

SECULAR CARMELITE RETREAT AT KENSINGTON

26TH- 30TH JULY 2021

*Deepening our prayer life
in the Carmelite Tradition*
transcripts of ten talks

Part 1: Talks One to Five

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St John of the Cross's opening prayer from 'Sayings of Light and Love'

I want to begin with a little passage from St John of the Cross. It's his opening prayer to his *Sayings of Light and Love*.¹ I want to pick this out because I think it helps to set the scene for what we want to do over these days and primarily it is to listen – not to me – but to God, to what God is doing in each of our lives, listen to what is really happening deep within, listen to the silence that is deep within, listen to the spirit whose voice speaks in that deep inner silence.

So John gives us this prayer at the beginning of this collection of sayings. In John's introduction he puts in this prayer and I'd like to make it our theme for this week:

Lord, you love discretion, you love light, you love love; these three you love above the other operations of the soul. Hence these will be sayings of discretion for the wayfarer, of light for the way, and of love in the wayfaring. May there be nothing of worldly rhetoric in them or the long-winded and dry eloquence of weak and artificial human wisdom, which never pleases you. Let us speak to the heart words bathed in sweetness and love that do indeed please you, removing obstacles and stumbling blocks from the paths of many souls who unknowingly trip and unconsciously walk in the path of error – poor souls who think they are right in what concerns the following of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in becoming like him, imitating his life, actions and virtues, and the form of his nakedness and purity of spirit. Father of mercies, come to our aid, for without you, Lord, we can do nothing.

Father of mercies, come to our aid this week, we can do nothing without you, but with you everything can be profitable, everything can bear fruit. So in these words, John of the Cross picks out the three things that God truly loves in the way that a human being lives. He loves that more than anything else we could do, any other way that we can live, and the three words are *discretion, light* and *love*. And what might John mean by each of these? We could write a whole book on any one of them, they keep reoccurring in his writings.

Let's take *discretion*. What might that mean, particularly in John's way of thinking? One way we could put it is about our capacity to make right decisions, or perhaps we could put it better and say it's our prudence, our patience, that enables us not to rush into wrong decisions, because what John seems to be more concerned about is that we rush into things – we do not stop to think, we do not pray. So that's one aspect of discretion: the decisions that we make, the actions that we take, the attitudes that we hold. Another aspect of discretion linked to this, obviously, is how we relate to each other. For John, discretion is fundamental to right human relationships. To be able to relate in a right way to each other, a way that is founded upon truth, and again of course, he's so aware of the damage that is done when there isn't discretion in our way of relating. So discretion is tied up with how we relate to each other, and of course true discretion can only come from one's relationship with God. The person

who is in a right relationship with God grows in discretion. We get a sense of the importance of this word for John, the importance in his thinking.

Then, *light*. What might he mean by light? So often when John speaks about light he actually speaks about it in terms of what we would call the opposite to light, he speaks about it in terms of darkness. Light is essential for seeing, for knowing, yet it is not a seeing or a knowing in a human, physical or earthly sense of the word. It is a light that is gift of God, it is a light from which other lights have to be cut off in order that we may see, or a light that absorbs other lights. Another word we could perhaps put here could be the word *wisdom*, that favourite biblical word denoting that greatest of gifts that God gives. Wisdom is God's greatest gift in the bible. So it is the light that God gives, the wisdom that God gives. It is a new way of seeing and knowing, often experienced by not seeing and not knowing. As John famously said: *Rejoice in what we do not know about God rather than what we know. Go by the way that we do not know rather than the way that we know.* So light is often depicted as darkness; knowing as not knowing, because it is a stepping out from the limits of our seeing and knowing, a stepping beyond those borders to a different kind of seeing and knowing that is gift of God, that is fruit of relationship with God.

And the third thing that God loves is *love*. *Love is God's language*, John famously says, *only love can change a human being, nothing else can.* And John is here referring to the spiritual life as a journey, the wayfarer, the person on a journey – and that of course we all are, we're on a journey and it's a journey that changes us. And it is only love that can change us, nothing else can, nothing else can bring about the deep inner change that is so necessary to make this journey. Other things might change – externals – but it is only love that can bring about this deep inner change.

So John here then prays that the words that he is going to share, that he is going to give, will be discretion for the wayfarer, light for the way, and love in the wayfarer. What a statement. It needs to be carefully looked at. Like all of what John writes – words, phrases, teachings that John gives us – they need time. They need time, we could say, to give up their meaning, to reveal their meaning. So the wayfarer here, the person on this spiritual journey needs discretion, needs to live with and act with discretion. Discretion needs to be the characteristic of this person's life.

Light for the way, for the journey. Wisdom for the journey. It's a journey of walking in light, but as John tells us over and over again, the light is so bright that it appears to us to be darkness. The knowledge is so profound and beyond anything our minds can grasp that it appears to be unknowing rather than knowing. So, light for the way, that the person may truly walk the journey that is the true light and not any false light.

And it is love in the wayfarer – in the action, in the travelling, in the doing and deciding and acting – love. Everything that the person does is an act of love. As John so beautiful puts it in the *Spiritual Canticle: All my actions are love* – a phrase so loved by St Therese of Lisieux – that everything is love, that's how the person will grow and make progress.

And John goes on to tell us why this is so important. If John of the Cross was here with us today, and we asked him just tell us one thing, my guess is that this is probably what he would say to us: *We're all on this journey, we've all taken the decision to live a spiritual life, a Carmelite life, a Christian life, taken a decision to*

follow that call, that voice deep within us to pursue this road, but that is never enough for us. What John recognises so clearly from his vast experience of guiding and directing people in the spiritual life is that what then happens to the person is that they desire to make progress. That desire, that need to make progress, to advance, that's very strong and very real for the person. There are two difficulties to it: one, the fundamental one, is that the person doesn't always advance. That, for John, is the greatest of all tragedies, to be called to something, to set out on the road and not to advance. But the second part he is also equally very much aware of and that is that what people sometimes call advancement and growth is not that at all, and what people think is going nowhere or going backwards or losing the way completely might actually be where God is pouring his grace into their lives, hence the need there is for the kind of guidance that John is giving.

I will read again how he puts it – and he puts it with real feeling here: *to remove obstacles and stumbling blocks from the paths of many souls who unknowingly trip and unconsciously walk in the path of error*. They don't know – *unknowingly* – walk the path of error. They do not understand, make wrong choices, lack the discretion that is needed, and so there are stumbling blocks and obstacles. That's what John wants these words to do – to remove these, that's why he wants them to be light for this journey.

So John wants to speak to the heart. He tells us: *Let us speak to the heart words bathed in sweetness and love*. What a wonderful phrase, because when somebody speaks to the heart it's not to the head they are speaking. When somebody speaks to the heart, the origin of the words is not something that is carefully thought out up here (points to his forehead) – rational and logical – it's rather these are words that have come from love and they have come from pain and from experience. They are words that are precious, that's the way he puts it – *bathed in sweetness and love* – they're not dry and empty words, they are *bathed in sweetness and love*. And therefore they have the capacity to change a person; they have the capacity to make a real difference in a person's life. The heart for John is where we hear God; God speaks to our hearts. That goes beyond anything our minds can know or control. Our minds can be everywhere, but he is speaking to us at this deeper level and to hear him requires silence, a lot of silence, not just in the sense of time, but a silence of the mind, a silence of one's ideas and agendas, because that's what of course creates the obstacles, the stumbling blocks that he's speaking about. When the spiritual life, the spiritual journey becomes my agenda, my project, something I'm going to master, something I'm going to achieve, something I understand, I know what needs to be done, etc., etc., we could go on and on and on – all of which, God in his wisdom has to pull out the foundations out from under them because there is a large stumbling block. But a word of love, a word bathed in sweetness and love can cut right through that, can touch the heart, can transform the inner spirit, can make a real difference to our lives.

