

# ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

## *THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE*

A retreat given by Fr Matt Blake OCD at Boars Hill  
12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> December 2014

First Talk	<i>Introduction and background</i>	page 1
Second Talk	<i>John's Prologue</i>	page 4
Third Talk	<i>Main themes</i>	page 7
Fourth Talk	<i>The Flame and the deepest centre</i>	page 11
Fifth Talk	<i>The Healing Flame</i>	page 16
Sixth Talk	<i>The Lamps of Fire</i>	page 21
Seventh Talk	<i>The Awakening</i>	page 25

## **First talk *Introduction and background***

Welcome to this retreat which is in our season of Advent, so we keep in mind all that that means - our preparation for Christmas - but at a more personal level our preparation for the Lord, who comes to us in many ways. And to help us over this weekend in our prayer, our reflection, we're going to be looking at John of the Cross' work *The Flame*; this poem and its commentary that John gives us. I am going to just give a general background and introduction to this work and tomorrow morning we will start looking at some of the content of this book.

As a prayerful beginning I am going to read and pray the first four stanzas of this poem.

*1. O living flame of love  
that tenderly wounds my soul  
in its deepest centre! Since  
now you are not oppressive,  
now consummate! if it be your will:  
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!*

*2. O sweet cautery,  
O delightful wound!  
O gentle hand! O delicate touch  
that tastes of eternal life  
and pays every debt!  
In killing you changed death to life.*

*3. O lamps of fire!  
in whose splendours  
the deep caverns of feeling,  
once obscure and blind,  
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,  
both warmth and light to their Beloved.*

*4. How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,  
where in secret you dwell alone;  
and in your sweet breathing,  
filled with good and glory,  
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.*

Lord we give you thanks for all that you're doing in us and we pray that your spirit may come upon us this weekend and fill our minds and hearts with the fire and warmth of your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Just listening to that poem one can understand why people would have asked John to explain; one just becomes aware of the profound mysteries that are in every word. As we know, John is a poet, an artist, much more comfortable with symbols and imagery than with rational explanations. But when John wrote his poetry and shared his poetry, people asked him to explain, and so John's teaching comes from his poetry, is an extension of his poetry. John puts the essence of the mystery into the pictures that he paints in the words of his poetry, and then his writings expand this, draw from it.

And that is what we see particularly in this work. What is called a commentary is probably more an extension of the poem, a drawing out some of the depths of the mystery that's there.

Just to step back a little bit. Where does this poem, this work, fit in John's life? It doesn't just drop from the sky. When we pick up any edition of John of the Cross' writings we find that this is the last of his four great books – *the Ascent of Mount Carmel, the Dark Night, the Spiritual Canticle* and then *the Living Flame*, and chronologically it was the last one that he wrote. He tells us at the very beginning: *it's a commentary on the stanzas that treat of a very intimate and elevated union and transformation of the soul in God written at the request of Donna Ana de Penalosa by the author of the stanzas* – the author of course being himself. We see immediately here that this is dedicated to Donna Ana de Mercado de Penalosa, but it's more than just a dedication.

I need to probably give a little bit about the background of this woman and her relationship with John. Those of you familiar with John's writings will know that the *Spiritual Canticle*, John's most famous work and the most read of John's writings, was dedicated to Mother Ana of Jesus, who was the Prioress of the Carmelite convent in Granada and she asked him to write a commentary on those 40 stanzas that John had already written and it is well known that he wrote this commentary for her. In 1582, when John and Mother Ana went to Granada to make a foundation for a Carmelite convent there - they had this foundation well planned but when they turned up in Granada all the plans had fallen through and they had no house or anything. Ana de Penalosa took the nuns into her house and the community of Carmelite nuns led by Mother Ana lived with her from January to August. There began there a very close friendship with Mother Ana but also with John of the Cross, who had now become Prior of the Carmelite friars nearby and was constantly coming to visit and support the nuns and work with them, so John's friendship with Ana grew from there. She was a native of Segovia, but a few years prior to this had been widowed and had moved down south to Granada to be near to her brother, who was a judge in that city. Years later, when John moves back to Segovia she also moves back and will work with John and be the main benefactor of the Carmelite monastery there that John built. Later again, after John's death, she will be the person responsible for bringing John's body back to Segovia for its burial there, where it is to this day. So she is somebody who plays an important part in John's life in various ways.

This poem came about, along with this commentary. Mother Ana had got her commentary and the *Spiritual Canticle*, and Ana de Penalosa really wanted a poem for herself - she wanted her book. So she obviously pressed him, asked him for this. As he puts it in his Prologue: *I felt rather reluctant, very noble and devout lady* – John doesn't give titles like that trivially; he really meant it - *to explain these four stanzas as you asked* – so obviously she's been asking him for an explanation and he's reluctant to give it, but he does, and thankfully he does because at her request we have here this masterpiece. It's important for us initially to appreciate the importance of this woman. As you know, any writer, even if they know their book is going to be read - and John knew this book would be read by many, many people – I'm not sure he realised we would still be reading it more than 400 years later - but he certainly had a very wide audience in mind. Good writers write for an individual or for a group; they have a very specific readership in mind. So John writes this in a very

personal way with a specific person in mind and a person who clearly will know – I hesitate to use the word *understand*, because clearly the material being dealt with here is not ‘understandable’ but the person who has the experience to enter into it, will know what is being spoken about. So in a sense we could say that this work is a conversation, a dialogue with a particular reader or listener, and it has grown out of their relationship. All that is spoken about here they would no doubt have discussed. Many witnesses attest to the amount of time she and John spent together, talking about spiritual matters, so it has been purified and refined in that relationship. So it is important to keep this in mind when we listen to this.

John gives us a little prologue to this work and I want to pick out a few things from the Prologue which again help to give us a certain background and context to this. I am picking out three things. The first one is intimately personal to John himself. Those of you who are familiar with John of the Cross’ writings will know that John rarely gives us anything autobiographical, but he begins here very personally and he tells us: *Since they deal with matters so interior and spiritual, for which words are usually lacking - in that the spiritual surpasses sense - I find it difficult to say something of their content; also, one speaks badly of the intimate depths of the spirit if one does not do so with a deeply recollected soul. Because of my want of such recollection, I have deferred this commentary until now, a period in which the Lord has seems to have uncovered some knowledge and bestowed some fervour.* So there a few important things in that – he’s expressing his personal reluctance to do this. In his previous work - the *Spiritual Canticle* - John spells out in his Prologue how difficult it is to put into words what happens in the depths of the human spirit – that intimate place of converse, relationship of union, between the person and God. It is very difficult to put into words, it’s impossible, yet he said, we have to try and do something. So people usually use images and illustrations and of course John being the artist and having the mind of an artist is good at doing this, so here now he has written these four stanzas and it is very difficult to give any sort of explanation. To give an explanation requires not just to have the right words and the right imagery; he said one also needs a recollected spirit – an inner light coming from within and he said he doesn’t have that. And that’s perhaps pretty consoling for us to think that John of the Cross himself wasn’t walking around in some kind of ecstasy or wonderful recollection or anything like that; most of the time he certainly wasn’t. But somehow he comes to a point here where he has some fervour or light and feels ready to do this. Up until now he didn’t feel in the right place spiritually to take on this work. His companion and secretary while he was writing this work, Juan Evangelista, tells us, he left a testimony. He was with John when he wrote his four books; he was acting as his secretary, assistant and companion, and the other books John wrote little by little, over a long period of time in the midst of many other works and occupations. When it came to the *Living Flame* he wrote the commentary in fourteen days while he was Provincial in the midst of many other occupations, but somehow he seemed to have that spirit to write it.

*Transcribed from the recording on youtube: <https://youtu.be/1C57jd9xvf4>*

12<sup>th</sup> December 2014

## **Second talk *John's Prologue***

We need to try to read this in a prayerful way. We need to read not only the poem but also the commentary as prayer, in as prayerful a spirit as we can, with as much of the recollection that John longed for when he was writing it; we need to see it as prayer and we will hear it and benefit from it the more prayerfully we can read it. So that is the first important indicator that we need to take from this prologue. It is prayer; it has come out of prayer and needs to be read, listened to, in prayer.

