

AWAKENED BY THE BELOVED
Contemplation in the Carmelite Tradition



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Fr Matt Blake OCD at Boar's Hill, 6th November 2021

We're delving into the whole understanding of what we mean by contemplation in our Carmelite tradition and I would like to begin by going to the very beginning, the very source of this, a little passage which we use for the feast Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is significant because that's the principal feast of the Carmelite year. We use this passage from the Book of Kings and it brings us to the very beginning, the source of all that we are speaking about.

This is first book of Kings and this is Chapter 18:42–45:

Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel and bowed down to the earth, putting his face between his knees. 'Now go up', he told his servant, 'and look out to the sea.' He went out and looked. 'There is nothing at all' he said. 'Go back seven times,' Elijah said. The seventh time the servant said 'now there is a cloud, small as a man's hand, rising from the sea.' Elijah said, 'Go and say to Ahab, harness the chariot and go down before the rain starts.' And with that the sky grew dark with cloud and storm and rain fell in torrents.

If we were to go through that little passage in detail we would find so many of the images that were used by Carmelite writers down through the centuries in speaking about this topic, but that's not really why I want to begin there. I want to begin there because it is the place that Carmel draws its inspiration from – Mount Carmel – a physical place, a mountain, a biblical mountain. And as we saw there at the beginning, it is sacred ground, Elijah bows down, puts his head between his knees; the gestures of prayer, of entering into a sacred space, this sacred place. There is a whole biblical background of God making himself known and God makes himself known in so many experiences; in particular in the Bible are the ones at the tops of mountains – the theophanies – where God shows himself, whether it be on Mount Sinai or wherever it may be, and then in the New Testament there is Mount Calvary. There is a wealth of tradition around these mountains and that's the cradle, the source of Carmelite spirituality. God makes himself known and the place where God makes himself known is sacred space and that sacred space ultimately is not in a physical place but is within, it is deep within the person, in the deepest centre – the soul – whatever word we want to use – that's the sacred place, that's where God makes himself known and the light, the understanding the Carmelite tradition reveals to us, gives to us, always has its beginnings there on Mount Carmel, in the scriptures, in the Bible, the word of God, the revelation of God, in that whole tradition that is there, that space, as I said, that is the cradle, the seed that is sown.

So it's from a mountain that Carmel takes its identity – to be Carmelite, to live Carmel, to be inspired and given life by Carmel is to be a person of the mountain, a person of that sacred space, that sacred place where God makes himself known. And that is what inspired the first Carmelites who settled there in the twelfth century. These are people to whom God has made himself known, though we don't know who

any of them are – that doesn't matter; not only does that not matter, but they very deliberately didn't allow us to know, because what was important to them was not who they were, but what God was doing in them, because the mountain is the place where God is given honour and glory – not the person, the human being – but God.

And so the first Carmelites of Mount Carmel would see themselves very much as successors, as living in that tradition, drinking from that same source, that same fountain, that same spring that Elijah drank from, as did so many others down through the centuries, all those to whom God made himself known. And that's what we understand by contemplation.

Perhaps John of the Cross' definition is the one that we make the basis of what we're speaking about, what John calls *the inflow of God into the soul*. And that's a lovely expression, God flows in like a stream, like water, the living water, he flows into the deepest place within the person, the most real, the most true place within, and this is a work of God that in some way becomes known to the person. But that being made known is something that's impossible to define. If we were to ask Elijah on that mountain *why did you send that guy up there seven times, how did you know that something was going to happen?* He probably wouldn't have been able to give us any explanation, nothing at least that we would understand. But he knew, he knew with a certainty. He knew he was in the presence of God and that God was making himself known on this mountain. He knew that – impossible to express it – but there is a certainty there. *Go back seven times* – then the little cloud appears, small as a man's hand, tiny. How does he know there's torrential rain coming, how does he know that the whole country is going to be transformed? How can he be so confident as to give the instruction to the king, *Go, to escape the rain?* That's the inflow of God into the soul, that's the presence of God within, God that makes himself known.