Over these past eighteen months so many things in our lives, so many things we took for granted, that had become the norm and the pattern of our lives, their foundations have been pulled out. We all have to live our life in new ways, some of which we found very challenging, very disconcerting. Where God is in all of this can sometimes be very difficult to see, to find, hence the need that there is for these words of discretion, of light, of love. That's what John would do in the situations that we

find ourselves in. That's what he would say to us, he would give us a few words and he would say spend time with these, whether they be words of scripture or these many phrases and sentences he has here in his teaching or a stanza of his poetry or whatever, and allow these words to speak. Our minds may not understand them, they may challenge our minds, they may seem contradictory and confusing. But words require silence, words require time. I am reminded of what a Carmelite nun said to me some years ago when I was about to begin to give them a retreat, and she asked me how long were my talks going to go on for. Luckily I gave the right reply and she said, oh yes, keep them very short, because in our way of life, few words go a long way. This is straight out of St John of the Cross, this is very much the Carmelite tradition, very much what the first Carmelites lived on Mount Carmel, simply living with God's word. That's how words nourish us, words become our food, words become our light. They do so when we hold them as precious, treat them with respect. When we're undemanding with words – what I mean by that is *What does this mean?* Stop! – it's not about what it means. Maybe the right question would be: *What is it saying now? What am I hearing? What is happening? What is this word, paragraph, phrase, bringing up? What is it disturbing? What questions are arising?* That's how wisdom speaks. When we start demanding meaning, explanations, then we want to confine it, we're trying to shut doors, we're trying to put up boundaries. But the word of God goes further, the words of wisdom take us much further. And that's what John is praying for here – that the words that he is giving to people will set them free, will help them to go beyond their limits, go beyond the obstacles that have entered into their lives, that the words will be liberating.

So that's our prayer for these days of retreat, that these days of retreat will set us free, set us free from what has troubled us, distressed us, pained us, limited us over these past times; that these days of retreat will help us discover again the words that God is speaking in the silence of each of our souls, each of our hearts; that we can hear that word in all its freshness and power; that these days of retreat will be times for us when all obstacles will disappear and the treasure begins of knowing Jesus Christ and living by his wisdom will simply shine through for us.

So let that be our prayer, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/HT5s31imzwo>

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St Teresa of Avila on being listened to in prayer and being raised to contemplation

This morning I introduced the talk with a quotation from St John of the Cross and it ended with John praying that God may help us, that without God we can do nothing, and that is something that a person of prayer learns at ever deeper levels. We can start off by thinking: I can do this, this is within my hands, I can learn how, I can get good at it, but the genuine person of prayer recognises, and recognises at ever deeper levels, that without God we can do nothing, but with God, God can make everything happen, God can make great things happen in us.

I want this afternoon to reflect on a passage from St Teresa, from her *Way of Perfection*, beginning of Chapter 25. I choose it because here Teresa in a very simple but very profound way shows us that prayer is possible. It's possible for everyone – not only is it possible, but the heights and the depths of prayer, the fullness of spiritual maturity is open to everybody, there are no spiritual limits, there are no limits to what God can do in us. Here she demonstrates this so simply, but so profoundly – she is speaking about praying the *Our Father*. Everybody can do that, every Christian knows this prayer, it is so familiar to us. We can pray it at any time, anywhere – it is totally accessible and open to us. Here is what she says in the first paragraph of this chapter: *While reciting the Our Father, she said, the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation. By these means His Majesty shows that he listens to the one who speaks to him. And it is his grandeur that speaks to the soul, suspending one's intellect, binding one's imagination, as they say, taking the words from one's mouth, for even though the soul may want to do so, it cannot speak, unless with great difficulty.* Now, this leads to the passage I want to focus on: *The soul understands that without the noise of words, this divine master is teaching it by suspending its faculties, for if they were to be at work they would do harm rather than bring benefit. They are enjoying without understanding how they are enjoying. The soul is being enkindled in love and it doesn't understand how it loves. It knows that it enjoys what it loves but it does not know how. It clearly understands that this is not a joy the intellect obtains merely through desire. The will is enkindled without understanding how, but as soon as it can understand something it sees that this good cannot be merited or gained through all the trials one can suffer on earth. This good is a gift from the Lord of earth and heaven, who, in some, gives to some according to who he is. What I have described, daughters, is perfect contemplation.*

We can almost envisage Teresa writing this and suddenly a smile comes to her face and she says *Ah! I have described perfect contemplation without even intending to!* It so beautifully demonstrates what contemplation is, this lovely gift of God that simply creeps in. God making himself known, God making his presence known in a way that is being known, as I said this morning, a way that is beyond the limits of what we can know, therefore Teresa uses terms here like *suspending the intellect and the faculties*. That might be language that is foreign to us but what she is trying to say is that this is outside of our understanding, outside of anything that we can do, because God does it, and she said *God does it according to who he is*. When something is done according to

who God is and not according to who we are, then we are speaking about something that is quite elusive, something that is quite beyond us.

What Teresa wants to show here is that prayer is possible, it's accessible, it is for everyone. And this is the great gift that Teresa gives us that she gives to the Church; this is what made her teaching new and so radical at the time. In Teresa's time the teaching on prayer often emphasised that the higher forms of prayer were for the elite, and everybody else had the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary* – they were a little bit looked down upon. Teresa is turning this around, saying that there are no gifts of God that are for a certain elite, the gifts that God gives are for everyone, neither are the gifts of God difficult to attain or arrive at, because they are free gifts that God gives. When a person truly receives the gift of God, as Teresa says, the person knows very clearly that they do not deserve this – this has not been earned or merited. Nothing that the person has done has brought this about, but what the person has learned is to totally depend upon God. That, as I said earlier, is what John of the Cross prayed to the Lord: *We are totally dependent upon you; of ourselves we can do nothing.* But our desire to do something of course becomes the great obstacle, because anything we can do, anything we desire to do is limiting. That is why Teresa uses this term here that I read: *suspending one's intellect, binding one's imagination.* So we have our ideas up here that are inadequate; God is always beyond them. And our imagination – we imagine what prayer should be, we imagine what contemplation should be, we imagine what it would be like to be in a right relationship with God, but of course the reality is nothing like that, the reality is something that is beyond our imagination.