The second important indicator I would take out of the Prologue is the scriptural basis for this and the scriptural basis John refers to here is a line from John's gospel Ch. 14:23, and these are the words of John of the Cross here: *For he declared – that's Jesus – that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit would take up their abode in those who love him by making them live the life of God and dwell in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.* That's the scriptural basis and that's what the entire work is about. This happens – this is how John of the Cross tells it to us – *there is no reason to marvel at God's granting such sublime and strange gifts to souls he decides to favour. If we consider that he is God and that he bestows them as God with infinite love and goodness it does not seem unreasonable.* This is what the Son of God would do, will do, and he does so as God. So in this entire work what John is exploring is what God does as God in the depths of the human person, in the soul, in the deepest centre of the person. What God does as God, and therefore we must not be surprised or marvel at it because it's what the Son of God, Jesus, said; it's entering deeply into the truth of what Jesus said, not in theory, but in reality. John takes us as far as it is humanly possible into the depths of the reality of this and we might say, to use his imagery, shines a light on it, gives us some picture of it. So that's the second pointer or indicator he's giving us here in the Prologue.

The third pointer or indicator that he's giving us is: what actually is he talking about? He refers us back to his other work *The Spiritual Canticle* and tells us: *in the stanzas we have already commented on – that's the Spiritual Canticle and obviously Ana de Penalosa would have been familiar with that - we speak of the highest degree of perfection that one can reach in this life – transformation in God.* Those of you familiar with the *Canticle* will know that from stanza 22 to the end, stanza 40 - all that section – is dealing with the highest state of union and perfection a person can reach in this life, particularly the last five stanzas, which are looking toward the threshold of eternal life. So there isn't a further stage one can go in this life; so what's this about here then? *These stanzas treat of a love deeper in quality and more perfect within this very state of transformation.* He's not repeating what he's told us in the *Canticle* - he does not repeat himself - those of you familiar with John of the Cross know that he does not repeat himself. He has given us four books and if we put all four together we get the full picture; there is no repetition. What he is doing here is taking us more deeply into what he gave us in the *Canticle* and why is that? I would explain it something like this – when somebody has read the account John has given in the *Spiritual Canticle*, they could make the mistake – and I think John probably realised this - of thinking this is it now, this is some kind of place of arrival, almost like a waiting room for eternity but it's not like that at all. What the *Living Flame* makes clear - indeed it's the principle that John gives us over and over again in his writings in various different ways - is that the very nature of love is that it cannot remain still. Love is never static; love is never some nice, smooth, even situation; love of its very

nature is always active; it's always growing, getting deeper and giving out effects. Love is dynamic and that's why his image here of fire - the flame - is so important. If a fire is burning, there's always movement, activity, changing; things are happening, it's giving out sparks, it's causing heat, it's burning up things. It doesn't just stay there and stay the same all the time. That's the nature of love and here we're talking about the deepest, most profound, most complete love possible and therefore it must be a raging fire, full of activity, so these stanzas are going to take us into something of the depths of this. So it's dealing with something - *a love deeper in quality and more perfect, even though it is true that these and the other stanzas - the Spiritual Canticle - are all the one state of transformation and one cannot pass beyond it, yet it can grow deeper in quality and become more ardent.* So in this work there is life, if we think about the title, it's the flame of love that's living; love that's alive or maybe we could say love that's living the fullness of life. Or maybe we could go further and say that love has brought the person to the fullness of life - it's not human love, but it's the love of God within the person.

Just one or two other points I will make. This work is divided up into four stanzas with a commentary on each stanza, but it is not a progression. Each of the four, we could say, is taking us in a very unique way into the depths of the one reality. The way I describe it is something like the sea - we are taken four times down into the bottom of the sea, given four very different looks at what's there, but clearly we are only getting little glimpses of something far, far bigger. And this work is something like that; each of the four is giving us a distinctive look at intimacy. Tomorrow morning I'll explore what it is we're looking into. Another point I will make - you will see as you read the work, it's speaking about *now, the present*, but it looks back and it looks forward, but if you look more carefully there's more than that. There's a timelessness in this work; time is always something human, of this world - in eternity there's no time and as this work of John's is dealing with what God does, God's love, God's presence, God's glory, there's a definite sense of the timelessness of God; there's something timeless about it, there's a bringing together of all time. What is past, present and future in the human mind in this work is the world. So be aware of that: it goes back, it goes forward - it looks back over the spiritual journey, it looks forward - it is the one flame that is doing it all. Through the clever use of time it is indicating the timelessness of it.

The last point I will make in this general introduction this evening is that John is the artist. We will never understand John of the Cross unless we understand that he's got the mind of an artist, he's got the vision of an artist. So what he is doing here is not so much explaining something as giving us pictures, images, but in order to enter into that we have got to somehow do more than be observers. If you look at the vocabulary in this work, seeing and hearing are not that important; the important senses are feeling, touching, tasting. It's not so much about understanding as experiencing; we've got to experience what's happening rather than try to rationally work it out. While John does a lot of explaining in this and a lot of very practical advice is given in this work, this is not up in the air, it's a very practical book and in many respects very down to earth. It is advice for those who are experiencing this, not for those who stay outside; it pulls us in, it pulls us into this. So it's about experiencing, it brings us into an experience; shows it to us, gives us pictures, images, sounds, taste, the feel of something. It's awakening us, raising our awareness of the profound realities or the profound presence of God and what that means or what it

*The Living Flame of Love*

implies for us as people – a God who, in the words of John's gospel, has chosen to come and live within us, make his home in us and everything that that means and implies for us.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/KlIBsxSd5oQ>*

12<sup>th</sup> December 2014

### **Third Talk** *Main themes*

So we're looking at St John of the Cross' *Living Flame* and last night I gave an overall introduction and background to this work and where it fits in John's teaching, his thinking and a little about how we might approach it. What I want to do this morning is to look at some of the main themes that are running through this work and I have given here on this page a list which I have borrowed from Federico Ruiz, one of my professors in Rome many years ago.

First of all I want to recap a little bit from last night on how we need to approach this work, the *Flame*. As I said, it is a work of art, and like any work of art it is showing us something rather than explaining it to us, we're shown something and we draw from what we're shown. We can come back to a great work of art over and over again and it will speak to us in a way that is new and how it will speak to us will be so much dependent on where I am and the eye and the mind that is taking in what's being shown. John demonstrates this for us in his Prologue that just as he, in order to write this, needed to be in a state of recollection, so also must the reader. We have got to approach this in a spirit of prayer; an openness; because it's a work of art, but it's not a work of art that we can casually observe, it's like a great work of music that draws us in, that draws us into an experience. When we allow a great work of music to draw us in, we become part of the experience. It's not something that's happening 'out there' anymore but something that we're a part of and that's what this work is – we need to become a part of it. This work is a celebration of what God does and it's particularly a celebration of the fulfilment of those words in John's gospel: *and the Father, Son and Spirit will come and dwell in the person who loves me*. It's a celebration of the fulfilment of those words – the Trinity now lives within the person. As John said in his introduction to this poem, they are the stanzas that speak from that place where God and the soul, or we could say the Trinity and the deepest centre of the person, that deepest centre, that place of profound truth within each one of us; where that place of profound truth meets with God and meets with God who is Father, Son and Spirit and the dynamics – the force, the power of that meeting – is love. We will look at this later this morning.

So this work is a celebration of that, and I want to have a look this morning at the themes on the page that I have given you. And like everything with John and the *Living Flame*, every word we use is inadequate and I am rather uncomfortable using the word *themes* here because that's not really what they are, they are more like profound truths that are interwoven into this work, like a fabric where various threads are interwoven into it. John is not explaining any of this and that is not the intention. The intention is to draw our attention to the truth of this, draw our attention to the reality and most importantly to draw our attention to the power and what that is doing in us, what that changes for us, both in how we see ourselves, how we see all that is around us, how we relate and who and how God is for us. So for the want of a better word I call them the main themes of the work.

So to briefly run through them:



**The mystery of the blessed Trinity, dwelling within, communicating itself, transforming and giving the light to the soul.**

We need to be careful how we understand the word *soul*. I think nowadays we see it in a less rich way than when John was writing this nearly 450 years ago. In the light of how we now understand things it might be better to see it as the person, or the true person. We tend to see the soul as one dimension or one aspect of a person, and it's not; John's intention is not that - it is the whole person, but the whole person living from that deepest place within. So maybe it's something like the true person, or the person living the fullness of the truth of who he or she is. We need to be alert to that and not reduce or impoverish the meaning of that word; sometimes we do and sometimes people who write about John of the Cross even do that.