And so when we speak about contemplation, for the most part what we are speaking about is not that *making himself known*, rather what we're really speaking about is our coming into awareness of this. It is us being awakened to it, becoming aware of it, that's what we're speaking about, because the feat in itself is always beyond, it's something mysterious – we cannot see the face of God. Like Moses, we can't see his face, we might, like the great gift to Moses, see the back of him, see the burning bush. We cannot see the face of God – the *it*, the *something*, the *inflow of God* – but it's the awareness of it, that's what we're speaking about, our being made aware of this, of being awakened to it. There are so many words used, usually in symbolic language, because we're beyond the boundaries of language here.

Perhaps one of the most powerful paragraphs in all of John of the Cross's teaching is the opening paragraph of his *Spiritual Canticle*, where he tries to tell us what this awakening might seem like. But of course what the paragraph shows us is the impossibility of saying that. But let's hear what John says, because it is a very important paragraph to our understanding of what this awakening, this enlightening is. He is speaking to the soul that is beginning, that has grown aware, and both of those words are important, the word *awareness* and to have *grown* into the awareness. In other words it's a maturing, a growing, a development, one grows into something, into an awareness. But now comes the impossibility of expressing the awareness, because it's going to be different for different people. It's going to be personal, unique to every person; so John gives us simply a long list of possibilities that this

awareness might look like in a particular person's experience and that's what this paragraph is, because nobody experiences everything that's in this paragraph; one might only experience a little bit of it, but that is the awareness. And he takes it in different ways, almost always talking from scripture, having gone in the search of scripture to find a way, and he's obviously taken a lot of time trying to construct this paragraph. He writes:

The soul at the beginning of this song has grown aware of her obligations and observed that life is short – that's from the Book of Job – the path leading to eternal life is constricted – that's Matthew's Gospel – the just one scarcely saved – that's the first letter of Peter – the things of the world are vain and deceitful – Ecclesiastes – that all comes to an end and fails like falling rain – 2 Samuel – and that the time is uncertain, the accounting strict, perdition very easy, salvation very difficult. She knows on the other hand, her immense indebtedness to God for having created her solely for himself and that for this she owes him the service of her whole life. Because he redeemed her solely for himself she owes him every response of love. She knows too of the thousand other benefits by which she has been obligated to God before the time of her birth, and that a good part of her life has vanished, that she must render an account of everything: of the beginning of her life as well as the later part, to the very last thing, when God will search Jerusalem with lighted candles and that it is already late, the day is far spent to remedy so much evil and harm. She feels on the other hand that God is angry and hidden, because she desired to forget him so in the midst of creatures. Touched with dread and interior sorrow of heart over so much loss and injury, renouncing all things, leaving all business, not delaying a day or an hour, with desires and sighs pouring from her heart, wounded now with love of God, she begins to call on her Beloved in saying...

On it goes, the search. Very carefully put together, this, to anything that could get a person to be attentive to God or attentive to the spiritual life, attentive to the change, the enormous change that is taking place. There are two aspects to it, if you notice: on the one hand she has become aware or has grown into awareness, but the second part is even more important. She must respond – this can no longer be ignored, can no longer be left sitting over there and I can get on with my life over here. This is how I have been living for so long up until now, but now there's an urgency and a decisiveness. This response has to happen now, it cannot be ignored. So there are two essential aspects of contemplation: the awareness and the urgency, the urgency of response. If it can be ignored, then the person has not quite got to the level of awareness. It cannot be ignored and there is nothing more important, nothing more essential. Nobody could talk a person out of this now; the person is touched by love, changed by love, has to respond to love and knows with the certainty that only love can do, that's the certainty that Elijah had when he simply sends the guy up seven times. The certainty that comes from love is not rational, it's deeper, it's a certainty that's deep within the person that only love can do it. But as I said, it takes a different form in every person – it's personal. Because when we speak about contemplation, we're speaking about the unique personal relationship God has with the person he has created and loves. No two human beings are identical; there are no clones in God's creation and that applies even more so to one's relationship with God. God knows each one of us as individuals and relates with each of us as individuals; therefore our relationship with God is unique, and how this inflow of God that is contemplation is felt and experienced in the person is going to be unique to that individual and it can