And so Teresa here, as she wrote this, was simply describing what she experiences, she's writing what she knows and then realises, ah, this is what it is, this is what perfect contemplation is, God coming in when we allow him in, God making his presence felt when we are praying with sincerity, when we are praying in whatever way we can or seems right for us. As long as the sincerity is there then God can do something great with it. So Teresa shows us that prayer – all aspects of prayer, in all its depths and dimensions – is open to everyone, possible for everyone, there are no spiritual elites or spiritual 'top division' or anything like that. The other aspect of Teresa's teaching which is very striking and would have been very original in her time would be that there are no preconditions – you do not have to do this or do that before you can begin, you do not have to have this knowledge or that knowledge or have changed this or that, there are no conditions to be met. Wherever we are, however our life may be, immediately, now, we can simply begin to pray and when we begin to pray, no matter how imperfect that might be, no matter how chaotic or difficult our life might be, no matter what our past or our history might be, we begin to pray with sincerity, with love, with truthfulness. Gradually, in God's time, great things happen, like the contemplation she's speaking about here simply happens. It simply happens. As she beautifully puts it there: *As they say, taking the words from one's mouth, he listens to the one who speaks to him.*

I spoke this morning a little bit when reflecting on St John of the Cross, on how important that listening is for us and particularly that listening in silence, listening to silence. Here Teresa speaks about God listening, *God is listening to us.* But remember God isn't just listening to our words. In fact, God doesn't really listen to the words because the words are superficial, God listens to the heart, God listens to what's in our hearts, God listens to what's in the deepest place within us, God listens to the deepest

truth of who we are, the deepest truth of our lives. So when we begin to pray, want to pray, desire to pray, or trying to pray or failing to pray, struggling to pray, fed up with prayer, getting nowhere with prayer – just remember God is listening. God is listening to this; he's simply listening. Whatever frustration, or difficulty, whatever we're struggling with, God is listening and he is listening in silence, in deepest silence. He's listening to what we're not saying, listening to what we're not even aware of – his listening is changing and transforming us. He listens to us and that is so important for us – you don't have to do anything to make that happen, we cannot do anything to make it happen – it's a fact. And for Teresa that is something that is so important to her. He is listening. I may be struggling to articulate something, I may be struggling in whatever way, but he is listening. He is also helping and supporting, but in ways that are usually beyond our awareness or understanding. *Rarely does one know*, she says, *what God is doing*.

And here is how she puts it and she emphasises it so strongly: *enjoying without understanding how they're enjoying, enkindled in love it doesn't understand how it loves, it knows it enjoys what it loves but it doesn't know how*, etc. So it's loving, it's understanding without knowing how, or even knowing what it's loving and understanding, because it is God and it is God that is working in the person. But then when it does, when some little glimpse of understanding comes in, the person just knows that this is God, this is totally undeserved – that's a sign that it truly is of God. If the person thinks they have achieved it themselves or got here themselves, or in some way merited this, then it is not of God, that person has not been changed and transformed by the love of God, because one little glimpse of God, one slight experience of God and the person knows that this cannot in any way have been arrived at by themselves, this is pure gift. And therefore the feeling, the sentiment in the heart is one of gratitude, of total gratitude for what God is doing. And that's what is in St Teresa's mind and heart when she says, *I have described what perfect contemplation is*. She has described it, not in some theoretical sense, but as she has experienced it, as it happens in her, and it's obvious that so many people have also recounted this to her. Most people wouldn't put the label *contemplation* on it, wouldn't even know that's what it is, wouldn't even be aware of it, wouldn't have the language for it.

What Teresa is doing here is giving us a language. When we pray a prayer – in this case the *Our Father* – when we pray that prayer well, as well as we can, or we're praying it with sincerity – *believe*, she said, *that God is doing something far greater than even one's imagination could imagine or one's brain could understand and what God is doing is having its effect*. It is effective and I think there are all kinds of implications for that, and when we think about these past months – a year and a half – when we have lived this very particular experience of being deprived of so many of the spiritual supports and structures that we depend upon, God has other ways of supporting us, God has other ways of making his presence felt, God was never less present to anybody. Churches may have been closed, the Eucharist may not have been available, other kinds of meetings and groups and events never took place, but whenever or wherever a person prays with sincerity, God sustains that person in ways beyond their understanding. *God takes the words from one's mouth* – that lovely phrase that Teresa uses – he takes the words, the words become his, whatever a person's attempt to voice something, God takes those words. A reminder of St Paul: when we cannot pray, when we cannot find words, when words are beyond us, when prayer is just too much of a struggle, the Holy Spirit steps in and prays in us and prays

with words, that St Paul says, *are of the mind of God.*² In other words, God, lifting the burden from us and praying in us and praying with us.

So whatever the experience of people over the year and a half has been – and each of us have our own experiences and each of us have our own struggles – and we’re bringing them all to this retreat at this time and they are with us and are part of our experience and part of what we’re listening to. The one thing we can be absolutely certain of is that God was never absent and that God was never inactive and that God’s grace never stopped bringing about what God brings about. Our spiritual journey, our spiritual growth, our spiritual development did not cease but continued in ways that were new, different, unknown to us and that’s something that St Teresa would have understood so well, because what prayer never fails to do for Teresa is to surprise her. Over and over again in her writings we’re told in a great variety of ways that prayer never failed to surprise her.

When a person prays, things happen and those things are so often surprising because what is happening is that the closer one comes to God – or I should put it this way, the closer God draws us to him, the greater the sense we have of who God is and God keeps expanding, getting bigger, greater and that’s why Teresa never ceases to be surprised by God and surprised by what happens in prayer and never ceases to be surprised by the richness that people of prayer live by. Contemplation can come this simply, this unexpectedly, this suddenly. With very little or no effort, a person can be at the heights of contemplation, so unexpectedly can one’s eyes be opened to the presence of God and the work of God where one least expects it to be: the surprise of God and of his presence and the power and the variety of that presence.

What Teresa is all the time showing us is just how simple prayer is. We complicate it, but it’s the most simple and the most natural thing a human being can do and the simpler it is and the more natural it is, the greater its richness. Just to pray with sincerity words that are very familiar to us, words that can be recited with no special effort or needing no special situation or circumstance can just be something that enables something very powerful to take place.

So over these days of retreat let us simply be open to that familiar, close presence of God. He is with us wherever anyone partaking in this retreat may be, and there are all sorts of places and all sorts of circumstances. Wherever you might be, God is there, he is listening to you, God is hearing the silence that’s within you, God is hearing whatever is in the deepest place within you, God is putting his words into your heart, God is making things possible, making things happen that are totally beyond your understanding or imagination. Whatever your efforts to pray may be, however impoverished or imperfect they may be, God can do something great with them. So do not underestimate God. Never underestimate the relationship that each of us has with God, because to God each one of us is important, to God, the prayer of each one of us is precious; to God his relationship to each one of us is unique and is something that he takes great care of. So let us in this retreat respond to that.

Let me just finish again with those words of Teresa: *the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation. By these means His Majesty shows he listens to the one who speaks to him.* So the Lord very simply may raise us up, he listens to us when we speak to him.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fenMtoRsNQk>

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St John of the Cross and his Secret Ladder of Contemplation – Part 1

I want to pick two things from yesterday to link into what I will speak about this morning. One of the things we saw from that text of St John of the Cross was the importance of love in John's whole system of teaching. Only love changes a person, only love brings about that change and transformation that's at the heart of the spiritual life. In the afternoon we saw Teresa describing for us in very personal and vivid terms what contemplation is, that secret hidden work that God does, that hidden effect of God that's present. When God is present, something great happens in the person, something that is beyond the person's awareness and understanding and Teresa shows that this can happen at any time, this can happen to anyone, there are no preconditions, this is pure gift of God.

