

Annual Retreat of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites

Centenary Year of St John of the Cross

On the Spiritual Canticle

Reference: The Spiritual Canticle Poem and Commentary by St John of the Cross in: Kavanaugh, K & Rodriguez, O. (2017). *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*. ICS Publications.

Talk 1 Let this work of art, this great love song speak to you

06/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY

This retreat focuses on the teachings of Saint John of the Cross, particularly his Spiritual Canticle, a poem born from his profound experience of God's love.

St John's poetry, written during his imprisonment, is a testament to his encounter with the Divine, expressed through imagery and artistic expression. His writings, including commentaries on his poems, are meant to be absorbed and experienced, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak through them to you personally.

John of the Cross's poetry, particularly the Spiritual Canticle, explores the mystical experience of God's work within the soul. It is a love song between the soul and God, a duet that brings us to life and fulfilment.

St John's writings encourage us to listen to the Holy Spirit's voice within us, transcending explanation and embracing the mystery of God's presence.

So, for this retreat, we'll draw on the teaching of Saint John of the Cross, and I want in particular to take some things from his Spiritual Canticle, that wonderful poem. Most of which he wrote when he was in prison. And I want to dip into, draw from this wonderful work. I just want to begin with a line that he uses at the very beginning of the Prologue when he writes his commentary, he says that **these Stanzas were composed out of a burning love of God.** And that is what we must always remember when we come to John's poetry. **The source of his poems, is his encounter with God. His meeting with God. His awareness of, or his experience of the love of God.**

Therefore, **his poems are the fruits of love and they are expressions of love.** For us as listeners, as readers, they are expressions of love. They are an attempt to express God's love, to put God's love into imagery, into artistic expression, because that is the only way there is to express one's encounter with love, one's experience of *love*.

So when it comes to John of the Cross' poetry, and poetry is John's *favourite* way of communicating with us. **We approach these poems,** and indeed, we can say the same for **all** of John's writings. **As we would approach any work of art. We allow the work to speak to us.**

John tells us that he was very reluctant to write commentaries on his poems. And all the writing, prose writings that we have from John are commentaries on his poems. And why was he reluctant to write commentaries on his poems? It was because the poems can say far more than what any commentary or explanation can say. But more importantly than that for John, **he wants us to listen to his poems, Be absorbed into them. Let them speak to us.** And he does not want us to be confined to the meaning or the explanations that he gives. Because poems are always saying far more than what can be explained in any commentary. **So he wants us to simply enter into this wonderful world of beauty, of creativity, that he gives us** and allow it to speak to us, and that's true of his poems and of all of his writings. There's no need to try to understand. In fact, trying to understand can become a great obstacle. We want to understand 'what's this about', but no. Let them speak. Let his writing speak to us. Because the same Holy Spirit is speaking to us and working in us that spoke and worked through St John of the Cross.

So as we listen to his poems, we're listening to the Holy Spirit speaking in us. The same Holy Spirit, active in our lives. And what matters is that we hear his voice in our lives and in our experience. John tells us that these stanzas have come out of or are the fruits of a profound experience of God. Something that cannot be put into words. That no words are ever adequate to explain.

And yet, there's a great need to express when something profound takes place in a person. There's a need to express it. But the expressions, as John tells us, don't come out in some rational explanation. But come out in imagery, in artistic expression. In so many *other* ways that people have for expressing **what is deepest within them.**

So when we come to John's poetry, and consequently, also to all of his writing, we're, first of all, touching some profound experience within him that inspired him to write, to express, to sing. In this Spiritual Canticle that we're going to be drawing from, we have 40 stanzas now 31 of which he wrote when he was in prison. And he wrote, of course, not for us, or for anybody else, but he wrote for himself, to keep himself going, keep his spirits up, keep himself alive, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. In those very difficult

circumstances that he found himself in. And so they were written for himself, to sustain him.