take all kinds of forms. As we saw in the text of St John of the Cross, it can take all sorts of different forms, but it is whatever convinces the person, gets the person to respond. It is this something that changes the person or enables the person to discover who they truly are. As John says: *the love that was there before she was even born* – the person is discovering something that was there before she was even born, because God is always there. The person may not have always been there, but God is always there. So it is unique to the individual, yet, as Carmelite spirituality shows us, there are patterns, there are things we have in common; our relationship with God is unique, but we're never isolated.

We discover and we come to understand our experience through relationships; we come to understand our experience through what others tell us of their experience. So when we pick up John of the Cross or Teresa or any of the other Carmelites we're reading and listening to, we're listening to people who have come to an understanding of something and can express it, who can give us a language through which we can also come to an understanding and a way of expressing what's happening within us. St Teresa expresses this very well for us. It's not original to her but she uses the idea when she says there are many people who had these experiences – that's the inflow of God into the soul. There are so many who experience contemplation; but far fewer people recognise it and know what it is; and fewer again are able to express it or explain it. And in the great richness and variety of writings that Teresa has left us with, we can see her growing in all three of these aspects, we can see how she grows in them and she has to grow into being the person who can do all three of these, who can explain them. She obviously has the experience, she can recognise what the experience is, she can come to an understanding of it and she can explain it and express it to us.

She tells us that she only writes what she knows through experience, and she qualifies that by saying that this consists of her own experience, the experience of other people, and thirdly, the experience that God gave her through prayer. Her own experience – that's everything that she has lived in her long life, all of life's experience; then her attentive listening to other people, the many people who have come to her (Teresa was a teacher of prayer from quite a young age); and then her direct experience of God, her standing before the face of God like Elijah or Moses. And of course this also means the many books that she has read and the theologians she has consulted and her learning, and all of this enlightens this experience. But she will only speak about what she has experienced because she knows that's where the learning is, that's what's authentic, that's what's real, that's what speaks to us – experience.

To illustrate what I mean about the power of Teresa's experience conveyed in her writing I want to remind you of Edith Stein, another Carmelite saint. On 1st January 2022 we will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of her baptism – she was baptised 1st January 1922. Just before this, in the summer of 1921, the *Life of Teresa of Avila* fell into her hands, bringing to an end her long search for truth. Unfortunately, she did not write an account of the experience for us, she didn't give us some spiritual autobiography so that we could have understood what happened to her in that summer of 1921 that completely changed her life.

How did Teresa come to end Edith Stein's great search for truth? I will just give a few possible suggestions for this. When five years earlier Edith wrote her doctrinal

thesis in 1916, the subject that she chose was *empathy*, a very interesting subject. What was behind that? I would suggest that it was in Teresa that she really found what she was looking for – empathy. When Edith read Teresa’s *Life* she felt understood for the first time in her life. She had met somebody who really understood her, and no doubt for the rest of Edith’s life – she died in Auschwitz in 1942 – Teresa of Avila was the biggest influence on her life. Everything that she lived from that point onwards was what Teresa lived – she was a daughter of Teresa. She found in Teresa’s writings the understanding that she had longed for and had been searching all her life, in study, and in philosophy, in so many other subjects she had studied, including Christianity, because there’s no doubt that in the years coming up to this, Edith had been researching and studying Christianity, though she was still a very strongly professed atheist. Shortly after this, when she went to a local priest to ask for baptism, he said she would need to undergo instruction and that she should ask him any questions that might arise. Before long of course, he realised that she knew far more about this than he did – no amount of study or research was going to give her what Teresa gave her.

