

Talk 3 Dynamics of the Canticle Fr. Matt 11th July 2023 Aylesford

This talk we could well call it something like 'The Dynamics of the Canticle'. What kind of a journey is John taking us on? This is a commentary on the end of Stanza 23. This is Ezekiel speaking as John quotes him. (23:6) “You were cast out upon the earth in contempt of your soul on the day you were born. And passing by you I saw you trodden underfoot in your blood. And I said to you as you were in your blood: live and be as multiplied as the grass of the field. Increase and grow great and reach the stature of womanhood. And your breasts grew and your hair increased, and you were naked and full of confusion. And I passed by you and looked at you and saw that your time was the time of lovers, and I held my mantle over you and covered your ignominy. And I swore to you and entered into a pact with you and made you mine. I washed you with water and cleansed the blood from you and anointed you with oil; and I clothed you in colour and shod you with violet shoes, girded you with fine linen and clothed you with fine woven garments. And I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a chain on your neck. And above your mouth I placed a ring, and I put earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown upon your head. And you were adorned with gold and silver and clothed in fine linen and embroidered silk and many colours. You ate very choice bread and honey and oil, and you became exceedingly beautiful and advanced to rule and be a queen. And your name was spread among the people because of your beauty.”

So these are the words of Ezekiel which John places here more or less at the exact centre of the Canticle; and he concludes it by saying “ These are the words of Ezekiel, and so it happens with the soul of which we are speaking.

That's what happens to the soul, the person, that he's speaking about throughout the whole Canticle and we can see that there is such a rich source of imagery for John. A very rich text in which Ezekiel so beautifully illustrates what God does in a person's life. That's what John is trying to describe what God does the change that God brings about in the person's life. Because that's what the whole Canticle is, the human being, the soul, the bride is changed, transformed by her relationship with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, with God. What John is trying to do throughout the Canticle is to put that into words, into imagery. To give people, in a sense, a road map, to help them navigate this journey. Central to our understanding of this are the four central stanzas, 20-23, and they are sung by the Bridegroom; the longest section that the Bridegroom sings in the whole Canticle. These are the stanzas of change and transformation. I'm starting at the end of these four, I'm going backwards, because it's the nature of the spiritual life, it's understood backwards. The further on one goes the more one understands what came before, so to understand the spiritual life we have to start at the end and look from that perspective, that's what John is doing here.

This person, this woman that Ezekiel speaks about, is now a queen, exceedingly beautiful, transformed. The image John uses here is the image of marriage, espousal; and just before this he relates it both to the Cross and to baptism. As you can see in the Ezekiel text all the imagery is of baptism, water, oil; of the Sacraments. Or as he puts it elsewhere the union between God and humanity, brought about on the Cross, is not the one we now speak of, for that espousal is accomplished immediately when God gives the first grace which is bestowed on each one at baptism. So upon the Cross and personally in baptism God does everything. For John of the Cross as he tells us in the Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 2 Ch. 7, it is on the Cross that God through Jesus brought about the total reconciliation of all creation. The words of St. Paul, the person dies and rises with Jesus Christ: Paul calls every baptised person a saint; they're saved. Salvation is not

something in the future, it is now, because of baptism. But John goes to say that that is not what we're speaking about now, the espousal we're speaking about bears reference to perfection and it is not achieved save gradually and by stages.

For although it is all one espousal, there is a difference in that one is attained at the soul's pace, thus little by little and the other at God's pace and thus immediately. So the Cross and baptism are at God's pace. What John is speaking about in the Canticle is what God does in the person but at the person's pace. We might be tempted to respond to that by saying 'Can't I speed it up, can I put my foot on the accelerator and move a bit quicker here?' But of course, one can't. Because although it's the person's pace only God knows the timing, the person doesn't, it's God's timing in the person, God knows us better than we know ourselves. So the person has no way of knowing where they are on this road, and that's part of God's wisdom. We don't know where we are, we don't know if we're making progress or not; times when we think we're making progress we're probably not; and when we think we're not making progress it's probably the time when we're making most progress. Because timing and progress are not by our understanding of those words but by God's, and the unique timing, and the road, journey and ways that works in each individual.