What I want to look at today is a text of John of the Cross – Chapters 19 and 20 of Book two of his *Dark Night*. It's a part of John's teaching that rarely gets much attention and there are probably two reasons for that. Firstly, this is a summary that he has already spoken about, so people don't tend give it much attention and secondly the structure that he uses – *The ten steps on the ladder* – is not original to John, who tells us it's from St Thomas and St Bernard. In fact recent research shows us that it is actually from a different Dominican of the 13th or 14th century. John uses *The ten steps of the ladder* to summarise his teaching, so I think it's a good starting point for us today to help expand a little bit on this love – the love, he said, that unites one with God. *It is love* – he tells us at the end of Ch. 18 – *it is only love that unites and joins the soul with God.*

This is how he introduces this ladder: *Speaking now somewhat more particularly of this ladder of secret contemplation we declare that the principal property involved in calling contemplation a ladder is its being a science of love, which as we said is an infused loving knowledge that both illumines and enamours the soul, elevating it step-by-step to God, its creator.* So there are a few things there: it's secret – in other words John makes it very clear the person doesn't know this, and the person has no way of knowing which step of this ladder they are on and whether they are on this ladder at all, because this is pure work of God, hidden, secret work of God. But there are two things that it does: it illumines, it gives light and by light of course it means wisdom, knowledge, understanding – as we saw yesterday – without the person knowing where that understanding is coming from. So it gives light, it illumines and it enamours, he said. I suppose we could put it like this: it gives energy and life; the fire burns within and it is important to understand that it is a science of love, in other words, what a person learns in climbing this ladder is love. One learns what love is, one learns how to love, how to receive and give love, and all of that learning is a gift of God. This can't be learned through a person's own initiative or effort, the learning, the change, the transformation, is a response to God's presence and God's actions.

Let's now pick up these steps. The first step, we're told, makes the soul sick in an advantageous way. How can you be sick in an advantageous way or suffer a sickness

that gives life, that is a positive sickness? It is very interesting that this is where, for John, real love begins. To understand this we have got to remember that when John is speaking about *beginners in prayer*, it might not be where we consider beginners to be. The people he refers to as beginners we might think are pretty well experienced, and so it is with love. This is no superficial beginning of the process of growing and maturing in love. This we could say is the beginning of real love; it is the beginning of real, mature, adult love, a love that is being set free from every element of self-interest. Perhaps we could put it in a rather simplistic way: what should not be there is being taken away and is being replaced by what should be there. This is what God is doing here, and so what John calls this sickness is there because the light of God's love has shone on this person and therefore they see their sickness, or what Teresa would call self-knowledge. The person has to face up to the real truth of who they are, so there is this sickness, this disillusionment, this sense that nothing has meaning any more, they cannot find satisfaction in anything. It reminds us very much of the first of John's signs for discerning the Dark Night and of course the Dark Night is this process of change and transformation that God brings about in a person. And John gives us three signs for discerning this and the first of the signs is very similar to this: the person no longer finds satisfaction in the 'spiritual' activities that gave them satisfaction up until now. They thought they were very holy, thought they were getting this all very right and making wonderful progress and then the foundations were pulled out from under them. But in order to know that this genuinely is a work of God and not something that's just coming from themselves, what also must go with it is the sense that they are not getting satisfaction from anything else either. So there's a general dissatisfaction in everything. The person hasn't stopped praying and taken a great liking to alcohol – that's not spiritual growth, that's simply that somebody has taken a wrong turning somewhere, or something else has come into their lives, distracting them and taking them away from where they should be. There's a general withdrawing, becoming detached from everything. So many things that had meaning before, gave satisfaction, no longer do, because what the light of God is doing is purifying what needs to be purified, because the motives and the attachment to these things were not pure – there was self-interest, there was self-serving in this. So this is the first step of love. It might appear to the person to be the opposite to that. Love gave great satisfaction up until now, the lover was full of love and suddenly love starts to become difficult, love starts to cost, love is no longer giving the satisfaction it gave because there was so much self-interest tied into it.

And so this then leads to the second of these steps on the ladder of love in which the person searches for God; the person recognises that *Nothing else is going to give me what I want, except God*. So the result, or the fruit, we might say, of all these other things being taken away is that the person searches for God. It's the bride at the beginning of the *Spiritual Canticle*. She's wounded with love, she goes out searching for God and nothing less than God will satisfy her. That is the result of the first step – that all these things that are less than God, that gave satisfaction and light and a certain enjoyment up until now are taken away. So nothing will satisfy the person but God, nothing will give real joy and peace but God. But the person is not yet fully united with God. Their love has got to grow. So the kind of search that John describes here is a search. I suppose we could put it like this: the person is not going to stop, there is an attention to detail present; the person is really concerned about the things of God. Again it echoes another of the signs of contemplation that John gives, the second sign: the person's attentiveness to the things of God. The person may not

be getting the satisfaction they previously enjoyed from their prayer or their Christian duties, but they're still very attentive to them, very committed to them, in fact they are more committed than ever. So there's this attentiveness, a detailed attentiveness; the things of God concern this person, let's put it like that, therefore it's not a falling away, a person who is falling away isn't concerned about the things of God. So in this second step of growing and maturing in love, the person's commitment to love is deepening, even though the person's satisfaction and fulfilment in this love is decreasing, at the same time the person is putting a greater energy and effort into the love. So love is getting stronger and this is very much part of John's teaching. Love is strengthened when it is difficult, when it is challenged, that's when love grows. So love is getting stronger here as the person searches for God and is satisfied with nothing less than God.

So then we come to the third rung of this ladder. The person is now much stronger despite the sickness and the apparent absence of God, so the person puts themselves very strongly into works, this work for God and the soul works and gives it fervour that it might not fail. So in this work that it does there is this eagerness because the fire of love is burning within. The person might not have the feeling that the fire of love is burning within, they might have thought the fire of love was burning at a much earlier stage, they might think the fire has gone out. In reality the fire is burning stronger than ever, but it's not experienced in feelings or emotions or highs, but it is seen in works. This person is growing in charity, in self-giving, but the person feels she's doing nothing because there is no sense that this is coming from herself, this is coming from God. What has been taken away is the sense or the feeling that one is loving, or the sense that one is getting somewhere or improving or anything like that. The person who is genuinely living on this third rung of the ladder would say they are doing nothing, because, of course, they are searching for God and nothing less than God will satisfy the person. Therefore whatever work they do, whatever charity they perform, no matter how great it is, it will seem nothing to them because the measure is of God's love and not anything else. So there's going to be no lacking in this love. *Because of such intense love for God, individuals at this stage feel deep sorrow and pain at the little they do for God and that sorrow and pain comes from the intense love for God that they have.* Another effect he gives here: *such persons think inwardly that they are really worse than others.* We see this very much played out in John's *Dark Night*.