If we are to look a little more closely at Teresa, she is writing from her experience, she is writing from the heart. Teresa never referred to her book by the title *Life*, although it is a very good title for us, a very appropriate title. The closest Teresa ever came to giving it a title was to say: *this is the book of God’s mercy*. What might that mean? It’s the book of somebody who receives from God, who has learned her total dependence on God. That of course is contemplation, learning to totally depend on God, on that inflow of God, learning to live by that total dependence on God – *without the mercy of God, I am nothing*. The Mercy of God, the book of God’s mercy, that’s what Teresa wants to give testimony to. The second title she gave – and this is in the covering letter she sent to the Dominican Garcia de Toledo, who had asked her to write it; she said *I am entrusting to you my soul*; entrusting her soul – not her mind, her thinking, her achievements – but her soul, and the soul of course is the place where God lives, the place of meeting with God within, the place of encounter and the place of awareness, the place she’s living from, the source of living water within her. She’s entrusting her soul. And both of these ‘titles’ would have struck Edith very strongly.

Edith tells us specifically that it’s her search for truth that comes to an end. Of course it doesn’t, she gave all her life to the search for truth, that’s a word she uses all the time – the search for truth – but something fundamentally changes her. (If you really want to know about this, read the last chapter of Teresa’s book of her *Life*, and there you will see that what happens is the fundamental change in attitude towards truth). Here is this woman who was scientifically researching truth; she’s a trained philosopher, scientist, woman of research, of study, has written so many books, teaching... Now suddenly it is Truth with a capital T revealing itself to her, Truth is bigger than I am; I don’t find or discover Truth, Truth makes itself known to me, makes itself known. The whole relationship with truth for this scientific, academic woman is turned completely upside down – I’m not going to discover truth, truth will make itself known to me. Truth is not something I can master, define or explain. The fundamental attitude towards truth – so important in the Christian tradition – is one of humility and linked to humility is worship, awe, amazement. Edith Stein’s eyes would have been opened when she read that book in awe, in amazement, in wonder, in worship, because to discover Truth is to enter into a relationship with it, Truth

speaks to us when we enter into a relationship with Truth. Truth can never be something that we can say *that it's there*, and define what it is. It's a relationship; it's an entering into relationship. It's God making himself known, Jesus is the Truth – *I am the Truth* – it is relationship with him. So it is this fundamental attitude of humility before Truth, and that we find all the time in all the tradition. St Teresa over and over again tells us that humility is the test of genuine prayer, the growing in humility.

Just one other thought. A very important moment for Teresa in her journey is in Chapters 8 and 9 (*Life*) when she comes to a point in her life, which she defines as *the life I was living was not life, but was a shadow of death*. She came to recognise that she was not really alive and she also came to recognise that *only relationship can give me life and it's relationship with him that will give me life*. But he wasn't giving it to her, and to come to recognise the wisdom of that, she had to grow into something, her eyes had to be opened and it was when someone gave her St Augustine's writings – she needed St Augustine to open her eyes to bring that kind of awareness to her – so St Augustine does for Teresa what Teresa does for Edith Stein. These people who have grown aware, who have been changed by this awareness, who have learned to express it; they are able to shine a light and what Edith Stein discovered the day that book fell into her hands is what we all discover when we really insert ourselves in Carmelite spirituality. It's not some knowledge we discover – we don't become wiser – we discover our own identity, who we are, the truth of who we are. To put it a little more specifically, what we discover is a language to help us to express who we are because that ultimately is what spirituality is, it's a language of the soul, a language of the spirit that we so need. The most significant experiences of our lives have a need to be expressed; so much of our lives can be a search for that means of expression, that spiritual language.

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We have been speaking about the awareness or the awakening to the presence, the dynamic, life-giving presence of God within the human being. As I said, St John of the Cross described it as *this inflow of God into the soul*.

Now I want to expand a little bit on this: what are the consequences or what are the fruits of this? I have already said that the person is changed by this; it is quite literally a new life. St Teresa described it in the book of her *Life*, beginning of Chapter 23, when she really starts what she wants to speak about: *This is a new book, a new life from now on. The life I lived up until now was my own, now it is the life that Jesus Christ lives in me* – that's from St Paul. There's a whole new life now being lived and it is being lived within her. It's the life of Jesus Christ – it's not hers but yet it is hers, this new life, lived from that deep place within that she has become aware of, where the change and transformation has happened.

