

THE ANNUNCIATION

Talk given by Fr Matt Blake OCD on 24 March 2022,

based on the *Romances on the Gospel text, “In the Beginning was the Word”* relating to the Blessed Trinity, by St John of the Cross

Transcribed from the recorded talk available at: https://youtu.be/C7H_ejTmYDQ

We're very aware that this evening is the vigil of the Feast of the Annunciation and so that feast is very much the background to what I have chosen to take as a reflection from St John of the Cross. Sometimes people feel having the Feast of the Annunciation in the midst of Lent doesn't quite fit. This is a feast we normally associate with Christmas and indeed it is part of the Christmas story and we hear all the readings we have for the Annunciation, particularly in the gospel, throughout the Christmas season; it's very much a Christmas story. And yet, with the help of John of the Cross we will see that perhaps not – maybe it also fits very well into our season of Lent.

My starting point is one of John of the Cross' poems, which I'm going to read in a moment. Many of you will be familiar with this poem, which John wrote in prison and it's what's known as his *Romances on the beginning of John's gospel on the Word becomes flesh* *. But in this poem, all set within the mind of God, the Trinity, we have the whole history of God's relationship with His people, and it all converges upon the incarnation, God becoming human. I just want to read the critical part of it from our perspective today, when he gets to the incarnation. It's all written in terms of a great love story; all of creation is created by God the Father as a bride for the Son. Here these first words are on the lips of Jesus, before he comes into the world:

*“I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word
of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
I will go seek my bride
and take upon myself
her weariness and labours
in which she suffers so;
and that she might have life,
I will die for her,
and lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to you.”*

So there is summed up the purpose of Jesus coming into this world. It is an act of love; it is to make known the beauty and sweetness and sovereignty of God the Father, of the Trinity, to make God known to our world. It is to take upon himself all the burden of humanity and of all of creation; because by the Bride in this poem, the author means not just all of humanity or all the created world, he means the entire cosmos and very importantly, the entire heavenly world – in other words everything outside of the

* *Romances in The Collected Works of St John of the Cross.* translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, ICS Publications, Washington, DC. 1991.

Trinity, everything that God created is Bride of Jesus Christ. And so Jesus is taking on all of this as an act of love for the Father.

And he said: *that she might have life* – it is to give life, he is the life coming into the world; *I will die for her*, so the original intention of God is to die; *and lifting her up out of that deep, I will restore her to you*, so this is the whole salvation of all of creation; lifting up the whole of creation. In another place, John of the Cross, describing this, tells us that God created the world in all beauty and clothed everything in beauty; but with the incarnation he lifted up everything, because he has become part of creation. Therefore, everything is raised up, all of creation, everything. And then it comes to the enacting of all of this. Now it is God the Father who is speaking:

*Then he called
the archangel Gabriel
and sent him to
the Virgin Mary,
at whose consent
the mystery was wrought,
in whom the Trinity
clothed the Word with flesh.
and though Three work this,
it is wrought in the One;
and the Word lived incarnate
In the womb of Mary.
And he who had only a Father
now had a mother too,
but she was not like others
who conceive by man.
From her own flesh
he received his flesh,
so he is called
Son of God and of man.*

That's an extraordinary text and it brings out the fundamental point of the Annunciation. God has this great plan and the entire plan of God is made dependent upon the yes of Mary, *at whose consent the mystery is wrought* – everything, from the beginning of creation, the creation of heaven and earth, all God's dealing with his people, his becoming human, being birthed, dying, rising – everything is made dependent upon the yes of Mary and that reveals the very nature of God. God does not impose himself, God is a respecter of human freedom, that freedom to choose, that freedom to say yes; Mary says yes in all freedom.