What one notices here is that despite all this sorrow and pain and sickness and everything else, there is a deep inner strength and that is getting stronger and that we see even more so when we get to the fourth step on this ladder. And it is what John calls *the spirit of suffering* and it is a suffering that does not tire the person. Just as the sickness on the first step of the ladder gave life, the sickness was a positive sickness. Now we have a suffering here that does not do harm, even though there might be harmful physical or psychological effects of the suffering. The person may be suffering physically, emotionally or psychologically and very much feel that suffering and there may be effects of that sort here but it is not a suffering that is going to damage or compromise the person's capacity to love – that's what matters – on the contrary, in the midst of this suffering the person's capacity and strength to love grows and matures, that's why John can call it a suffering that is doing no real harm but it's actually a suffering that's strengthening and life-giving, and what is growing is this interior detachment. At the first rung of the ladder we saw that there

was an exterior detachment, the person was being detached from everything else around them that would be giving them satisfaction. Now the detachment is had at a much deeper level. Whatever this pain or suffering may be, the person is not pushed into self-pity or self-centredness. So often suffering makes people more self-centred, turns people in on themselves and they become defensive, whereas the kind of suffering here does the opposite, in that love continues to grow, love continues to mature because the person is more and more detached and therefore the suffering really does not tire, but the person has energy, has life. *All its care – that's the person's care – is directed as to how it might give some pleasure to God and render him some service.* That's all the person is concerned about. In the midst of however great the suffering may be, they will give some pleasure to God and render God some service. Because, as we saw in the second step, everything is now focused on God and searching for God and in the third step the fire of love is burning so much stronger, therefore the person would be turning backwards if they became concerned about themselves, here in the midst of this suffering, whatever form it might take. Rather, everything is directed towards God and rendering him service, *because, John tells us, of what God deserves and the favours he has bestowed, even though the cost might be very high.* So the person sees everything as gift of God and a favour from God. *This degree of love is a very elevated step, as the soul at this stage through so genuine a love pursues God in the spirit of suffering for his sake.* So the person is seeking God in the midst of great suffering, not for something for themselves, but out of love for God and to give God service. So the suffering is not in any way making the person self-centred, but rather is doing the opposite, they are reaching out ever more to God in an un-self-centred way, they are reaching toward God. *His Majesty frequently gives it joy – God is sustaining the person, giving the person joy in the midst of suffering – this is something John of the Cross speaks about at length elsewhere, as does Edith Stein, how in the midst of the greatest suffering a human being can be experiencing the greatest joy.* There is no contradiction between suffering and joy, they are not opposites. In an earthly human sense of the word they are opposites, but here in the spiritual life they come together, they can exist side by side in the person, because when the person is no longer focused on themselves, then they have the freedom to really receive the joy and the peace that God is giving them irrespective of what their circumstances may be.

The fifth step on the ladder is this impatient desire and longing for God. What the second step had begun has now become even stronger. On this step the lover must either see its love or die. That comes from the Bible, *to see God and to die.* Only God can satisfy us, and therefore what all this suffering, this searching and longing and all these works this person is doing has brought about is that love is growing all the time – this desire, this longing for nothing less than God. This is sometimes called *the hunger for God, or the step of hunger – an impatient longing.* Nothing else will do, nothing else will suffice. *On this step, the desire of the lover is to apprehend and be united with the beloved. It is so ardent that any delay, no matter how slight, is long, annoying and tiresome. The soul is ever believing that it is finding its beloved and when it sees its desire frustrated at almost every step, it faints in love. So, on this step of hunger this desire is so strong – the soul so feeds on love that it can ascend to the sixth step.*

It helps us to get a summary of this process of growing in love, which is, to put it in another way, the process of human maturing. We're becoming true human beings

through the effect that God's love has on the person. That's what John is trying to summarise here. Having brought us through all his teaching on his *Dark Night* to show us now what it is that takes place when the love of God enters a person, when the love of God is given the space and the freedom to work in the person. We need to go back to that rather simplistic term: *when what should not be there is purified, removed* – that is, all the obstacles, imperfections and imperfect understandings, all sorts of obstacles. Love removes those. It's only love that removes the obstacles.

As John says in the *Living Flame*: *It is the same fire of love that purifies that also gives the light.* So the flame of love, that flame of God's love is always doing these two things that may seem contradictory to us: it is purifying, therefore it is bringing about detachment and inner freedom and healing and strength, and is at the same time giving light, imparting to the person all these great gifts that God gives.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: https://youtu.be/D_hafVpXwq8

**Secular Carmelite Retreat at Kensington
26th –30th July 2021 with Fr Matt Blake OCD**

St John of the Cross and his Secret Ladder of Contemplation – Part 2

This is continuing what I was speaking about this morning, *The Ladder of Love* or *The Ladder of Contemplation*, the ladder of growing and maturing in love. This image of the ladder, John tells us, is a particularly good image because, obviously with a ladder one can go up and one can come down, there's ascending and descending. The inspiration for it is Jacob's Ladder in the Bible with the angels ascending and descending, depicting the communication, the contact there is between the earthly world and the heavenly world.

For the purpose of what John is speaking about here, in the descending, there are two aspects to it. One is of course that God comes down to wherever we are, because we couldn't even get on to the first rung of the ladder without God's help. It is entirely, as I said this morning, a work of God. Contemplation is always God's secret work. God comes down and meets us, wherever we are, even if we can't get onto the first rung of the ladder, he's there with us. The other aspect of the ascending and the descending is that from our perspective we are going toward God because God is at the top of the ladder; the ladder is also leaning upon God – God is supporting the ladder – and as the person grows in love she goes up the ladder. But in another sense she also goes down, because the more one grows in love, the more one also grows in humility. The person becomes more humble, grounded and rooted in this earth. The image of the ladder helps to depict both of these. The growing in humility is such an important aspect of this and it's the proof that this is genuine. If the person is not growing in humility, then whatever they're growing in, it's not genuine, it's not pure.

As John tells us, the ladder is secret – *by a secret ladder* – the line of John's poem from the *Dark Night*. The secret ladder, because contemplation is always secret, never known to the person, but what John tells us – especially when we get to the second set of the five rungs of the ladder that we will look at now – is that the person becomes aware of the effects. Love can never remain in itself, love can never remain a secret, love always throws out effects. The lovely image that John uses in his *Living Flame* is that of the fire and it gets hotter and hotter and hotter, but the fire is also sending out flames – that's the nature of love, love is always expressing itself, so the effects of this love are seen.

We looked this morning at the first five steps of the ladder. However, it can be misleading when we talk about going from one rung of the ladder to the next, because this is not to be understood in a linear sense, it's more that as one grows and matures the different aspects of love come together in the person. Each of these rungs represent different aspects of love that grow and mature as they are purified in the person. It's not so much about getting to the top, but more about the person growing and deepening in each of these aspects of love, one does not know anyway where one is. Each of the rungs is giving us a different aspect of what pure and mature love is.