I want to go back to Edith Stein, just to get a sense of what this is. What is this new life? What is it that the person now lives from or by? This is her preface to her book *The Science of the Cross*, the last book she wrote before her death. I want to quote from her introduction to this book. She is trying to define what this life is, what she has described as the *science of the Cross*, this living by this new truth. What is this? And she said: *what we are dealing with is a well-recognised truth*, then she gives a title: *a theology of the Cross* – then she goes on to define it: *it's a living, real and effective truth*. It's living, it's real and it's the effective bit she now goes on to expand upon. This is not something dry or something empty or something that's just there – this is living, real. She then goes on to say where it is: *it is buried in the soul*, and by the soul she means the deepest centre, the deepest truth of a person, the most real identity of a person. I think nowadays we are inclined to see the soul as one particular dimension of a person; but it means the whole person, the true person, the full identity of the person, hidden – it's hidden there, deep within. *It's buried there*, she said, *like a seed that takes root and grows*. We are all the time coming back to this word *growing* – something has to grow and mature, because ultimately what we're speaking about is the fullness of human maturity, that's what we're really speaking about. When we speak about somebody living a contemplative life, a mature, developed, contemplative life, what we're really speaking about is somebody living a mature, human life, living what it really means to be human, because this seed is buried within every human and it is only when it has grown and matured that we can see the kind of gifts and effects that we're speaking about.

So it grows, and here's what Edith says here: *it makes a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits and by shining outwardly is recognised in this very doing and omitting*. That's a great statement, because she's effectively saying that this can't happen to a person without the person being completely changed, and that change is going to be visible and effective. It's an impression on the person, this is a new identity that the person puts on, but of course this is not what it is, it is the real identity emerging, the false identity being taken away, being

discarded; determining what it does in actions, what a person does and omits, the decision that a person takes. And that is why when somebody is living a contemplative life, their decisions are often incomprehensible to others, they don't make rational sense. Edith Stein knows this very personally herself – the decision to become Christian, to become a Carmelite, and other decisions that she took were totally incomprehensible to her family, to those around her, but they are coming from a different place. What a person does and what a person needs are coming from that deepest place within. The decisions that a person makes, the contemplative life that now informs and enlightens all the decisions that a person takes, because they are being taken from a deeper place within and then it shines outwardly and is recognised in this very doing and omitting. Every decision this person takes somehow reflects, bears testimony to what they are living within and that's what makes it real, otherwise it's just an illusion. People can think they are living a contemplative life, but it's the decisions – and not just the actions, but the attitudes – that's what reveals them. The inner life is revealed in everything that the person communicates. How is the person living? Or as Teresa wonderfully puts it in her *Way of Perfection*, at the very beginning, teaching her sisters about prayer she asks, *what kind of people are we?* That's the question, not how do we pray, not what do we do, but what kind of people are we? What kind of a person is this? How are we living? That's what Edith is getting at. If a person is really living this science of the Cross, this life, this inflow of God into the soul as St John of the Cross puts it, if the person is really living from that, then they are going to be a very particular person and where they're living from will be revealed, will be shown, and the decisions that they take, what they do, what they omit, the kind of people that they are. In other words, it affects every area of a person's life. It can never be something that is simply in a corner somewhere. And contemplation is never something that's just personal to the individual or some private activity that a person has. It goes out everywhere, and she is going to go on to say a bit more about that.

