give you a bride who will love You. Because of You she will deserve to share our company, and eat at our table, the same bread that I eat, that she may know the good I have in such a Son; and rejoice with me in your grace and fullness.' What a great statement, the bride to share our company, eat at our table the same bread: the imagery of bread, the manna in the desert, the Eucharist; so many other biblical images there around the bread, that most intimate of sharing. 'She will know the good I have in such a Son and rejoice'. Joy, rejoicing, the very nature of God that the bride will have. Now we have the Son's response, the Son saying 'Yes'. Notice in this poem there are two 'yes's'; there's the 'Yes' of the Son and later on there the 'Yes' of Mary that we will look at. Both answer yes, two fiat's we could say. The Son here answers

yes before all of creation, before anything was created He says yes. And here's His response, 'I am very grateful the Son answered; I will show my brightness to the bride you give me, so that by it she may see how great my Father is, and how I have received my being from your being. I will hold her in my arms and she will burn with your love, and with eternal delight she will exalt your goodness.' Love, I will hold her in my arms - the bride, and she will see in me how great you are. No one knows the Father except the Son, St. John's Gospel. He will reveal to the bride who the Father is; she will burn with your love, and rejoice in eternal delight, so what He will give to the bride.

Now the second poem on creation - it happens; now we're coming to creation and the beginning, the fourth poem. 'Let it be done, then, said the Father, for your love has deserved it'. So creation is a response to Jesus' love for the Father. It's a gift He gives both out of His love, the Father's love and as a response to the love He has received from the Son. 'for your love has deserved it. And by these words the world was created,'. Creation is the great act of love between the Father and the Son.

Creation is a 'a place for the bride made with great wisdom and divided into rooms, one above, the other below.' The lower being the earth, the higher being the heavenly world: so both heaven and earth are the bride, all of creation, everything outside of the Trinity is bride for the Son. 'The lower was furnished with infinite variety, while the higher was made beautiful with marvellous jewels, that the bride might know the Bridegroom she had.' The bride might know the Bridegroom and who knows the Bridegroom? the angels and humanity. The angels are placed in the higher, humanity has the lower place, for both have the capacity to know the Bridegroom, that's what singles them out from everything else in creation, though everything else is also the bride. 'Those higher ones possessed the Bridegroom in gladness; the lower in hope, founded on the faith that He infused in them'. So hope and faith, that's what we see throughout John's writings, hope and faith and love of course, the Theological Virtues. That's the life of the Christian. 'for He would make Himself wholly like them, and He would come to them and dwell with them; and God would be man, and man would be God, and He would walk with them and eat and drink with them; and He Himself would be with them continually til the consummation of this world, when joined, they would rejoice in eternal song; for He was the Head of this bride of His to whom all the members of the just would be joined who form the body of the bride'. And you can see that the bride is the Church; there's the individual and there's the Church. And there's so much of the language of St. Paul here, the Body of Christ, the teaching of the Church and the liturgy of the Church is brought into this; the Church is bride and the individual is bride and the whole of creation is bride. 'He would take her tenderly in His arms and there give her His love; and when they were thus one, He would lift her to the Father 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'. That's the point of arrival for John of the Cross' teaching, to live the life of God. God through participation, that great term that he uses, no longer I who live but Jesus lives in me, and so much else.

So he's set out here in creation not only making, but rather the goal of creation is union with the Trinity. The goal of creation is oneness with God, is relationship. Creation is an act of creating relationship. It's an act of love and it's object, it's goal is relationship of love between Bridegroom and bride; between all of creation and God. The goal of creation is relationship, is love.

Then we come to the next 2, numbers 4&5; which is the scriptures and again there's so much scripture and imagery. I'll just put it very briefly, it's the prophets, the Bible, and particular individuals in the Bible. These are the hope of the people of God; the looking forward, the wanting, and everything that the scriptures have, all of that and the longing, the waiting, and then no. 6. 'In these and other prayers a long time had passed: but in later years their fervour swelled and grew when the aged Simeon burned with longing, and begged God that he might see this day. And so the Holy Spirit answering the good old man gave him His word that he would not see death until he saw Life descending from the heights, until he took God Himself into his own hands and holding Him in his arms, pressed him to himself.' Simeon representing all the other individuals of scripture who had the same longing.