So we get to the sixth rung and the image that John uses in the sixth is the one of flying. He takes it from various biblical passages. The person can fly, the person is being set free. The love that has invigorated them makes them fly swiftly. There is this sense of being liberated and that has been there right through this whole process, right from the beginning. The person has been set free. What is one being set free from? Everything that weighs one down, everything that is an obstacle, everything that is incompatible with love. As I said at the beginning, everything has to be taken out that is in need of purification, because what all of these obstacles do is limit and compromise a person's freedom. To grow in love is to grow in freedom. Love sets us free, so the person now is experiencing a very highly developed level of freedom. So the person can fly, nothing is restraining the person, so this makes it fly swiftly, it races. There is a sense of speed, and the reason, John tells us, for the swiftness of love on this step is that the soul's charity is now highly increased and almost completely purified. So the charity, the love, has so increased. If love is setting one free one has now reached a very high level of freedom. It's almost purified – that's an interesting phrase. Almost – not quite there yet – and that will be the case always for as long as the person lives in this world, because the love of God, God's love, that love that God puts in the person, that desire for God that we've seen in these earlier steps, particularly in numbers two and five, that searching, that desire, that hunger for God can only be fully satisfied with the full vision of God. But that's not possible in this world. That can only be possible when the soul comes face to face with God in eternity, therefore this *almost, not quite there, cannot be fully there*. For as long as one dwells in this world there is always a sense that there is more. The search does not stop, or as John puts it in his *Living Flame*, it's the very nature of love to be always growing and changing and going deeper. Love can never stop somewhere and one of the shortcomings of the image of the ladder is that once you get to the top you cannot go further. But the very nature of love is that there isn't an end, love cannot stop somewhere and become something static, it's always going to be something dynamic, something that is living and growing and there is always more. So it's almost purified but not fully, it cannot be so in this world. So the soul is soon to be brought to the sixth step – there's an urgency to get to the next one here. Even the way he writes about this sixth step he writes such a short bit about it because the person wants to fly.

We now come to the seventh step of the ladder, and like so many of these steps, there's a paradox here. On the one hand, this seventh step is termed *ardent boldness*, John says, *an ardent daring*. Nothing holds the person back because the person is being set free. He gives us here three examples of what holds a person back that now no longer applies. *At this stage*, he said, *love neither profits by the judgment awaited* – no waiting, no, go for it – *nor makes use of counsel* – no, it does not go backwards, *neither can it be curbed through shame* – so nothing is holding it back from God, from going to God – *for the favour God now gives it imparts an ardent daring* – it's a daring that's given by God, therefore it is not something that comes from the person, if it came from the person it would be seen as pride or something like that – vanity or presumption. It's none of those because the person is almost totally purified, therefore it's God who gives the person the courage that they now have. But as I said, there's a paradox to this because at the same time there is humility – the person can be daring and be humble. Humility has also grown here, the person always conserves humility. Daring does not in any way threaten humility. So the person here can ask God for anything. He quotes St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians³: *Charity believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things*, and he quotes Moses asking God.

So we can ask for anything here. *From the free hand and boldness God gives on this seventh step that one may be daring in his presence, but in ardent love.* So there's a daring here, one can ask for anything, to approach God – the person is coming closer and closer to God but is at the same time more and more humble.

So the next step we come to is the eighth, which in a sense follows on from this. The person now has the daring and also has the humility, is ready and able to come into God's presence. Therefore, this step is logically called *Union with God* – becoming one with the Beloved. *I found him who my heart and soul loves*, he quotes from the *Song of Songs*.⁴ In John of the Cross's teaching the goal and the point of arrival of the spiritual life is always union with God, union between two lovers, union between two loves, but in reality that's not what it is because we are not speaking about two loves that are equal. God's love and human love can never be equal, so the union is between God's love and human love that has been transformed by God's love. Human love that has been so transformed that it resembles God's love, because the nature of love, as John of the Cross tells us, love of its very nature must respond with a love that is equal to the love that it receives. Nothing less will satisfy it. So the person who is receiving the Love of God and here the person is receiving it at a very deep level, is totally transformed in that love so they will not be satisfied until they can return that love, until they can respond with a love equal to the love that is received and so it is union between God's love and the human love transformed. So in this eighth step the soul satisfies its desire for union. However again it's not fully there. *It does not do so continually. Some manage to get to it but soon turn back and leave it*, because again we're still in this world, still within the limits of this world, so not quite there, but almost there.

The ninth step is the highest that one can reach in this world, John tells us – the step of the perfect. The ninth step of love causes the soul to burn gently; it is the step of the perfect who *burn gently in God*. Before this, the fire is ardent and the fire is painful, now it is a gentle burning into God, a uniting with God. *The Holy Spirit produces this gentle and delightful ardour by means of the perfect soul's union with God*. So it is burning with love. *We cannot speak*, John says, *of the goods and riches of God a person enjoys on this step, because even were we to write many books about them the greater part would still remain unsaid*. So it is impossible to fully articulate this, but John attempts to in his writings, particularly in his *Spiritual Canticle*, his *Living Flame*, his poetry and in many parts of his writings, because on the one hand, while it cannot be expressed and what the person is experiencing cannot be put into words, there is a great need to put it into words or put it into concepts or images or express it artistically in some way. The deepest of human experiences need expression and that is one of the characteristics of John's writings and this is where his artistic mind, his artistic temperament is to be seen: the need to express what cannot be expressed, the need to express what most needs to be expressed. Now the person is living the most profound and mature relationship any human being could live. While John is all the time describing it as secret and hidden, of course it's not, and it cannot be so – it must be expressed.

The tenth step, John tells us, is not of this world, because the completion can only take place in the next world and that of course is what the ladder is doing; that's why the ladder is such a good image, because it is linking the heavenly and earthly worlds;

not only linking the heavenly and the earthly, but the human and the divine within the soul of the person and what can be known and experienced with what cannot be known. Experienced, yes – but not known.

So the last step then, the tenth: *This secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it.* That clear vision of God that a person sees. When a person is drawn into God, it's not that the person becomes God, or part of God, but rather like God, or resembles God. *Since these souls, few that there be, are already extremely purged through love, they do not enter purgatory.* That's something again fundamental to John's teaching on purification, the teaching on purgatory that in the next life, if we haven't reached this full purification, the person has an opportunity for further purification and preparation to come face to face with God. Here John is saying that in this life, the souls that ascend this ladder do not need that, because all the preparation is done here in this life. The person is ready for the sight of God, the person has reached that level of purity so now they can come face to face with God. The final setting free, when all the other setting free has been done, is setting one free of this world, of the physical body, of the limits of this world.

John gives a beautiful description in his *Living Flame*, of the death of these people. He said it is physically like the death of everybody else, it has all the physical characteristics, but in reality, he said, it is something completely different, because the person has already died to everything that they need to die to. They have let go of everything, this is the detachment that has been happening as one ascends the ladder. The person has already let go of everything, therefore death is just the final passing into that fullness of light and of life that the person is fully prepared for; because, as John said, most people are not fully prepared for that.

So he then quotes from the first letter of St John, who said this vision of God is the cause of the soul's complete likeness to God: *We know that we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.*⁵ So the more that we can see God, the more we can see ourselves as we really are. So when the person comes face to face with God – this is from the first letter of St John and we often quote it in the third Eucharistic prayer, often used at funerals – when we come face to face with God, we shall be like God because we shall see him as he really is. When we can see God as he really is, we are like him. To put this in a rational way, this whole climbing of the ladder of contemplation that John has been speaking about leads to the person becoming more like God. The nature of God is love, so to grow in love is to grow in likeness of God. If we want to become like God we grow in love, so the more that the person grows in love, the more like God they become. Or another way of putting it is the more they grow in love, the more they see the truth of who God is, the reality of who God is. And in order to see God one has to have grown and matured in love, one has to be purified in love in order to see God. If one is not purified in love, one's image of God, one's vision of God will be distorted. It is only through the eyes of love that we can see God, it's only through love that we can know God. So the person who has been purified in love, who has reached this fullness of love that John of the Cross is speaking about, that person can see God, that person can recognise God and can see the truth of who they are. If seeing ourselves, self-knowledge, is the first step of the journey, it's also the last step. At the first step of self-knowledge, what we saw was everything that was not God, as I said, everything that needed to be taken away,

that needed to be purified, that needed to be changed. Now the person sees themselves in the image of God, as the Bible says at the beginning *we are created in the image and likeness of God*. Now the person has grown into that image and likeness of God, and John uses here one of his favourite ways of expressing this: *God through participation, because all that it is will become like God. Thus, it will be called and shall be God through participation*. So everything about this person, everything that's seen will be like God, it is *God through participation*. It is not, as I have said earlier, being assimilated into God or becoming part of God, it's not that, the person becomes more truly themselves, they resemble God, the mirror image of God, they are the image and likeness of God, they are *God through participation*. By that John means actively – in other words, how they receive and give love, how they relate, how they see things, is like God. To see the world as God sees it, to see other people as God sees them, to think and act as God does, etc.