So she said: *it's the science of the saints, the science of the Cross. From this living form and strength in one's innermost depths, a perspective of life arises, the image one has of God and of the world and therefore one can find expression of it in a mode of thinking.* So it's from this perspective within, an inner strength, how one sees the whole world around one, the perspective of life. The image one has of God and of the world – that's changed, God has become very different. We see the person searching for God but actually when God makes himself known to the person, God is going to be very different to the one that was searched for. God is not the image of God that one has created up here, in one's head; God is going to be very different. We imagine who or what we are looking for, but when the real God makes himself known and impacts into a person's life, it's going to be very different and often unrecognisable, or a whole journey needs to be gone on to recognise that this really is God, that this is real and so also in the way one sees the world around. The saints can be very surprising people in their attitudes and their decisions, because they see things in a way that is very different. Just like the decisions they take, the way they see things is incomprehensible to others, it's not coming from the wisdom that's all around, it's coming from that relationship to God that's deep within them.

And that's why this term *science of the Cross* is so attractive to Edith Stein. The term was taken from St Paul, when he speaks about *the wisdom of the Cross* that is foolishness to human beings but the more it seems to be folly and foolishness and

incomprehensible to human beings, the more it is a revelation of the wisdom of God and the power of God. So what's happening in the person's life and the way that the person sees God and sees the world around radically changes, and that is both a struggle for the individual to understand, and of course it is virtually impossible to communicate to others or for others to understand it. So a whole perspective of life is in there.

But all the time throughout this, Edith is also preoccupied: why does this not always happen? In considering all of this we have got to consider not just what happens, but why it doesn't, or why it seems to happen for a while and not become what it is really meant to be. St John of the Cross in his writings describes this as the greatest tragedy in human life. The person who goes a little bit down this road and then stops, either because they think they have arrived now, when of course they haven't at all, or because it's just too scary to go any further, or *I've had enough of this*. All of John's writings are helping the person to go beyond that.

But here Edith turns to this: when it comes to religious matters why are so many people left cold? Why does it all go cold? *What we have often heard and long known leaves us cold*. That is the problem: we have heard it all before, we've been here before, it's what other people are saying, what other people are giving, it's not coming from within, it's not real, it's not alive, it's not speaking. And she said it's often linked with an excessive interior preoccupation with one's own concerns. It's all about me; it's all about looking at myself. When a person becomes self-obsessed, that, she said, is what is often linked to this, and then she looks around her world and sees it everywhere. She said: *those who are living this, we rejoice that we're still able to feel deep genuine joy and deep genuine pain*. That's what the person of contemplation is able to feel – joy and pain. She said *this seems a grace when compared to this rigid insensitivity*. Contemplation enables one to feel joy and pain and of course the two go together. The person is more alive. The opposite to this is a sort of a rigidity and a numbness, not really being alive. That's what St Teresa was experiencing when she said she saw her life as a shadow of death. She was not really alive, she could recognise that she wasn't alive. To be able to feel joy, to be able to feel pain, to be able to hold the two together – they're not opposites, in the contemplative life they go together. To speak about the joy of the Cross – the pain and the joy go together, they are the one route, the one reality. So, to be able to feel. She said this numbness of feeling is particularly painful across the religious sphere and now she hits upon exactly why this is so. She said *many believers are depressed because the facts of salvation history do not at all, or no longer impress them as they ought and lack the strong influence on their lives that they should expect. The example of the saints demonstrates to them how things should actually be, where there's genuine lively faith there is the doctrine of faith and the tremendous deeds of God are the content of life*.

She's making a very important statement about contemplation here. She has spoken about this seed that's within, that grows and matures and governs what a person does and doesn't do, chooses and omits, gives a whole perspective on life, on God, on the world around. But that's not enough, and that will not sustain the person and there's a real danger in that the person will descend into this numbness that she speaks about. The two things that have to come in with this are the doctrine and the scriptures – the deeds of salvation history. For Christian contemplation, for Carmelite contemplation

to be genuine, to be life giving, to really sustain a person, it has to be grounded in the scriptures and the doctrine, the teaching of the church. If not, she said, the person grows numb. And we see this all the time in our Carmelite tradition – pick up the readings of St John of the Cross, there's hardly a line that doesn't come from scripture, that isn't rooted in scripture, rooted in the doctrine and the teaching of the church, everything entrusted to the Church. And there's a very good reason for that. The events of salvation history – that's the whole Bible – has to make a real impact on a person's life, become, as Edith said, the content of a person's life, what a person is living.