John of the Cross elsewhere in his writings tells us how this is so. How is it possible for Mary – to use a phrase from John of the Cross – *to give the perfect yes of love?* Mary could give the perfect yes of love; and she can do that, John tells us, because unlike the rest of us, Mary has from the beginning lived totally by God's grace. All the rest of us, even the greatest saints in the world, have to grow into this, have to grow and mature, be purified into the fullness of living God's grace. Mary from the beginning does, and in that way we can understand the doctrine of her immaculate conception. She lives the fullness of God's grace, therefore she has the inner freedom to say yes, a

yes that has no constraints, no preconditions, no doubts, a total giving of herself. *I am God's servant, God's handmaid*; so she is able to say yes on behalf of all humanity, all creation, all the heavens and all the earth; yes to the fullness of the mystery of her son Jesus Christ, of his coming into this world, because for St John of the Cross the greatest of all the mysteries is the incarnation; God becoming one with humanity. That's God's greatest deed, to become one of us; far more than making us or even saving us – they're all things he does for us in a sense, we could say, from outside. But becoming one of us, sharing in our life, sharing in our pain, sharing in our fears and doubts – everything that entails the human condition.

I will just read a few more lines from the poem. The birth has taken place, which John in the poem depicts as a marriage feast, the wonderful feast that has taken place:

*whom the gracious Mother
laid in a manger...
Men sang songs
and angels melodies
celebrating the marriage
of Two such as these.
But God there in the manger
cried and moaned;
and these tears were jewels
the bride brought to the wedding.
The Mother gazed in sheer wonder
on such an exchange:
in God, man's weeping,
and in man, gladness,
to the one and the other
things usually so strange.*

There are no limits to what God took on, to what Jesus embraced and became part of: the whole human condition, including death, including being put in the tomb, including all the tears of humanity. And to be able to say yes is critical, and the whole teaching of John of the Cross, we could say, is of each individual growing, maturing, being purified, that we can come to the place of spiritual growth where each of us can say this yes of love.

We could ask ourselves the question about Jesus himself, following the logic of John of the Cross' teaching: did Jesus say this full yes of love – because Jesus lives a human spiritual life. We could say that Lent tells us of the two places where Jesus gives his yes. At the very beginning of Lent, at the very beginning of the gospels, we have the temptations in the desert, where Jesus in that very spiritual experience in the desert says yes, despite and in the midst of the very strong temptations of the devil. Nothing is going to take him off-course: he is saying yes to the will of God, yes to his true identity and mission. And the other place where Jesus says the complete yes of love is in the garden of Gethsemane – yes, to the will of God, totally and completely. *Thy will be done*. That will of God, nothing will stop it, there are no limits. He takes it to its final conclusion, he completely takes on the tears and suffering of humanity, as John's poem tells us. He says yes completely to it, to what his mother had already said yes to at the moment of conception. In other words, John of the Cross' poetry and his teaching

shows us that everything about this great mystery of Jesus Christ, of God becoming human, is dependent upon and requires humanity's consent: Mary at the Annunciation; Jesus himself, in the temptations, in the Garden of Gethsemane. That is the nature of our relationship with God, a relationship with God in which the human being grows into the fullness of human freedom, in which the human being grows into the fullness of love, in which the human being is totally united with God.

In the incarnation God and human become one. As John of the Cross' poem says, he is son of God and son of man; from the Father he takes his nature as God, from Mary he takes his nature as human; he needs both and in him both are united, become one. But that is also what happens in the spiritual life of each person – we become one with God. In John of the Cross' teaching, the high point, the point of arrival in the spiritual life is always union with God, a union of love, a union of wills; God's will and the will of the human being becoming one – what happened with Jesus in Gethsemane, *Thy will be done*. So it's the union of God and humanity.

St John of the Cross then shows us in this poem that Mary is the first and complete disciple of Jesus Christ. She shows us the way of discipleship because she has said yes to discipleship, she has said yes, fully and freely to everything God wants to do in her. and in doing so, for all that God wants to do in her she makes something truly great possible – the greatest act of God's love and God's wisdom possible.

So as we celebrate this feast of the Annunciation, let us be mindful and reflect on what a truly great event it is. God becomes one with us and shares in all the human condition, and this year we pray for Ukraine and Russia and we pray that that same love and that same wisdom of God will be seen and heard in those lands and will bring about peace and reconciliation.

24th March 2022 – Vigil, Solemnity of the Annunciation