John gives us a little conclusion here: *Such is the secret ladder of which the soul here speaks, although on these higher steps it is not very secret for the soul, for love reveals a great deal though the remarkable effects it produces*. The effects of love reveal the deep wisdom of God. We learn who God is through love, not through information or knowledge or actions. We learn who God is through love, that's why rightly, John of the Cross keeps coming back to saying *Love is God's language, God communicates himself through love, we hear that communication through love, it is our hearts that listen and hear the communication of God through love*. *But on this last step of clear vision at the top of the ladder where God rests, nothing is any longer hid from the soul and this because of its total assimilation*. Now it is able to see face to face, no longer in darkness, as St Paul said, but face to face. *Nevertheless, until that day, however high the soul may ascend, something will still be hidden in proportion to one's lack of total assimilation to the divine essence*.

Those ten steps of the ladder help in drawing together that essential teaching of John of the Cross on love and the growth of love. It is through love that we grow towards God into God, it is through love that we become most totally and most completely ourselves. It is love that brings about this growth, purification and transformation that is so needed, that is necessary for all growth.

Transcribed from the recorded talk <https://youtu.be/WTH5jb5JzSw>

**Secular Carmelite Retreat at Kensington
26th – 30th July 2021 with Fr Matt Blake OCD**

The person disguised, clothed in the theological virtues of faith, hope and love

This morning is really a continuation of what I spoke about yesterday. We concentrated upon John of the Cross' ladder that we find in the second stanza of his poem *The Dark Night* in which he talks about this escape and this ladder and he gave us ten rungs of the ladder, ten stages of growth – growing in love, maturing in love. When John gets to the end of that he realises there's something missing here because everything he has been speaking about is the work of God, of contemplation, what God is doing, what God is bringing about. I want to read a little paragraph in which John summarises that something truly amazing has taken place. This is Chapter 22 of Book 2 of *The Dark Night*. *It was manifestly a great grace for the soul to have successfully undertaken this departure in which she liberated herself from the devil, the world and her own sensuality. In having reached the happy freedom of spirit desired by all, the soul went from the lowly to the sublime; being earthly she became heavenly; and being human she became divine, and arrived at having her conversation in heaven – that's from St Paul's letter to the Philippians⁶ and John concludes: as is proper to this state of perfection.*

So in those words John tells us of the transformation that has taken place. But if you note, he tells it not in terms of what God has done but in what she has done. She has departed, she has set herself free. The part that's missing then from what we saw yesterday is: what is the person doing? How is the person living this experience? He shows us this, tells us this, that the person is living now fully the three theological virtues: faith, hope and love. John of the Cross the artist presents to us most beautifully in Chapter 21 the person clothed in the three colours: white, green and red.

The Italians love this chapter because of the Italian flag. What is also striking about this chapter is how well John knows military dress. All this is given by him to present us with this visual image. He has given us the ladder and now he has the person disguised in order to make this escape. To make this journey, the person needs to be clothed or disguised or take on a new identity, an identity that will aid the person in becoming free, that's the purpose of disguised, he said, in order to achieve an objective or to make a statement. And so the disguise is faith, hope and love. What he's doing in this section is he bringing together the entire teaching of his books *The Dark Night* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, because the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* Books 2 and 3 are all about faith, hope and charity. Now he's pulling that together with the great work of contemplation that God brings about and that John describes in his *Dark Night*.



The important reason, John tells us, that I undertook this task – that is writing all of this – was to explain this night to many souls who in passing through it do not understand. It is so important that the person understands. Yesterday I mentioned

over and over again that the person understands yet does not understand. There's understanding used in various senses of the word, but a knowledge of the spiritual life, a knowledge of how it works, is so important for spiritual growth. I will be coming back to this this afternoon when I will look at something from St Teresa. It's not enough just to be walking on this road. For John if one is to make real genuine progress one needs to have an understanding of the road that one is on and why one is on it. That's John's whole purpose, he said, is that with an understanding the person will obviously make greater progress and the means to make progress, for John, is living by these theological virtues of faith, hope and love. And he has gone into great detail on them in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, so here he just gives a very brief summary of each of them, but an important little summary that helps us to see the purpose of this.

It should be known for the sake of understanding this verse – and that is the disguised – that people disguise themselves by simply dissembling their identity under a garb and appearance different their own, and they do this to show exteriorly by means of that garment their will and aspiration towards gaining the favour and good pleasure of their beloved. So it is these garments of faith, hope and love that show what the person really is living within, their will, this is a statement that this is how the person is living. *The Soul then, touched with love for Christ her spouse, and aspiring to win his favour and friendship, departs into the skies that more vividly represent the affections of her spirit.* So the garments reveal what is happening within her spirit. The three colours stand for the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, by which she not only gains the favour and goodwill of her beloved, but also advances very safely, fortified against her three enemies. So these give the strength against the three enemies. Faith, hope and charity are the sources of strength that enable the person to make the journey. The three enemies of the journey are the devil, the world and the flesh.

So faith is the first one, then. It's white. Faith is an inner tunic of such pure whiteness that it blinds the sight of every intellect. Remember in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* faith is the purifying of the intellect. And we might think what's that about? Because whatever it is that we know, or we can ever know is always going to be limited and is always going to limit us. It is faith that enables us to go beyond what we know to a real knowledge of God. It is faith that enables the earthly, the human and God – the heavenly, the divine – to meet, to speak, to converse, to enter into an understanding. So when John speaks about faith and when he speaks about contemplation and when he speaks about the dark night, though they are three distinct realities, he speaks about them in a very similar language because each is what exposes one to God. To speak about faith as darkness or a dark night, of course what he is speaking about is the brightness of the light, the knowledge of God. It is faith that enables us to know God, but in order to do that we must go beyond the limits and the distortions of our own thinking. So our own thinking can become an obstacle. It's a purification of everything that is known and every means that we have of knowing and of course that's where the devil comes in, that can distort what we think.