This is the Trinity, living within. Now that's not just something spatial, that's where the person is. Living is a word that is filled with meaning in the context of the *Flame*, drawing life from, expressing who one is, so it is the life of the Trinity. Everything in this work is dynamic; there's nothing static here; everything is on fire here. So this is the Trinity living within the person, the fullness of life of God within the person - communicating itself - Father, Son and Spirit communicating itself and that's where the work is taking us, to that communication. So it's not just the Trinity there, living there; the Trinity is communicating to the person, to the soul and what it is communicating is the life of the Trinity - communicating its own life - it's transforming every dimension of the person. Again the image of fire brings this out - fire pulls everything in, fire transforms everything - you can't be in a fire and not be burned by it, so the fire is transforming everything here and it's giving the light, celebrating - everything here is a celebration. This work takes us to all sorts of places, sometimes very painful places - it's this same flame that does all the transforming, the purifying, the healing, but it's a celebration of that. Whatever is the work of God, of the Trinity must be celebrated, whatever God is doing, celebrate it, even when it is painful and challenging and disturbing and bewildering, celebrate it - it's a celebration, so this work is the Trinity and the soul celebrating. But it's the mystery of the Trinity; this work is profoundly mysterious and the more we know God, the more mysterious God becomes. So it is the mystery of the Trinity, that's why we observe it, allow ourselves to be drawn into it and experience it. As I said last night, the important words here are *taste, touch, feel, experience*, rather than *understand, see, or hear* - these being words in the mind, which limit us. We can taste, feel, and experience what we do not need to understand or cannot understand or we can let go of the understanding of it. So this is a profound encounter with the mystery of the Trinity, because that's what Jesus in the gospel said will happen to anyone who enters into this relationship of love with him, this is what happens.

The second strand we have running through this:

**The foundation of this human interiority revealed and empowered by the presence of God.**

Now we're in the depths of the human person, the reality of what it means to be human. The presence of God tells us who we are and takes us right to those very foundations of who we are, the very depths and truth of who we are. Just as God, Trinity, become more and more mysterious and bigger and bigger and bigger here, so also does the human person. There are depths, and this work takes us into the deepest centre of the person, and John tells us that that's where we meet God. It's the presence of God in the deepest centre of the person. That's what reveals to us what it

means to be human, who we are as human beings. But it doesn't just reveal it, it empowers it, but it's an empowering that is paradoxical - we have to be careful how we understand it - it's the power that comes from God's presence; not human power, it's a letting go of human power or a purification of anything we might consider to be power at a human level. It brings out dimensions of the human person that otherwise remain hidden, impoverished, that never grow or mature. We see this at a human level: there are many dimensions - physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially - and if any particular dimension doesn't grow, the whole person is impoverished. But the most fundamental dimension of the human person that needs to grow is the spirit, and here we are touching the heights of spiritual maturity and when we touch those heights of spiritual maturity we see a fullness of human maturity, dimensions of what it is to be human that are otherwise not seen and they grow from the deepest centre within the person and it is the presence of God there that reveals and empowers us, makes this happen.

The third thread here:

**The attitude of adoration and praise on the part of the human person.**

Stand back here – adoration and praise of what's happening. I mentioned last night the word *glory*, such an important word in this work because that's the word that indicates the presence of God. We're in the atmosphere or the environment of God here, we're breathing the air of God, so the right attitude for us as people is adoration and praise.

It's linked with the next thread:

**The silence of prayer**

Which first and foremost is love. The silence of prayer, that's put beautifully, because it is not prayer in silence, it's a silence that is very profound, it's not an external silence. I mentioned last night that John of the Cross wrote this work in fourteen days when he was very busy and occupied with a whole lot of other things, so he didn't have much, if any, external silence when he was writing this, but rather it is another kind of silence, it's a silence of one's thoughts, one's ideas, any kind of input on the part of the person, a silence of everything that is not of God. First and foremost is love – prayer here is love, but the way that the person loves in the *Flame* is receiving, it is all receiving. So prayer here is receiving, prayer here is all in God through the silence of prayer. There is no longer anything of what I want or think should be, but God. It's praying in the love and in the words of God.

Next thread:

**Active passivity in receiving and collaborating with the Holy Spirit**

At the very beginning of this work John tells us that the Holy Spirit is the *Flame*, and that imagery – the Acts of the Apostles, the spirit came as fire – spirit is the flame, but also the flame is the Trinity – you cannot have one without the other. This is a work of the Holy Spirit and I think those two words *active passivity* probably go as close as one can to expressing what needs to be expressed because it is receiving the work of the Spirit – the Spirit is doing everything here – but it is not passivity - the person isn't just sitting there and with Holy Spirit dropping down on top of the person – it's not that. That's why the image of fire is so good here - fire is active, the spirit lights the fire, the fire sits the in flames but the fire goes out to others, sets other things on fire, sparks fly from it, other fires come; so it's an active receiving - an active receiving and an active collaborating and it's collaborating at a very profound level –

the Spirit doesn't force himself on anybody. This collaborating takes a lifetime of learning, the person here is so totally open to what the Spirit is doing, receiving and collaborating with the Holy Spirit in every dimension of the person.

And the final one of these themes:

**The ever renewed demand of the Cross as a preparation for Christian love and its realisation**

That is very well put. The Cross is everywhere here in the *Flame*. There is nowhere where a person can be in the spiritual life where the Cross is absent and here in this sentence we have a few pointers: *ever renewed demand* – so it's going to be something new that's asked. The Cross is always asking something new, leading us to somewhere new, it will manifest itself in new ways and the Cross is two things here – it's the preparation for Christian love. We know that from the gospels and the New Testament – there's no Christianity, there's no Christian love before the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity is post-resurrection; Christianity is post-Cross; the Cross is the preparation, is the journey into Christianity, into Christian life. The Cross shows us what Christian love is, it brings us to that point where Christian love can begin. So here in the person, in the soul, the encounter with the Cross in whatever form that takes in the person's life, that's what enables the person to love in a Christian way, that is what brings the person to the point of Christian love, which is what the person is doing here and living here. But there's a further stage to that, the Cross is also the realisation of Christian love, all of Christian love is in some way the Cross, part of the Cross; it's living some dimension of the Cross. To love in a Christian way requires something of the self-giving generosity of the radical love that the Cross is. So here in this *Living Flame*, the Cross is ever present and is revealing the full truth or dimension of Christian love. Or perhaps I should put that better, making possible Christian love in what it really is, because without the Cross it just would not be possible.

So these are strands, threads, themes that are interwoven in this work; they are not explained, rather our hearts are drawn to them, or we're drawn into the truth of them, the truth of them is in some way revealed to us. As I said, this list is very good, I couldn't come up with anything better than this and there are so many other things that one could add to this list; we could never stop creating a list like this, there is just so much left there, but at least I think it gives us some idea, somewhere to begin from.

What I want to do in the remaining sessions is to simply dip in and look at certain aspects of this flame. As I said last night, the four stanzas, each of them in different ways is showing us a variety of dimensions of this way. And so in the other sessions I am just going to pick out some of these; it will be a bit at random because it's impossible to look at everything, but the intention I would have in mind is in some way to give some pointers or indicators so that you can read this, listen to it, appreciate it, experience it yourselves, prayerfully and hopefully in a way that's rich and enlightening.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/xxpk1s1YeLg>*

13<sup>th</sup> December 2014

#### **Fourth talk** *The flame and the deepest centre*

I said I would dip into this work and explore certain aspects of it, so what I want to do in this session is explore two aspects of Stanza 1: the flame itself, what the flame is; and then, the deepest centre, two aspects that I have already mentioned, but we need to go a bit further into it to get a sense of what's involved here.

I will begin with how John opens his commentary: *The soul now feels that it is all inflamed in the divine union, its palate is all bathed in glory and love, that the intimate part of its substance it is flooded no less than rivers of glory, abounding in delights, and from its depths flow rivers of living water [Jn.7:38], which the Son of God declared will rise up in such souls. It seems, because it is so forcefully transformed in God, so sublimely possessed by Him, and arrayed with such rich gifts and virtues, that it is singularly close to beatitude – so close that only a thin veil separates it.* [Living Flame, Stanza 1, para1]

So that paragraph one could say is a summary of this whole work in that place where, on the one hand, there is only a thin veil separating the soul from eternal life, but on the other hand, the person is living the fullness of life here in this world and that's brought about by the flame. Right throughout the whole of this work, we have the flame doing all sorts of different things. Primarily, here at the beginning, everything the flame does is somehow contained in this one glory. It's a word that holds all of what the flame does.