Now in numbers 7& 8 it's the Incarnation, and firstly it's seen through the Trinity, through the relationship between Father and Son. 'Now that the time had come when it would be good to ransom the bride serving under the hard yoke of that law which Moses had given her, the Father, with tender love, spoke in this way: 'Now you see, Son, that your bride was made in your image, and so far as she is like you she will suit you well; yet she is different, in her flesh, which your simple being does not have. In perfect love this law holds: that the lover become like the one he loves; for the greater their likeness the greater their delight'. This again is one of John of the Cross' great principles, right throughout his teaching but particularly in the Spiritual Canticle. Love brings about likeness; so the more one loves the more one becomes like the one one loves. If one's love is only for God then one becomes like God, but if one's love is for something else one becomes like that and John says, even subject to it; hence the great damage done by any kind of attachment to anything other than God, we make ourselves slaves to that. 'My will is yours, the Son replied, and my glory is that your will be mine'. (Thy will be done). 'I will go and seek my bride and take upon myself her weariness and labours in which she suffers so; and that she may have life, I will die for her, and lifting her out of that deep, I will restore her to you.' So there's Jesus before the Incarnation promising the Father that He will die to give her life. He will die to give her life, the purpose of the Incarnation before it happens. Everything is in God's plan predestined by God.

So in number 8 we come to the actual Incarnation; 'the virgin Mary at whose consent the mystery was wrought,'. So now she's giving her consent; the Son had given His consent much earlier, now she's given her consent. The Bridegroom has given His consent, now the bride is and Mary is giving her consent in the name of the bride, she ultimately is the bride, and the Incarnation is presented here as a great wedding feast of the Bridegroom and the bride. So Mary gives her consent and the mystery is wrought. He receives His flesh and He is now called Son of God and of man.

And then the birth, the final one. 'When the time had come for Him to be born, He went forth like the bridegroom from his bridal chamber, embracing His bride, holding her in His arms, whom the gracious Mother laid in a manger among some animals that were there at that time.' The heavenly and the earthly world meeting. 'Men sang songs and angels melodies celebrating the marriage of Two such as these'. All the bride is singing, heaven and earth united. 'But God there in the manger cried and moaned; and these tears were jewels the bride brought to the wedding'. There's an enormous amount of symbolism here in all of this. 'The Mother gazed in sheer wonder on such an exchange: in God, man's weeping, and in man gladness, to the one and the other things usually so strange'. So that's the point it comes to, the celebration. Now God has become human, humanity

and God are alike, the likeness of the two; He is now in flesh, we can see our God as one of us, but we can also see ourselves in God.

May I just finish with this. This marriage that takes place, this rejoicing, this celebrating is very similar to the very first paragraph of the introduction to stanza 22 of the Spiritual Canticle. That's the point of arrival of the Canticle, the point of the Spiritual Marriage, the union between Bridegroom and bride. I'll just read that paragraph, and conclude with that, it just helps us to see how this whole poem is the preface, the preparation for all of John's teaching. Here we're at the point of arrival, and the Bridegroom is celebrating, just as in the poem bride and Bridegroom are celebrating, now there's a great celebration taking place. What happens in the Incarnation, which is that great wedding feast, that great spiritual marriage, is what happens in the spiritual life of each person, bride and Bridegroom become one, the union of the two, the spiritual life of each individual. So we look at this wonderful paragraph. 'Great was the desire of the Bridegroom to free and ransom His bride completely (that's language almost identical to what we had in the poem, the Father sending the Son to free and ransom the bride) from the hands of sensuality and the devil. (It's this personal spiritual life; now biblical imagery from Luke's Gospel). 'Like the good shepherd rejoicing and holding on his shoulders the lost sheep for which he had searched along many winding paths (Lk 15:4-5), and like the woman who, having lit the candle and hunted through her whole house for the lost drachma, holding it up in her hands with gladness and calling her friends and neighbours to come and celebrate, saying, rejoice with me and so on. (Lk 15:8-9) now too the soul is liberated'. Again back to the Romances, the Bridegroom has come to liberate the bride. 'Now, too, that the soul is liberated, this loving Shepherd and Bridegroom rejoices. And it is wonderful to see His pleasure in carrying the rescued, perfected soul on His shoulders, held there by His hands in this desired union.' Again language almost identical to the poem, 'I will hold her in my arms'. John goes on 'Not only does He Himself rejoice, but He also makes the angels and saintly souls share in His gladness'. The heavenly and the earthly world is rejoicing. Then he quotes from the Song of Songs, important words for John of the Cross, he quotes them later on in the Canticle 'Go forth, daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon in the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his espousal and on the day of the joy in his heart'. (Sg 3:11). 'By these words he calls the soul His crown, His bride and the joy of His heart, and He takes her now in His arms and goes forth with her as the bridegroom from his bridal chamber.' (Ps 19:5). So much of the same imagery as we have in the poem is here, the unity of John's teaching; what we might call the global, the great plan of God culminating in the Incarnation, is what happens in each individual's spiritual life. Each of us is created as the bride of the Bridegroom; created for this union, for this love, to be one with the Bridegroom. So as I said, that poem sets out the foundations of John's thinking and the foundations on which everything in his teaching is built. This is who God is, this what the Incarnation is all about, hence John tells us several times that the Incarnation is the greatest of God's mysteries; it's the bringing about the union of God, humanity, and all of creation. It's the greatest of all mysteries and it happens individually in the depths of each individual.