Perhaps where St John of the Cross illustrates this best for us is in his teaching of the Dark Night, particularly the second book of the *Dark Night*, where he is speaking about the Night of the Spirit. There he is speaking about the most difficult, challenging, aspects of the spiritual life, where the life of prayer and contemplation is really difficult, where God becomes a greater mystery and we do not understand what's going on; where we really feel we are going backwards, have lost it or cannot pray any more. John doesn't explicitly say this to us but rather it's there, everything he says is taken out of scripture, and in particular from the Old Testament. John is showing us by example that when spiritual life is very difficult, that's the time when we need the scriptures more than ever – read the Psalms, keep reading Jeremiah and the prophets, keep reading the story of salvation history – this is when scriptures are needed. Go right back to where we began – the Carmelite tradition, its beginnings are from scripture, this is a tradition that takes its very name from the biblical mountain. It can't be lived, as Edith Stein shows us, in a healthy life-giving way without staying very close to the scriptures. And without to use Teresa's expression on her deathbed: *I die a daughter of the church*. She lived being a *daughter of the Church*, the Church, the body of Christ, the teaching of the Church. So it goes back again to what I said earlier, contemplation must never be seen as some personal private activity or way of life. The deeper one goes into contemplation, the more one reaches out to God, to the world around.

Another aspect of contemplation – a fruit, a consequence – is what the bible calls *wisdom*, the greatest of God's gifts, and as John of the Cross describes it – it's the wisdom of God and the wisdom of humanity. The person comes to know the real God, a direct contact with, communication with God, which might be very, very different to the image we have created of God, but it will be found in the scriptures somewhere. There will be something in the scriptures that will give the person the need for this, but also of humanity, the understanding of human life, what it means to be human. I have already illustrated in the case of Edith Stein, when she picked up Teresa she found there the understanding that she had been longing for, that she had been searching for, not just intellectually but in a very personal way. As a human being she knew she was reading someone who understood her, and that's what draws people.

The great example of all of this is St Therese of Lisieux. How do we explain her popularity? It's beyond explanation. Some of you may remember when her relics came, these crowds of people turning up. What are they coming for, what's going on? Next year we will be celebrating 100 years of her beatification. Before that, during the First World War, the book of her life, just published, was being handed around the trenches and they were reading it – on both sides – from what we know.

These soldiers reading this book by this nun. What's her life got in common with these soldiers? What were they reading her for? The only explanation is that when they read her, they had a sense that she understands them – not at an external level, she wasn't a soldier, she would have known nothing about military life or wars and never experienced anything like that – but it's at a deeper level. If we were to ask any of these soldiers reading her book, they probably would not be able to tell us why they were reading it. Maybe a better way of putting it would be that she understood them, she created an environment or a world in which they could discover understanding, that's what a contemplative environment is, it's a world. Somehow in this book, they discovered a language, an environment, a way that they could somehow touch upon something that was really meaningful and life-giving to them. That's what contemplation does; it gives that wisdom, that understanding, or perhaps opens up the way that we can discover that understanding.

That's what John of the Cross tells us he's attempting to do in his commentary on the *Spiritual Canticle*. In his Prologue he tells us that the things of the spirit must be spoken about in a very general way, not narrowed down, because in that way each person can then discover what speaks to them, what's right for them. If it's narrowed down then it will not be right for everyone, but somehow the spiritual life creates this environment where everyone can find their place, find the understanding and meaning that the person is searching for and longing for. That's what happens to a person when this *inflow of God* comes in. Obviously it is God's initiative, it is God's doing, but the person believes and thinks *I've got to search, I've got to look, I've got to do, I've got to learn* etc., and that's very understandable, because this requires a response, and the response of course is going to change the person. To go back to John's definition of contemplation, it's the *inflow of God* – he says – *when not impeded, purifies and transforms the person*. When not impeded – of course, we're impeding all the time. The work that we have to do is to learn to not impede, to not get in God's way or allow things to become more important to us than God, to allowing what he finally calls the false Gods. So John's teaching is all about this, don't let in the false Gods that impede this great work God is doing in us. So, not to impede this work, but rather to collaborate and to co-operate with God. We think it's our doing, but of course it's not. As I have already quoted at the beginning, *whoever is seeking God, God is seeking that person much more*. Nobody would even think of seeking God unless God had already put the need there in them, God has already sown the seed.