*And the soul sees that every time the delicate flame of love, burning within, assails it, it does so as though glorifying it with gentle and powerful glory. Such is the glory this flame of love imparts that each time it absorbs and attacks, it seems that it is about to give eternal life and tear the veil of mortal life, that little is lacking and that because of this lack, the soul does not receive eternal glory completely.*

So we have this flame that absorbs and attacks, these are words that somehow say something of the human experience of this flame. What the flame is in reality doing is imparting love, it is always imparting love, however it is experienced. So on the one hand there is only the thin veil separating the soul from eternal life - on the other hand the person is living very strong desires, ardent desire, we're told; there isn't a sense of fulfilment here. The soul tells the flame, the Holy Spirit, to tear the veil of mortal life – that's the end of the first line. So on the one hand the person is at a spiritual level, because they are experiencing God so strongly and so profoundly – there's only a thin veil – yet at the same time the person is living this fullness of desire for God because that cannot be fulfilled in this life.

So, to come to this flame, the flame is the Holy Spirit and it's the work of the Holy Spirit and in this first stanza the soul is praying to the Holy Spirit. The way he puts it: *it intimates and stresses its tremendous desire, persuading love to lose it, to let it be free. The Holy Spirit at work in the person - and that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life.*

So what happens? What is this flame doing that the soul is reaching out to here? I will just pick out a few things here – it makes the person *love most sublimely* – John

uses very strong terminology here – the kind of love that this flame creates when it has done its work increases the capacity for love that the person has. I will just read how he puts it:

*Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love: the interior acts he produces shoot up flames, for they are acts of inflamed love in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely.*

[LF stanza:1: para 3]

It is the Holy Spirit doing this; the fire has taken over, the log of wood has been completely taken into this fire, and so now it is giving out fire, a most sublime love, a love that in some way touches upon God's love. So the flame enables or allows or sets the person free – whatever words we want to use – to love in this sublime way.

The second thing I would pick out here about what the flame does is that it transforms how the person hears God, and the illustration John gives here is a little passage from Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. As you go through this chapter, which is principally on the Eucharist, the words of Jesus become more sublime as it goes on, but less and less people stay with Jesus; the more sublime the words of Jesus become the more people reject him and turn against him. But what the Holy Spirit does here transforms the way that the person hears, so that the person is able to hear the true Word of God. It is the Spirit that enables this. *These words are perceived by souls who have ears to hear them, those souls, as I say, that are cleansed and enamored* - those who have been purified by this fire so that love has been set alight in them. They are able to hear the Word of God - *the language and the words of God speaks in these souls* - so they are able to hear the Word of God. John goes on to clarify this: *Those who do not relish the language God speaks within them must not think on this account that others do not taste it.* These are not words in any vocal sense, but this deep presence of the Spirit causes God to be heard in a much deeper and newer way. So God is heard.

The third point about the flame I would pick out here: *Thus it refers to this flame as living, not because the flame is not always living but because of this effect; it makes the soul live in God spiritually and experience the life of God... The spirit and the senses, transformed in God, enjoy him in a living way.* The word *living* is very important in the first line of the poem: *O living flame of love* – love that is alive, love that is filled with life, love that is brought to life by God. The whole experience of God in this work is of a living God and living in two ways – living within the person and bringing the person to life - the life that the person lives is the life of God and indeed it becomes the one life, the life of God within, that is what the person is living now. And while perhaps we can accept this in some theoretical way – if some wonderful book or document or theologian tells us this, we might accept it, but accepting it in the reality of our lives is actually very challenging. This is a God that we can no longer put in a particular place or define in a particular way or see according to anything we have been taught, this is a God that is much more profoundly personal and deeply interwoven or integrated into the life that the person is living, or indeed, we need to go further with that and say that the very life the person is living is the life of God. The difficulty with that is that from a human perspective we often find ourselves in water with nothing to hold on to. Where's God in this? The reality is that God is like the air that we are breathing, we don't see him, we have little awareness that he is there. Air is probably not the right image - he is

even more hidden than that, more transparent than that, so this *living flame* is a very important concept that John is drawing our attention to. Everything about this God is living, God is living within us, but like this fire is constantly changing, evolving and acting, but always elusive. So this flame of love that's alive, this living God, as John tells us here is *nothing less than a glimpse of eternity*, but of course we can't take that in with our human limitations. So those are just a few aspects of this flame that is the Holy Spirit - active, operating, transforming, cleansing in the deepest centre, and the deepest centre is the place where everything in this work takes place, because that's where God is and that's where we are, that's where the deepest truth of ourselves lives. As with everything, John struggles to explain this - what is it? where is it? Because none of our usual words take us there - even soul or spirit - yes, yes, but... And of course it's not actually a place in any sense that we understand what a place is, it is something much bigger than that.

*This feast*, this festival, because everything here is a festival, a celebration - *takes place in the substance of the soul where neither the centre of the senses nor the devil can reach*. [LF stanza:1 para:9] So it is a place, the centre of the senses - that's another term - what does he mean by that? What he is trying to say is that nothing that can be perceived by our senses can reach this place within us. Nothing - neither the internal senses nor the exterior senses nor the psyche, though he wouldn't have known that word - nothing, emotions, anything, can reach this place within us, neither can the devil, neither can evil, neither can any other external force other than God can reach there. And because of this, *therefore the more interior it is, the more secure, substantial and delightful*. So nothing else can get in there, therefore so nothing can disturb this, yet it is also substantial, it is real and delightful. *Because the more interior it is, the purer it is and the greater the purity, the more abundantly, frequently and generously God communicates himself*. Because clearly if nothing can get in there, nothing can disturb, interrupt, or compromise God's communicating. But John goes on: *thus the delight and joy of the soul is so much more intense, because God is the doer of all without the soul doing anything itself*. Since the soul cannot do any work of its own because anything - the soul, the person, even the greatest depths the person - can reach themselves, they can only operate with the senses, with what is human, and there is nothing human here. *So its sole occupation now, he said, is to receive from God, who alone can move the soul and do his work in its depths*. So this is the place deep within where only God can work, nothing the person does themselves can anywhere reach this place within, only God. But when God works there, everything, the whole person, is changed and transformed by it. So everything here is about receiving and that requires a great level of humility, letting go, because there's always the human inclination to want to do a bit, want to control, want to know, want to have power, want to be involved, want this in some way to be mine, to possess it. All of those tendencies have been purified by the flame, therefore the person now has the freedom and the openness and the humility to receive what God is giving them from within. So it is from the deepest centre, we could say, that the true self is born. The person is set free and becomes alive.

Since by saying that the flame wounds in its deepest centre the soul indicates that it has other less profound centres. John is struggling all the time to tell us that this is deeper than anything we can imagine or think about in any way. But what is it? On the one hand, yes, it is the deepest and truest dimension of us as people, as human beings, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, but it is also, and much

more importantly, he tells us, the soul's centre is God. It's not just where God is in some kind of spatial sense, but it *is* God. That's a very strong term. He doesn't mean that somehow or other we become part of God or are absorbed into God, that's not what it is, but it is God. Let's let John explain a little bit what he means: *When it – that's the soul, the person, the deepest centre of the person - has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest centre in God, it will know, love, and enjoy God with all its might*, [LF Stanza:1 para:12] will know, love and enjoy God with all its strength, all its ability. This in terms of relationship; it has become one with God; all its being and the strength of its operation – everything now is at one with God. And so on the one hand, the person here is living and operating from there, and on the other hand, the person really doesn't reach their deepest centre until the next life. They can go always deeper into God, there's always further to be gone. So, to give us a sense of what's meant here: *...love is the inclination, strength and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it with God. The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centres itself in him. We can say that there are as many centres in God possible to the soul, each one deeper than the other, as there are degrees of love of God possible to it*. [LF Stanza:1 para:13] See what is going on here - the deepest centre of the person, and now he is talking about the deepest centre of God and actually they are the one reality. Very difficult for us to logically work this out in our heads in any sort of human way but that's the experience, the reality, because of the depths of the relationship made possible by the Trinity that lives within a person. John is at the very edges of language here, at the very edges of ideas or images that he can come up with to try and explain this. There's God in the deepest, deepest, deepest centre of the human being - wherever that is - deeper than anything else can reach and the person going deeper and deeper into God, yet it is the same reality that he is speaking about, it's not two separate journeys or two separate places, but the one reality, the one action of the flame here. And it is always the carrying through, we might say, the logical consequences of what Jesus says in the gospel, how Jesus describes his relationship with the Father and the relationship that he and the Father – the Trinity – desire, want, wish, long, to have with us, dwell in us and we dwell in them. So what John is attempting to do here is say to us *yes, this is real* – it's not out there somewhere, but it's real in you and you and you and me and all of us and all brought about by this flame.