So faith, he said, gives strong protection, more than do all the other virtues, against the devil, who is the mightiest and the most astute enemy, because he can distort the way we think, the way we see things. So faith is the foundation and the beginning of the other garments and virtues. We cannot get through to God without faith. To summarise what he says: *so the soul wore her white tunic of faith when she departed on this dark night – that’s coming straight from the second stanza of his poem – and walked, as we said, in the midst of interior darknesses and straits without the comfort of any intellectual light, neither from above, because heaven seemed closed and God hidden, nor from below because she derived no satisfaction from her spiritual teachers and suffered with constancy and perseverance, passing through these trials without growing discouraged or failing the beloved.* This is a summary of many chapters of John’s teaching basically saying that everything that we know or think we know is not God, something less than God, and therefore we must go beyond that, without the comfort of anything, without reading, spiritual teachers or anything, only trust in God, put one’s total reliance on God, persevere, walk this road. So that’s the white, that is faith, that is the inner garment, he said, that is the deepest inner garment, that’s what the person is living within.

The second garment is green, and green is hope, the enemy being the world. *This greenness of living hope in God imparts such courage and valour and so elevates the soul to the things of eternal life, that in comparison with these heavenly hopes all earthly things seem as they truly are, dry, withered, dead and worthless.* Hope is linked to the purification of the memory, and this is something that is so often misunderstood. Surely John of the Cross is not saying that we shouldn’t remember things, that we should all become forgetful? That’s not what he is saying. The



memory is obviously a gift of God, just like the intellect is a gift of God; the difficulty with it is that we can become confined or limited by it. Just as with the intellect we are confined by what we know and understand, here we can be by what we experience, by the world around us, by the familiar, the little voice within us telling us things and of course that includes all the hurts and pain of the past and the angers and resentments and all sorts of things that we bring with us, that we carry with us and that become imprisonments for us or become things that we depend upon. A purified memory places one’s hope in God, looks to the things that one does not know, that one does not have, looks to the things of heaven, looks to the things of God, that is not tied to the things of this world. Each of these you can see is a setting free. When we looked at the ladder, the person can find the ladder because they have the inner freedom to respond to God’s grace, to God’s work in them. So each of these is setting the person free. When the person has this green cloak of hope then the person is putting all their hope in God, in what they do not yet see. *The soul is thus divested of all worldly garments and does not set her heart on anything there is or will be in the world.* What is the heart set on? Anything that is or will be in the world. If it is then we are confined to that, but the heart rather is set on God and what God gives. *She lives clothed only in the hope of eternal life, having her heart so lifted above the things of the world, she is not only unable to touch or take hold of worldly things but she cannot even see them.* So this green livery is this great protection. Each one of these John presents here as a protection because he is speaking in military language,

the robes, the garments and now the helmet are protection. *It allows the soul to look only towards heavenly things. This green livery by which one always gazes on God, looks at nothing else and is not content save in him alone.* A principle of John of the Cross is that if somebody is content with something less than God, then they make themselves equal with that, but if they are content only with God – as we have seen yesterday – then they become ‘an equal with God’ by transformation, by grace; but to set one’s heart on anything that’s less than God is to debase oneself and is ultimately a denial of one’s true identity as a person *made in the image and likeness of God*, as we are told at the very beginning of the Bible. If we’re truly made in the image and likeness of God, if we know our true identity, then we can be satisfied with nothing less than that. So the person who is living in hope has their heart set upon God and nothing else can control the person’s heart, because it is set only on God.

The soul advances through this dark and secret night in the disguise of the green livery of hope, for she walks along so empty of all possessions and support that neither her eyes nor her care are taken up with anything but God. So she’s empty of everything: possessions and support – the detachment that we saw yesterday. But again, remember John of the Cross’s principle: it’s not the quantity of goods that a person has but the relationship with them. One can have all the goods in the world and be free of them, one can be extremely poor but be attached to something. It’s the attachment, not the goods in themselves. Goods are not an obstacle between us and God; all the many things God gives us in this world are not an obstacle between us and God, it’s the relationship we have with them when we allow them to control us or distort us, when they become an obstacle between us and God. The person truly clothed in this green can have all the wealth in the world because that wealth will not be an obstacle between the person and God. The person’s heart will be free to relate with God. That’s the freedom of this green cloak.

Then over the white and the green comes the red, the bright red, the precious red toga, he said, that covers everything. And this is charity – love. And charity, John tells us, makes her so beautiful and pleasing to God. It’s Charity that brings out the beauty of the person. Love and beauty, they are so important in John’s teaching, they are God’s language – God is love, God is beauty. When a person here is transformed in love – and that’s what the whole ladder was about yesterday, that person is exceedingly beautiful, that person radiates beauty. It’s not a beauty in some superficial sense of the word, but it is the beauty of love, the beauty of God. *For where there is true love of God, love of self and of one’s own things finds no entry.* So it’s the self one is set free from here – the devil, the world and now the self: the flesh, the feelings of sensuality, everything in one’s self that one is now set free from. Without charity, no virtue is pleasing to God, no work. John tells us elsewhere everything one does, everything one achieves in life, its value is in the love with which it is done, not in the greatness of the achievement, or the wonders of the work, or whether it lasts, or whether it makes one famous or anything, the only thing that gives anything value is the love with which it is done. The smallest little act done with love is more valuable than all the greatest works in the world if there is no love in them. It’s only love that gives value to human life, it’s only love that gives value to whatever it is that we do,



or whatever decisions that we take, everything is measured by love. Now the person is clothed in the bright red of love, which is the wonderful beauty of the person.

Now we have a fourth colour, he brings another colour in here. It is purple, which is the most valuable of all colours, the colour of royalty. He tells us that *love is the seat draped in purple on which God rests*. That's inspired by the *Song of Songs*,⁷ so influential on John's teaching. A wonderful image to hold. It's a lovely expression, love is the seat draped in purple on which God rests. Love is the very nature of God, that's who God is.



To summarise, paragraph 11: *This then is the disguise the soul says she wore on the secret ladder in the night of faith and these are its colours. Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with the divine wisdom. Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, it withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with him. Charity also empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not God and centres them on him alone. Thus charity prepares the will and unites it with God through love, because these virtues have the function of withdrawing the soul from all that is less than God, they consequently have the mission of joining it with God.* So that's what it's all about, put very simply: faith, hope and charity withdraw the soul from all that is less than God. If one is living these three, one withdraws from everything that is not God, and when one withdraws from everything that is not God the person is joined with God. That's the mission: to join the person with God to become one with God. That is the whole purpose: union with God that John is writing about, that's why these colours are so important, this is what enables the person to make this journey and that is the journey that's being made on this ladder – from being limited, attached, confined, imprisoned – to being free, to love, to being one with God, to being God by participation.

I am going to finish now. *Without walking sincerely in the garb of these three virtues it is impossible to reach perfect union with God through love.* We have seen over and over again that there is no other way to be united with God except through love. It's only love that changes the person, it's only love that enables true growth and maturing to happen to the person. Without faith, hope and charity it's impossible. So it's a great grace, it's a great gift to have put on these clothes and to have persevered to the end, the goal – union with God. And that is what John is celebrating in his poem, that's what matters to him more than everything else and that's what he is giving us in this summary here.

Transcribed from the recorded talk <https://youtu.be/4PrNJfLB5cA>

NOTES for Talks 1–5

¹ *Sayings of Light and Love* [Prologue, p.85] in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, ODC and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD. ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies Washington, D.C. 1991

² Romans 8:26

³ Corinthians 1 – 13:7

⁴ Song of Songs, Chapter 3

⁵ 1 John 3:2

⁶ Phil. 3:20

⁷ Song of Songs 3:10