Teresa beautifully describes it in the *Book of her Life* where she speaks about prayer as drawing water; it's about watering the garden, but of course, she said, God has already cleared the ground and tilled the soil and sown the seeds. In other words, God has already done all the hard work before the person even begins. It wouldn't even enter the person's head *I have pray* unless God had already bestowed all these gifts, but the person needs to co-operate. We're watering the garden, but already the big work has been done by God. Then she goes on to say that the early stage of prayer is like going to the well and putting in one's bucket and drawing the water out and it is hard work, she said. And then of course before long the well is going to go dry and what does a person do then? You keep going to the well, she said, and you keep putting in your bucket and you draw it out empty and you keep doing this, because, she said, the difference between the garden of the spiritual life and our earthly gardens – as Teresa would have been tending in the monastery in Avila – even when there is

no water, the plants continue to grow, God still makes them grow, whereas in the earthly garden they will die, but in the spiritual garden, no, if the person keeps doing their part, if the person keeps co-operating, God will make them grow, God will bring about something. So it's perseverance, it's co-operating, believing, trusting, going on this road, determined, as she said, to reach the end, come what may. These are the people she is speaking to, the people who are determined to reach the end; because, of course, it's the desire for that that has already been put there by God. Nothing less fulfils the person, nothing less will answer what the person is longing for, because when it is this inflow of God that comes into the soul, it is God – it is not a bit of God, it is the fullness of God – therefore the person has experienced directly God. They don't know that they have, but they have, and therefore nothing less than that experience is going to satisfy them. Anything that's less than God simply doesn't satisfy – the person can't explain why they're not satisfied, but they're not – they are satisfied with nothing less than God, because God has already given them something of that experience of himself and therefore all the things of the world will not satisfy. When it is genuine contemplation, the person is satisfied by nothing less than God, but they have to grow into that and that's what takes a lifetime.

In John of the Cross's *signs for contemplation* – these three signs that he gives – when a person has really been touched by God, when contemplation has happened and is a reality in a person's life, then somehow everything else seems to fall away, including the satisfaction that they were already getting from prayer, because of course that wasn't real, but everything else is also taken away. So there's the dissatisfaction with one's prayer, because of course what one thought one was doing so wonderfully well in prayer wasn't real, that was only my own construction, my own illusion. But in addition to that, the person isn't getting satisfaction in other things either, the person is no longer satisfied with prayer. The third sign, which is always the important one, that the person doesn't see, but others often see, is that there are so many positive fruits of what the person is going through. The person is growing in wisdom and understanding, the person is very attentive to the things of God. This is a real concern to the person, the person is doing great good, growing in charity and love etc, even though the person doesn't see this, because whatever they have experienced of God is real, it can't be counterfeited, it can't be imagined, it can't be made to happen by the person. It's pure gift, it's a pure gift that has taken over, therefore images like the cloud and the dark night are very good images. Gone into a cloud, gone into a dark night, gone into somewhere. Something great is taking place and that something great – going back again to where we began, symbolised by Elijah and all that rain that is coming – God is simply letting his presence be felt and seen, and yet it is in a great darkness, incomprehensible. How is this known or understood as God making himself known, whether it be in water or in rain or in the darkness or in the cloud or whatever it is, all these many images that we use? God makes himself known, communicates with us, and when his presence is not impeded, then the person is purified, changed, transformed, grows into the fullness of human maturity.

If we grow through relationship, as psychology tells us, then in this greatest of all relationships we grow into dimensions of the human that can only be grown into through this greatest of all relationships, which also enhances and purifies all the other relationships in a person's life.

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