So, this deepest centre: *Hence for the soul to be in its centre - which is God, as we have said - it is sufficient for it to possess one degree of love, for by one degree alone it is united with him through grace. Should it have two degrees, it becomes united and concentrated in God in another deeper centre*. [LF Stanza 1, para 13] So any little bit of love unites one with God – so there are deeper and deeper centres, so any little bit at all unites one with God, because God is love. But here now, when someone has the final degree, *God's love has arrived at wounding the soul in its ultimate and deepest centre, which is to illuminate it and transform it in its whole being, power, and and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God*. [LF stanza 1, para 13] Just think about that sentence for a moment – *its whole being, power and strength* - there's an echo there of a very famous line in the scriptures from the Book of Deuteronomy the famous command of God to Israel: *you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength*. [Deut 6:5] And in John of the Cross' other work, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John tells us there that in that line is contained everything he would want to

teach the spiritual person. There, to the people of Israel, in the Book of Deuteronomy, God gave the one command, the command that summarises everything of the call of the people of Israel to be God's people. And John says in that is contained everything he would want to teach. Though John doesn't refer to it here, the words are virtually identical. It's the fulfilment of that commandment, the fulfilment of that commandment that's at the heart of the scriptures and that Jesus in the gospel picks out as being the most important commandment, and he then adds one from Leviticus - to love one's neighbour as oneself - but that is implied in the Deuteronomy quote, because if one loves God with all one's power and strength and being, as John of the Cross is showing us here, then the flame goes forth, loving as God loves, the world, creation, everything as God loves, because it is coming from, and they are living from the deepest centre, which is God.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/p2joncjtU>

13<sup>th</sup> December 2014



### **Fifth talk** *The healing flame*

What I want to do this time is look at the second stanza, the beginning part of it and we could say that it is the part about the flame healing. I will just read it as we have it here:

*O sweet cautery,  
O delightful wound!  
O gentle hand! O delicate touch  
that tastes of eternal life  
and pays every debt!  
In killing you changed death to life.*

That might pass over our heads nowadays, but I think somebody in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain who would hear that, a shudder would come down their spine at the thought of this cautery, this cauterizing device. Doctors and nurses nowadays are very gentle, but the healing methods – Britain was the same – were a little short of cruelty and sometimes more akin to a form of butchery than real medicine and a few years later John of the Cross in the last few months of his life – the kind of medical treatment he received was just horrific.

He's starting off here with this cauterizing, this *sweet cautery*, *this delicate wound*, *the gentle hand*, *delicate touch*. If we are to get a sense of what John is conveying here, we have got to, in a sense, put ourselves into that world and the imagery that John is using. Somebody puts the device into the fire and applying it to whatever part of the body they think needs it, and quite literally burning the person. That's the imagery that John is using in this first part of this second stanza and we need to be aware of that.

This comes to the part where this flame heals. I will first look at his summary and then I want to look particularly at the cautery and the wound. *In this stanza the soul proclaims how the three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are the ones who effect this divine work of union in it. Thus the hand, the cautery, and the touch are in substance the same. The soul applies these terms to the Persons of the Trinity because of the effects each of the Persons produces. The cautery is the Holy Spirit, the hand is the Father, the touch is the Son. The soul here magnifies the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, stressing the three admirable favours and blessings they produce in it, having changed its death to life, transforming it in the Trinity.* Transformation is taking place here and changing death into life. A total transformation. Here the emphasis is upon what the Trinity is doing in the soul, but we need to be careful here: language can mislead us. Yes, this is the Trinity healing, touching, delicacy, wounding, but not something outside of ourselves but it is from within. To illustrate what I mean – when a doctor working on somebody it's another person, whereas here the doctor has gone into the person, has become the person, he's one with the person, so the healing that is taking place here is a healing from within, brought about by the inner union, the presence of the Trinity. One needs to carefully read this to see how John is conveying this in various ways.

Yes, the soul is, as we saw in the previous stanza, receiving, is being healed, is growing, is changing and is already united with the Trinity. We will see how John tries to express this for us. He has tried to express, stated for us, shown us the presence of the Trinity that comes and lives within the person. Now the Trinity is showing the effects of its presence by the healing and transformation that's taking place. And so we've got the wound, what he calls *this delightful wound*; we've got *this delicate touch* that somehow tastes of eternal life, that tastes of something that's beyond the life we've got here, and the transformation: *this gentle hand*, the gift that all debts are paid.

So now let's look a little bit closer at this cautery, which in John's time used not very pleasant instruments for healing. I suppose it either healed you or killed you - one or the other - and that's what John is saying. Playing with death changing into life, the person is either healed or dies here when this cautery is applied. He is using it as the image to try and convey to us the work of the Holy Spirit. So this fire of love, being of infinite power can inestimably consume and transform into itself the soul it touches. Fire consumes, fire burns up, can take completely into itself and transform with just a little touch. If the touch is a bit too strong, the person is dead. The touch has to be extremely gentle; this is a touch with a fire that is infinitely powerful. *Yet he burns each soul according to its preparation. He will burn one more, another less, and this he does insofar as he desires and how and when he desires. When he wills to touch somewhat vehemently, the soul's burning reaches such a high degree of love that seems to surpass all the fires of the world, because he is an infinite fire of love. As a result of this union the soul calls the Holy Spirit a cautery.* Because it is nothing - a gentlest little touch heals everything - there is no other wound that couldn't be healed because of this. John goes on to clarify it a little bit here: *it's a wonderful thing and worth relating that since this fire of God is so mighty, it would consume a thousand worlds more easily than the fire of this earth would burn up a straw. It does not consume and destroy the soul in which it so burns and it does not afflict it, rather, commensurate with the strength of the love, it divinises and delights it, burning gently within it.* It may appear to, it may seem to a person going through the healing, the painful process of healing, in whatever form that healing is taking, but it never does. It is gentle and it is always in accordance with the person's strength. God never asks one to carry something that one cannot carry or takes one to a place that one can't endure, even though it may seem like that to the person at the time. God doesn't; this is a gentle God.

He speaks about this wound, because that was the method of healing - you healed by wounding. The person has a wound, which would be cauterized, which would effectively create a bigger wound to heal the previous wound. That was the logic of these methods and as I said, sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. John is applying it here to all the need of healing that a human being has, from wherever that need of healing comes. *Whether a soul is wounded by other wounds of miseries and sins or whether it is healthy, this cautery of love immediately effects a wound of love in the one it touches and these wounds deriving from other causes become wounds of love.* Transforming the wounds that a person has, they become the very place of healing. He uses here the term *immediately* because - as I mentioned last night in introducing this work - there's a timelessness in this work, because it is all focussing upon the work of God and God is always outside of time. But when we're reading it clearly - and this is the very clever way that John has written this - it's all in the

present, but we look back to the past and we go forward to the future yet everything is happening at a level that's above that or beyond that, in the timelessness that is God. Applied to this process of healing here, when John says the Holy Spirit just does this, we could think it happens immediately, but in the life of a person this could take a whole lifetime. But the principle remains the same – the place of woundedness is the place of healing and that's where the Holy Spirit is going to work, that's where the flame is going to work; but of course the person has to co-operate with this and perhaps over the long period of time it takes to come to the point where they can fully co-operate with the work of the Holy Spirit it will involve going to those very painful places, at times those very painful places will become even more painful as one exposes them to the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Just like a wound that is infected or septic, getting gangrenous or whatever, when this cauterizer is applied to it, it will heal it, it will purify it, it will burn off whatever is infected, but it will cause greater pain for a while, maybe for a long time, but that is the healing process, that's how it will appear to the person. So the wound of love that he speaks about here in such gentle and beautiful terms in the reality of human life can appear to the person to be very, very painful and it will be, but this is the place of healing. The Spirit has to come into these places, they have to be exposed to him in order to be healed. And as I said, the way it is spoken about here, it is a looking back on it, it is a celebration, but we mustn't see it in some kind of idealized way. This can be a long process, a painful process, but it's the wound of love.

Yet there is a difference between this loving cautery – that's the Holy Spirit – and the cautery produced by material fire, which all John's readers will be very aware of. There is a difference – the wound left by material fire is only curable by other medicines, whereas the wound affected by the cautery of love is incurable through medicine, but the very cautery that causes it cures it and by curing it causes it. As often as the cautery of love touches the wound of love it causes a deeper wound of love and thus the more it wounds, the more it cures and heals.