God said to the woman that Ezekiel is speaking about "Your time has come". How was she to know that her time has come? She had absolutely no way of knowing that her time had come; but God knew. So all of this is done in each and every person's life by God's timing at the pace of the person. God knows the person's pace, the person themselves doesn't, though it can be that the person becomes aware at a particular time, or there is a growing awareness, but that's only the slightest little hint or perhaps a slight understanding of some of the effects; the process itself is hidden in the depths of the mystery of God. So what becomes apparent here at this crossroad or we might say this major junction in the Canticle is that this is entirely the work of God at the pace of the person.

Look at the introductory paragraph of stanza 22. This is the point now of arrival. Up until now, the soul, the bride, the person, has been searching for God, longing for God, suffering the absence of God, has been saying 'no' and rejecting everything that is not God: has been opening and disposing herself to God, hungering, trusting, now she has arrived. The union with God, the spiritual marriage happens. We suddenly realise that this has not been the work of the soul, the bride, at all, this has been God's work. As John of the Cross puts it in *The Living Flame* "Whoever is seeking God, his Beloved is seeking him much more". (LF 3:28) It's really God who is doing the seeking and the searching, not the person. That's the big twist that happens here; it comes as a surprise. In this wonderful introductory paragraph, he just gives us the scriptures "Great was the desire of the Bridegroom to free and ransom His bride completely from the hands of sensuality and the devil. Like the good shepherd rejoicing and holding on his shoulders the lost sheep for which he has searched many winding paths (Luke 15:4-5), and like the woman who, having lit the candle and hunted through her whole house for the lost drachma, holding up her hands with gladness and calling for her friends and neighbours to come and celebrate, saying, rejoice with me, etc. (Luke 15:8-9), now, too, that the soul is liberated, this loving Shepherd and Bridegroom rejoices. And it is wonderful to see his pleasure in carrying the rescued, perfected soul on His shoulders, held there by His hands in this desired union". (Stanza 22 Intro).

So it is the Shepherd, the Bridegroom that's rejoicing, He has wanted this all along; it's been His desiring. But of course, the question then arises but God could have done this instantly? And John of the Cross says, of course He did on the Cross and of course He's already done it in this

individual in baptism. But God wants a mutual relationship, and God respects human freedom. These are the two keys to understanding the ways of God as the Cantic depicts Him, or the ways of the Bridegroom. The whole Cantic is about that. God respects human freedom. God wants a mutual relationship and the whole Cantic is about how God brings that about in a person. We could say that the first half of the Cantic is the setting free and the second half of the Cantic is God enabling the person to love as she is loved. As he puts it later, giving the person the instruments of love and working those instruments with her. The person is transformed in God's love and God's beauty. God wants a relationship of equality with the person and the person is not satisfied until that relationship of equality is realised. So God wants to set the person free, that's what God wants to do. He's not going to step in, otherwise He's treating the person as an object, God does not want to treat us as objects. God has given us freedom. God has given us our individuality, and God respects that. The Cantic, we could say, is a celebration of that.

So what has happened here then? Stanzas 20/21 we could say are a completion of that setting free and the culmination of that is what John beautifully describes as the complete and free 'Yes' of love. (Intro 20/21). Stanzas 20/21 are we might say the completion of the process of being set free. The complete and free yes of love. That is the high point of human freedom – the human being at her greatest. When the human being can say a complete and free yes of love, that's humanity at her greatest. That's what the whole up until now has brought about. The person has gone through all that searching to arrive here, now the person's whole life is this yes of love. God has waited for this, God has longed for this, long before the person became aware of it or began to desire it; that's what God has been longing for from eternity. Now the person has the capacity to make this 'Yes'. God will do nothing without human consent, or against our wishes. That is the nature of God and so that's how we learn the true nature of God.

One of the fundamental obstacles that a human being has always got to face is that we do not understand the nature of God. Our understanding of the nature of God is distorted. Here we're touching on the true nature of God, the God of chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel. The shepherd that goes out and searches; the woman who searches for the coin; the father of the prodigal who watches and waits, (John doesn't mention that here) but it is that kind of longing. God has waited for the right moment. So the right moment has come here. So John in stanzas 20/21 is giving us some kind of sense of this freedom. What it might be like. There is no time to go through it all so I'll just pick out a few flavours of it.