Those of you familiar with John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle* will see this idea played out through the whole canticle. At the beginning, the very first stanza, the person is wounded with love and nothing will heal this wound. The person goes on a frantic search for the lover – *the stag that has fled* – but nothing works, she can search for the lover - among creation, people, everywhere - but nothing, only the Beloved can cure this wound of love. But it is the wound of love that has awakened the person and inspired them to go on the spiritual journey and in the Canticle it's a long spiritual journey. Here, of course, we are looking at it in the context of timelessness of the flame. John is writing the *Flame* for people who are already familiar with his *Canticle*, so they will immediately know when he speaks about this wound of love that it's not some instant thing. When the person is touched by the wound of love there is a long process of searching, because nothing will fulfil the person except the love of God, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, however we put it. So this can only be healed by the one who has caused it, but in the dynamics of the *Canticle*, the one who has caused it remains elusive for so long, until the person has been changed and transformed and is able to then meet.

Here's how he puts it in the *Flame*: *The more wounded the lover, the healthier the lover is* - because the more the lover has been touched by this love, though it may not seem like this for a long time. *The more wounded, the more it feels the need. It is*

*part of this process of love growing by absence, emptiness, need, desire. So the more wounded it is, the healthier the lover is, and a cure caused by love is to wound and inflict wound upon wound to such an extent that the entire soul is dissolved into a wound of love. And now all cauterised and made one wound of love is completely healthy in love because it is transformed into love.* There is a profound paradox at the base of that; it is completely transformed into love by this working of the Holy Spirit that brings about this healing. *This is what is understood by the wound of which the soul, all wounded and all healthy, – it's all wounded and all healthy at the one time.* So many things here are paradoxical, the more it is in need of the healing, the more healthy it is - the complete opposite to the way it would operate in the physical, because the more wounded it is – the wounding has been done by the Holy Spirit - the more it is absorbed into the Holy Spirit. *Even though the soul is all wounded and all healthy, the cautery of love does not fail to fulfil its task, which is to touch and wound with love. Being wholly delightful and completely sound, the wound brings delight just as a good doctor usually does.* Now he addresses the wound: *Oh then, wound, so much more delightful as the fire of love that causes higher and most sublime, the Holy Spirit produces it only for the sake of giving delight and it is His will to delight the soul is great. This wound will be great and extremely delightful - so it is a celebration of this total healing that takes place – oh then delightful wound, so much more sublimely delightful the more the cautery touches the intimate centre, the substance of the soul.* Trying to find language that will bring us there - that is where it happens, that is why everything is healed from there. *For this cautery is a touch only of divinity in the soul without any intellectual or imaginative form or figure – so there's no way of knowing this in any way except through its effects, through the healing that has taken place.* The person's wounds that have been healed, the lifetime wounds and struggles that the person has carried have been healed. They have been done so by a touch that is totally unknown at any physical or psychological level. It is a healing that cannot happen in any other way. All the wounds of a person, whatever they have been, however deep-rooted they may have been, however painful they were, however debilitating they were, they have been healed. Not physical wounds of course, but psychological wounds, moral wounds, sinfulness - whatever kind of wounds they have been. They might be physical as well, miracles, but usually they are the more deeply spiritual ones that happen here, that this presence of the Trinity brings about in that deepest centre.

Notice here, particularly in this stanza, but indeed right throughout, the strong emphasis here upon touch, experience, feeling - the gentle hand, the delicate touch - this is what is experienced. He finishes this stanza in celebration because this is what is to be celebrated – the wounds, the healing that the Spirit brings about and so he finishes his commentary in wonderful celebration: *there is no need to be amazed that the soul so frequently walks amidst this joy, jubilation, fruition and praise of God. Besides the knowledge it has of the favours received, it feels in this state that God is so solicitous in regaling it with precious, delicate and enhancing words and extoling it by various favours as if He has no one else in the world to favour or anything else to do that everything is for the soul alone.* So in this second stanza John is pointing out this aspect of healing which is a very important aspect for all of us in our life. We cannot come to God without being healed, we cannot come to God without allowing Him to heal us.

*The Living Flame of Love*

Here in this *Flame* John is bringing us into the celebration of healing. And as he is doing all the time, he is simply pointing us to this, pointing us to this effect of the presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the deepest centre of the person.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk:* <https://youtu.be/SY1uKMKI0W4>

13<sup>th</sup> December 2014

## **Sixth talk *The Lamps***

As I have been doing in each of these sessions is just picking out some things, not attempting, as I said before, to give a comprehensive explanation of this work, rather, in a sense I am doing what John himself is doing in his commentary, alerting you to various things, drawing attention to them, as we are dealing with material that is impossible to explain without entering into the depths.

This morning we are picking out two aspects from the third stanza. John begins his commentary on the stanza by saying something that he has already said – if people haven't got experience they could misinterpret this or think it is very obscure or not what it is meant to be or less than what it is; so he prays for God's help to help him explain something of the meaning of this stanza. We find that everywhere because what he is doing in these stanzas is taking us deeply into some aspect of the flame. It is not a progression but rather dip in here, dip in there and sense something of the depths and the riches of what is going on in this union of love between the Father, Son and Spirit and the soul which they inhabit and live and the soul which they bring to life. And here in this third stanza we see something of this bringing to life, particularly in the image of the lamps. John uses this image of the lamps to try and convey something of the life that the presence and power and love of God gives to the person or maybe, put differently, how this light is experienced. But first of all he tells us that in this union, it – the soul, the person – is receiving abundant and lofty knowledge of God. The difficulty that we have, as people within the limits of our humanity and of our world and of our experience is that that abundant and lofty knowledge of God always seems to be obscure, beyond us. We will misinterpret it, we will put our own interpretation, our own meaning onto it, we will miss it completely or see it as the complete opposite of what it actually is. And so the two images that I am picking out here are ways in which John brings us into something of the experience of this abundant and lofty knowledge that God is giving us. And we might say the principle behind this – everything is told, everything is communicated here around the principles of love – how love operates.

As John tells us elsewhere, love is God's language. God is always speaking the language of love and in order to hear God we have got to listen in the language of love. And so the principle here of the language of love that we've got is this: *true lovers are only content when they employ all they are in themselves, all they are worth, have and receive in the Beloved and the greater all this is, the more satisfaction they receive in giving it.* So that's a principle of love at every level. True love - when love is truthful - is only content when all that the lovers are in themselves, their worth, all that they have, all that they receive in the Beloved, their whole being is employed in the Beloved. And the greater this is the more satisfaction they receive in giving. So here we have this principle we might say, pushed to its very limits, the very limits possible in human experience and limits that take one to the very edge, that place which is in a sense almost touching eternal life when the human being is set free from the restraints and limitations of human life and can actually enter fully into this. But here John is trying to convey something of what this is when it is pushed to

the limits possible in human experience and it can only be brought to this place in relationship with God. Human relationships, relationships between lovers will always aspire to this, yes, and with very good relationships will go a lot of the way towards it. But the relationship with God is bigger than this, because one is receiving a love that is beyond human limitations and therefore it will bring out in the person greater depths and more abundant generosity. But that also affects every other relationship, because when the capacity for love increases, that capacity for love is seen everywhere this person gives love.

And here we come to the lamps. John always has wonderful images; the lamps are light that is given out from the flame; they are like other flames that the flame will light up. And John tells us that these lamps have two properties: they transmit light and they give off warmth – light and heat. To understand the lamps, John has to tell us something of the nature of God, what John calls the attributes of God; that's a phrase that comes from philosophy and theology that John would have learned at university. John gives a few examples here: God is all wise, good, he is merciful, just, powerful, loving and as John says here there are other infinite attributes and powers that we have no knowledge of. God is all of these and the fullness of all of these, but we experience them individually – wisdom, power, justice or love, and we will experience them as something of God because they are attributes of God. So when these lamps are lit up in a person, then the person is giving forth something of God. *Each of these attributes, John tells us, is a lamp that enlightens the soul and gives off the warmth of love.* So the person receives light, wisdom, insight, knowledge, and it is giving off warmth – it is communicating love and affection and this comes from God, so this is God communicating himself, his very being and the person is communicating this.

There are so many examples of this: *He is also to the soul a lamp of justice, fortitude and mercy and of all the other attributes are represented to it together in God. The light communicated to it from all these attributes together is enveloped in the warmth of love of God by which it loves him because he is all these things. In this communication and manifestation of himself to the soul, which in my opinion is the greatest possible in this life, he is to it innumerable lamps, giving forth knowledge and love of Himself.* So the person is receiving knowledge and love of God and is giving that out in these attributes, because the person is now united with God, who is the fullness of all of these. It's this principle of love that all his being, all that the lover has, is, possesses, is given to the beloved and so God is experienced. To come back to what I said at the beginning, the difficulty here is that because of our limited humanity, we can't have direct access to God but what we have are these attributes. Love, wisdom and all of these attributes are coming from the presence of God within the person and the person will be living and acting out that presence.

The principal image of this stanza is the caverns, these vast empty caverns within. This is how it is experienced by a person. By this image of the caverns, these infinite caverns, John is trying to convey the infinite capacity a person has for God. The caverns are the human capacity for God, the capacity for a relationship with God. How can the infinite dwell in someone as finite and limited as a human being? What has been going on all the time in this work is that, on the one hand we have the infinite God, the all powerful, all merciful, all loving God united with the limited human being, limited in himself, limited in his capacity, limited in experience, limited

with all of the limitations that go with being human. But the God that is in relationship with the soul here cannot be limited and therefore the soul must have the capacity to relate with his God, hence this journey or this process of growing, healing, maturing, purification that's going on that's needed to increase the capacity for God. That's the image of these caverns, these vast empty caverns that have to be emptied. So the more empty a person feels within, the closer they are to God. It's this principle, when a person feels close to God, they're not, because whatever they are feeling close to, it's not God, because a person cannot feel God or feel closeness to God. But whenever a person is touched by some experience of God, God will seem further away; the closer a person is, the further away from God the person will feel, because they will be getting some sense of the vastness of God and the limits of themselves. The more God communicates himself, the greater the distance seems to the person. And now, here in these caverns, we have that pushed to its limits; the person feeling totally empty within, yet not filled with God. *When these caverns are empty and pure, the thirst, hunger and yearning of the spiritual feeling is intolerable. Since these caverns have deep stomachs, they suffer profoundly; for the food they lack, which as I say is God, is also profound.* So these caverns have to be emptied, purged, cleansed, he tells us, of every affection for creatures. *They do not feel the vast emptiness of their capacity until this happens. Any little thing that adheres to them in this life is sufficient to so burden and bewitch them that they do not perceive the harm or note the lack of the immense good or know their own capacity.* So when a person is attached to something or limited in some way they don't see their lack; so what the light is doing is showing the person what they're lacking and that's how we human beings are shown what we're lacking, and the capacity that needs to expand here.

This is the heart of the third stanza. What John calls the spiritual appetite is: *emptied and purged of every creature and affection for creatures, and since it has lost its natural quality and has adapted to the divine, and since its void is disposed and the divine is not communicated to it in union with God, the pain of this void and the thirst are worse than death, especially when the divine ray appears vaguely as though through some crevices and is not communicated to the soul.* Because what is being whetted is the appetite for God which nothing else will satisfy; whatever might have satisfied the person before is now being seen as nothing, of no value, such is the person's longing for God. So God becomes more absent, more distant, more incomprehensible and what satisfied the person before this just won't anymore.

What about people who are living this? John in his commentary on this stanza says these people need careful guidance. He goes into a long parenthesis about spiritual directors. People will come along and say you're not doing this right, you should be doing this you should be doing that, you should be reading this. Of course, none of this is going to help, it will make matters worse. He talks about the three blind guides, and the three blind guides are the spiritual director, the person themselves or the devil, but most of it is the spiritual director, though it can be anyone else trying to tell them what to do. What these people need, John tells us, are only two things – encouragement and freedom. Just encouragement and the freedom to go with this; wherever the Lord is taking them just goes. Just stay with this emptiness, it's OK.

This whole section here is in a sense praising these cavities, this emptiness, because it is the capacity for God - only God will satisfy you. *The capacity of these caverns is deep because the object of this capacity, namely God, is profound and infinite. Thus,*



*in a certain fashion their capacity is infinite, their thirst is infinite, their hunger is also deep and infinite, and their languishing and suffering are infinite death.* That's what it can feel like at times, and the closer one gets to God, the more that's going to be there. That principle of love, as in any experience of love, when the person has been touched by their lover, nothing less than that is going to satisfy them. So these people who have been touched by these lamps, by something of the light, by something of the warmth of these lamps; to them everything else is as nothing – only God. So here in this stanza with its imagery of the lamps and the caverns John is trying to convey with these two images, the experience of God, what that means to a human being. The person who has somehow experienced God will be living and acting from that experience, from the light and warmth of the experience and that will be seen in these attributes: justice, love, wisdom... you can make your own list, all that are virtues proper to God, the self-giving love that is there. And the more that is there, the more radical that is because all of these are communicating something of God. But at the same time these people can be feeling and will be feeling profoundly empty within. And the stronger and greater the experience of God is, the more empty the people are within. So there is this person who will be doing great work, wonderful work of charity and everybody will be turning to this person for advice and for help and this person will be showing many of these attributes, yet they will be feeling more and more empty within. They cannot stop what they are doing, nor would they want to. What is happening is that they are living more and more by the light of these lamps and what God is doing within them is expanding and expanding this capacity for Him within the person. And that will mean purifying, cleansing, healing, transforming and detaching from so many other things that maybe in the past interested them or satisfied them - not that they will not be interested in them - but they will no longer be satisfied, because the person can be satisfied with nothing less than God. That's the nature of love; when love enters, everything else is in second or third or fifth or hundredth place.

When somebody falls in love, all their attention is on the person they love, all other things, which might have been terribly important, even yesterday, are way back on the priority list. When it is with God, then even more so, but they can still do all the other things and do them far better, because it's being done now with and in and through the love of God within, which is not limited by human limitations. So the emptier the person here is, the more free they are to love, but not confined or restricted by the feelings of love or the affirmation that comes from love or the results they might think their love should be producing. They are free of all that, therefore their love will be more complete, more self-giving, more free.

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/etsbFLqKf0M>*

14<sup>th</sup> December 2014

## **Seventh talk**   *The awakening*

I just want to draw your attention to a few points from the fourth stanza. Here John gives a much shorter commentary, in fact he only comments on the beginning of the poem, as to the rest he says he cannot say any more, he has come to the very edge of anything that he can put into language. All the time he is speaking about this deep love, this union of love that's happening in the deepest centre and here in this stanza there are two things in particular that he speaks about. Firstly, the awakening of God in the soul and secondly, the breathing of God within - awakening and breath – and what that brings about.

*3. And thus it is as though the soul were to say: How gentle and loving (that is, extremely loving and gentle) is your awakening, O Bridegroom Word, in the centre and depth of my soul, which is its pure and intimate substance, in which secretly and silently, as its only Lord you dwell alone, not only as in your house, nor only as in your bed but also as in my own heart, intimately and closely united with it. And how delicately you captivate me and arouse my affections toward you in the sweet breathing you produce in this awakening, a breathing delightful to me and full of good and glory.*

In a sense it is the same as what is in the verse of the stanza, put into prayer form. It is the soul, the person, addressing the God who lives within, who lives in this deepest centre, or as it appears to the person has become awake and alive, awakened and breathing, living. The particular characteristic of this awakening that John draws our attention to is this. He says: *And here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening. The soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures.* In other words we look out there at creation and the beauty of it and it draws our minds and our hearts towards the creator, towards God, but now because the person is seeing – not through human eyes, but through the light of the God who dwells within – the person is seeing creation as God sees it; a very different image; much deeper, much more complete and also much freer, because the person is no longer constrained.

For those of you familiar with John's *Spiritual Canticle* will see this worked out in the early stanzas of the canticle. The person who has been awakened, made aware, wounded, goes in search of the Beloved and there are beautiful passages there about creation and what creation does – it reminds the person of the Beloved because like the great artist there is always something of the artist in what he has created. And so these act as reminders, but instead of giving satisfaction and consolation, they do the opposite, they make the person hunger and thirst and search more frantically, because they are signs of the one that she loves, but they are not the lover. The lover, he has left traces of himself so she has to search further and further and further because she has been touched by God and nothing will satisfy except God. But it is not a rejection of creation or people or the world or anything, but rather it is a journey that is going to lead to a capacity to love in a much deeper and fuller and complete way. And that is

what we see here; the person is now seeing and loving through the God who is within and so things are known in a very different way.