In this state “. . .the soul obtains, not only a very lofty purity and beauty, but also an amazing strength . . .” that word strength is so very important to John of the Cross right throughout his writings, the strength to love. A key passage in *The Ascent to Mt Carmel*, when he begins to describe the transformation of love (Ascent bk 3 Ch. 16) everything one would want to teach a person is contained in the great command to Israel, the Shema. “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength”. (Deut 6:5) John puts the emphasis particularly on the word strength because up until now there are so many things in a person's life that are taking away their strength. Not a physical strength or a psychological strength but a spiritual strength; so the person might actually be very weak physically or very weak psychologically but there's a strength of soul there, that's the strength he's speaking about. And now the person has that strength so he says it's not enough to have a very lofty purity and beauty, it's the amazing strength because of the powerful and intimate bond effected between God and her because of this union”. (End of intro 20/21) So they have the strength to be united to God. “The Holy Spirit intervenes to effect this spiritual union desiring that the soul attain possession of these qualities in

order to merit this union”. (Stanzas 20/21:2) The Holy Spirit brings this about. We see that almost the entire Canticle is about the relationship with Jesus Christ; when John writes the Living Flame it's very much about what the Holy Spirit does, but of course they're not separate processes, they're the one process. It's the Holy Spirit who brings about this transformation. So the person now has this lofty purity, beauty and strength. Another characteristic is that the Bridegroom is speaking now. (20/21:4) “The Bridegroom makes these disturbing activities and movements cease by means of the immense delight and sweetness and strength received in the spiritual communication and surrender He makes of Himself at this time”. It's the Bridegroom surrendering, not the bride. That's extraordinary, because not only is the bride set free as I have said, it's the highest point of human freedom known to humanity that John is speaking about here, but it's also God's freedom. God now has the freedom to relate with the human being. The Bridegroom has the freedom to give Himself to the bride which He couldn't do up until now, out of respect for the bride, out of respect for the road and the journey that the bride was on; out of respect for her process of growing and maturing. So the freedom is a mutual freedom, the bride can make the full and complete 'Yes' of love now and the Bridegroom can totally surrender. The Bridegroom wanted to give Himself totally to the bride right from the very beginning. God has created us for this. But until the human being, the bride, is ready, until the right time, the Bridegroom waits.

It's the enormous respect God has for His creation; the enormous respect He has for the person He has created. This is a key theme running through John of the Cross' writings, how wonderful creation is because God created it all for this as he tells us in this wonderful poem “The Romances” on creation and the Word becoming flesh. This is what it's all about. God creates everything, the world, the heavens and the earth as a bride for His Son, and the Bridegroom, the Son of God wants this relationship. This is a relationship He wants with the bride in every sense of the word. So this is mutual surrender.

So what about the person then? So what kind of person is this? Are they less human than they were before? No. The person is fully human, more human in fact. A little paragraph here might illustrate this for us. “It should be observed that the Bridegroom does conjure anger and concupiscence to cease, for these powers are never wanting to the soul”. (Stanzas 20/21:7). We might expect that they would, surely, anger, won't have to get angry? Surely that would stop now? Surely the person would not get all kinds of concupiscence, distorted desires and longings? Surely these will cease? No, they don't, John goes on to say, for these powers are never wanting to the soul. The soul is as human as ever. But what God does do, John goes on to say, He conjures their disturbances to cease, But the person will still get angry, but in the right way; a righteous anger. The person will still have desires and longings but they will not control the person. They will not be out of proportion or inordinate. But all the human longings and desires will still be there, but will no longer be distorted. “It is necessary that in this state these inordinate movements be lacking”. (20/21 end of 7). The person will still get angry, Jesus got angry in the temple; anger is part of how it is to be human. All mature human beings have desires and longings, all of that is part of being human, they don't go but they're in proportion. They're rightly ordered. The person is somehow put back how they should be.