It appears that it is God who has awakened within, but of course it is not – it is the soul that has awakened – *we then ought to say that in this movement it is the soul that is moved and awakened from sleep, from the natural condition to the supernatural condition... Yet God always acts in this way – as the soul is able to see – moving, governing, bestowing being, power, graces and gifts on all creatures, bearing them all in himself by his power, presence and substance. And the soul sees what God is in himself and what he is in his creatures in only one view, so now the person sees God and what he has created as one – they are not separate, just as one who in opening the door of a palace beholds in one act the eminence of the person who dwells inside together with what that sovereign is doing. It's all seen in one, because it's seen through the lamps, the wisdom, that God gives.*

John goes on to explain this further, because clearly he knows that we struggle to understand what he's saying, so he gives us some illustrations here from human life: *Such is the lowliness of our condition in this life; for we think others are like ourselves and we judge others according to what we ourselves are, since our judgement arises from within us and not outside us. Thus the thief thinks others also steal; and the lustful think others are lustful too; and the malicious think others also bear malice, their judgment stemming from their own malice; and the good think well of others, because their judgment flows from the goodness of their own thoughts; and for those who are careless and asleep, it seems that others are too. This is human nature; we see others from our own point of view, from where we are ourselves. So he is applying it here in two ways then, we apply this to God, we think God is like this: Hence it is when we are careless and asleep in God's presence, it seems to us it is God who is asleep and neglectful of us. We apply onto God what is ours. God is never asleep, but we think he is: God, he is missing; where is he? He's not doing anything; why isn't he doing what I want him to do? Why isn't he answering my prayer? Why isn't he sorting this out? Has he gone to sleep? We are putting this onto God, but God is never neglectful; we are projecting onto God, but equally so when it comes to other people, or creation or anything. So now the person is viewing everything through the God who is within, and so it's God's way of looking at things, God's way of loving. God has wakened within: the life of God, the wisdom of God, the vision of God has awakened within, so the person is awakened to a very, very different way of seeing things.*

*Yet since everything in human beings comes from God, and they of themselves can do nothing good [Jas.1:17], it is rightly asserted that our awakening is an awakening of God and our rising is God's rising. Since the soul was in a sleep from which it could never awaken itself, and only God could open its eyes and cause this awakening. Because only God can do this, only God can open our eyes, but of course we don't always like what he shows us and we might want to close them again. What we see through our own eyes might suit us better than what God might be showing us. But here it's God opening the eyes of the person. Here he puts it into prayer again: Awaken and enlighten us, my Lord, so that we might know and love the blessings that you ever propose to us, and we might understand that you have moved to bestow favours on us and have remembered us. Note carefully that prayer, how John has worded it: awaken and enlighten us my Lord – you need to wake and enlighten and*

allow God to do it – *so that we might know and love the blessings that you ever propose to us* – know and love what you give us, not what we might give ourselves, or think we have, or want ourselves. All of that has been cleansed and purified prior to this. The person now only knows and loves what God presents to us, what God gives to us, *and that we might understand that you have moved to bestow favours on us and have remembered us* – so that we may understand everything comes from God; this attitude of total gratitude – everything comes from God. The need that something to come from me, the need for my contribution, my part in this has gone, it's not there. It's so unlike the prayer we would normally make, the prayer of intercession that we might make. This comes from somebody who is awakened and enlightened by God, by the presence of God.

So all of this, the entire *Living Flame*, as I said at the very beginning, is an entering deeply into the truth, the reality of those words of Jesus in John's gospel of the Father and the Son and the Spirit – Trinity – will come and make their home, will come and live in the person who loves them. And this whole work is an exploration or a celebration of that relationship of love - the relationship of the Trinity and the person, the soul, entering into that relationship, becoming alive in that. So John here at the end gives us a paragraph which maybe might be helpful to us to get a perspective on it all and see what this is. I am commenting on the verse: *where in secret you dwell alone*, this place where the Trinity, in secret, dwells alone, because if anything else lives there, if anything else is drawing life there, then the person is not living the fullness of the life of God. God and God alone, and only God can live in this deepest centre and when it is only God and God alone living there, then the person is fully alive; the person is living the fullness of life; and is loving the fullness of love, the fullness of wisdom and all these other attributes that we saw earlier on.

So here's how John thinks about it: *the soul says he dwells in its heart in secret, because this sweet embrace is wrought in the depths of its substance*. All the time John is trying to find a language to get us right into to some very deep place in there. Going through this one sees all the different ways he tries to depict this deepest centre, of the heart, or the spirit, all the kinds of ways he tries to express something that no words can, because no words are able to express what this place – but it's not a place of course – where this is happening. It's in the depths of the substance. *It should be known that God dwells secretly in all souls and is hidden in their substance, otherwise they would not last*. That's a principle of John of the Cross's teaching, he expresses it in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* as a basic fundamental principle when he is defining what he means by union with God, which is the goal and the purpose of the spiritual life – to be united with God. He's defining what he means by that: every person - no person would exist if they were not united with God - they just wouldn't exist. There are implications in that, both in how I see myself and how I see the other person, because every other person is also somebody in whom God lives, with whom God is united, whom God is sustaining in existence.

But there is a difference and that's what *The Flame* is celebrating - not explaining the difference, but celebrating the difference. And here's the difference, there is a great difference in his dwelling in them. *In some souls he dwells alone and in others he does not dwell alone*. That's how he defines the difference: alone and not being alone. If he is not alone it means the person soul has other priorities, other habits, other addictions, other desires, other goals; but where he is alone, then that's the

union. *Abiding in some, he is pleased and in others he is displeased. He lives in some as though in his own house, commanding and ruling everything, and in others as though a stranger in a strange house, where they do not permit him to give orders or to do anything.* That's the difference, where God dwells in his own house, commanding and ruling everything, or where he is a stranger in a strange house. That is the difference, and *The Living Flame* here is a celebration of that house where he commands, rules; where he lives in freedom.

So John goes on to define in a little more detail what this means: *it is in the soul in which less of its own appetites and pleasures dwell, where he dwells more alone* – appetites and the pleasures are words John uses over and over again in his teaching. Put simply, they are everything that compromises our inner freedom, everything that holds us bound in some way, whether it is some ambition, some addiction, some obsessions, some hurt, something dysfunctional in our lives - whatever it is that holds us bound, that compromises us. *It is in the soul in which less of its own appetites and pleasures dwell where he dwells more alone, more pleased and more as though in his own house, ruling and governing it. And he dwells more in secret the more he dwells alone.* Again, that's important, in secret. We've seen that in various ways, the dwelling alone is more secret, less known to the person, less obvious; the caverns, the feelings, there's no feelings there, the more alone he is, the less there is because it is deeper. We can be as attached to spiritual feelings as we can be to anything else and therefore the secret is deeper than either feelings of his presence or feelings of his absence, because they can both profoundly mislead us, as we have seen. We can think God is present but there's really only ourselves, we are only relying on our own feelings. We can believe him to be absent when actually the most profound and greatest feeling of absence is the strongest feeling of his presence, because absence, of its very nature, is a sign of love. We can only miss someone we've loved, the deeper sense of absence and loss, the greater the love there must be there. *Thus in this soul in which neither any appetite nor other image or forms or any affections for created things dwell, the Beloved dwells secretly with an embrace so much closer, more intimate and interior, the purer and more alone the soul is to everything other than God.* So again, *neither appetite nor any form or affection lives,* draws life, other things are drawing life from you, but from the depths it is God, God has awakened here. *His dwelling is in secret then, because the devil cannot reach the area of this embrace nor can the human intellect understand how it occurs.* So neither the devil nor the human intellect can understand this, so the person cannot be misled because it is so secret, they can't be tempted out of this in some way, neither can the human intellect reach there. We won't know, because he knew we would manipulate it or think it is not what it is or misunderstand it or whatever. There he gives just an image for us to help us to see what it is that John of the Cross has been making us aware of in this work, or heightening our awareness, because that's what *The Flame* is all about. It's not about explaining something, but showing. As I mentioned the first evening it is the artist showing us something or the great musician drawing us into an experience, absorbing us into something. It's a work to be experienced, felt, tasted, rather than analysed. And as I said, very appropriate for this season of Advent as the season of Advent is about awaiting the Lord and opening ourselves more deeply to his coming to us and into us; about a growing more deeply in our love of the Lord.

So, we will just finish here with a word from John himself, where he concludes:

*The Living Flame of Love*

*Oh how happy is this soul, which ever experiences God resting and reposing within it. Oh how fitting it is for it to withdraw from things, flee from business matters and live in immense tranquillity, so that it may not, even with the slightest speck of dust or noise, disturb or trouble its heart where the Beloved dwells. Since the breathing – that's the breathing of the Holy Spirit – is filled with good and glory, the Holy Spirit through this breathing fills the soul with good and glory in which he enkindled it in love of himself indescribably and incomprehensibly in the depths of God, to whom the honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen*

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/6iB7jt48hTI>

14th December 2014

© Fr Matthew Blake, OCD – December 2014

---

**Reference**

*The Living Flame of Love* [p. 638-715] in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD. ICS Publications, Washington DC. 1991.