Another example would be joy. “Neither do the emotions of joy, which usually caused her a feeling of possessing more or less, make her aware of less or added abundance, for what she ordinarily enjoys is so great that, like the sea, she neither decreases by the outflowing waters or increases by the inflowing waters”. (20/21:11) How does joy work? Perhaps we explain it like this – the person has within them now the full joy of knowing Jesus Christ, of being united with Jesus Christ. The

bride is filled with the joy that the Bridegroom gives, which is greater than any other joy, so events and circumstances of life that can cause joy, whilst the person will still have them and feel them, they will immediately turn to the deeper joy that's within. It's like one has a greater joy, greater than any of the joys that are out there. It's not that the person doesn't appreciate the joys that are out there, they do, but they're in proportion to the greater joy. So there's a freedom there; the person isn't going around looking for this joy or that joy, being pulled in one way or another, because the person already possesses that complete joy that Jesus speaks about at the Last Supper in John's Gospel, 'That your joy may be complete'. There is a complete joy that the person now has and that joy is very much linked to the Cross – the greatest of joy. It's a very different kind of joy. So he's giving a sense here of what the person is like; what this new life is like, and then as we said in stanza 22, it's being brought about, this spiritual marriage.

It's an image that's traditionally used and the inspiration of course is the Song of Songs; also parts of the New Testament like the book of the Apocalypse, where the marriage is between Christ and the Church rather than Christ and an individual. “This spiritual marriage (John tells us) is incomparably greater than the spiritual betrothal, (which is what has been in the previous stanzas, which we could perhaps describe as an ever-deepening level of commitment so) for it is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love”. (Stanza 22:3) How can God give the entire possession of Self to us? Jesus did this upon the Cross, that entire possession, He gave everything. It's very well expressed by St. Paul's hymn in the letter to the Philippians (2; 6-8) “ Though He is in the form of God He emptied Himself becoming as all human beings are, even to death, death on the Cross.” Dying the death of a criminal. He gave everything but He is still God. God doesn't cease to be God here. God can give everything and not cease to be God. The Bridegroom is giving everything here, but not ceasing to be the Bridegroom. Just as the human being, the person is giving everything but she's not ceasing to be human; she's growing into the fullness of her humanity. So the total surrender here is consistent with the very nature of both. God can totally give Himself and yet remain totally God; the human being transformed into Christ, into God, transformed in love, can totally give of herself and yet in that process of giving of herself becomes more completely herself.

Human maturity then, is the capacity to give, the capacity to give of herself. So John goes further “The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life. And thus I think that this state never occurs without the soul's being confirmed in grace, for the faith of both is confirmed when God's faith in the soul is here confirmed. It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this life”. (22:3)

In the Prologue to John's Gospel, which is very influential on John of the Cross, when the author is trying to describe this Word that becomes flesh and comes into this world, and what that means to the person who accepts Him, he said they gave grace upon grace, gave the power to become children of God; or gave the power to grow into being, or gave the power to be transformed into being children of God. John of the Cross here is simply telling us what it is like from within, from the perspective of experience. That's an extraordinary term John of the Cross uses, and insists upon over and over again, particularly in the Spiritual Canticle, but elsewhere as well, God by participation, not by nature. The human being does not become God, or become part of God, though certain people over the years have unfortunately erroneously interpreted John in that way. It is not what John is saying. God by participation for John is in terms of relationship; the relationship with God that the human being is capable of makes the person truly resemble God.

We're made in the image and likeness of God; therefore we have the capacity to grow into that image and likeness image and likeness of God. We'll be picking up on that at a later stage, but at this point I just want to set out the very core, the very centre of this work, what it's about. It's about the person who grows into, who matures into the highest state of humanity possible in this life. Which is an image of God but also it is the fullness of human maturity. That's the woman that Ezekiel is speaking about, she becomes a queen, she rules over all, she's exceedingly beautiful. All the language and imagery that Ezekiel uses there to describe what has happened to this woman is the imagery of God, which is why John of the Cross loves that text so much. It summarises for John the whole Cantic, so Ezekiel summarises the whole Cantic. It is the centre of the Cantic.