Written is not the right word, actually, because for most of his time in prison, he had no way of writing, nothing to write on. It was only towards the end of his time in prison that a more amenable jailer was there and one day he asked him, could he have a pencil and some paper to write down some stanzas he had already composed, so they were composed in his head. They are based upon Scripture, the parts of Scripture that he knew best. And the Spiritual Canticle, as you know, is based upon the *Song of Songs*. That wonderful book of the Bible, that great love-song and clearly John knew that off by heart. He had no Bible with him in prison so he could only operate by memory. Clearly, he knew that by memory in his mind and reciting it, singing it, helped him, sustained him in his prison and inspired him to compose, to express artistically what is happening deep within him. And in his Prologue to the Canticle, he tells us that, that is how scripture works.

One of the things we noticed in John's writings is the originality, the creativity with which he uses the Scriptures. Using the song of songs in this poem is a great example of that. But so much else in the Scripture he uses with great originality and creativity. The Bible is a great collection of writings. From different times in history, many different authors, different ways of writing from prose, from history, to songs, to poems, to all kind, every type of literature we could think of. That great variety that's there. Because he said the Holy Spirit, needs all of that. Needs that great variety in order to communicate the wisdom. And that process goes on.

Because the Holy Spirit doesn't just inspire the author that wrote these scriptures 1000s of years ago. But all the generations that have passed them down to us. And those who have translated them and transmitted them and and to us now also, listening and reading, the same Holy Spirit is speaking to us. So John, as we see in his writings, has that creativity, that originality, with how he reads scripture and he wants us to have that also when we come to his writings. When we come to it, particularly to his poetry, but to all of his writings, because all of his writings are an extension of the poetry. They are not really intended to be explanations, though he does some explaining, he said. But they're really **intended to expand upon the poems, to enhance them, to help us, to enter more deeply into his poems.**

So, it very much recommends that over these days, just pick up John's poems, sit with them, sit out with them in nature. **Listen to them. Not just to the words, but to the sounds, the voices, the imagery.** Listen to what's being said there, what's being sung there. **And let it speak. Let it speak to one's own life, one's own experience.**

John tells us that he's reluctant to explain them for another reason also that is because the subject matter that he's dealing with, what he calls *mysticism, mystical theology*, these words that he uses, are beyond the boundaries of explanation. Ultimately, we're dealing with **the work of God in human beings. In the depths of the soul, the depths of the person in the depths of each one of us.** That's always something that is beyond explanation. Beyond the boundaries of our understanding. There are no words. There is no understanding.

So we mustn't be limited to our words, or to our understanding **but allow ourselves to be drawn beyond that. Beyond those limits, because that's where John's teaching is.** Because John knows from experience, his own experience, and the experience of so many other people. **That the spiritual life, living a deep spiritual life, takes us beyond the boundaries of what we can know, understand and control.** Anything that's within our grasp, we are taken beyond those boundaries. And therefore, **we need to have the courage to allow ourselves to be taken beyond them. Because God is doing something great in our lives.**

And when John begins his explanation of the Canticle, his commentary on it, the opening words, he tells us that the person has **become aware**. Or the person has been **awakened**, or enlightened, whatever word we want to use. The person has become *aware*. And the whole canticle is an attempt to express *what the person has become aware of*. But of course, it can't be expressed. Ultimately, it can't. But the person has become aware. that God is not just present but, has done something has awakened and enlightened the person.

And so **this whole work of John's, this wonderful Poem and his Commentary is a great exploration of the awareness that we have or that we can have, or that we're brought into; of God's mysterious work in our lives.** And how we can live that, navigate it, *respond in a right and positive way to it. That we not become an obstacle to the work of God in our lives.* But be set free. Truly free. To live. To become more and more alive. To be brought more and more into the fulness of life by that life giving presence of God that is deep within us. So over the next few days, we'll explore certain aspects of this **wonderful work of art**. Just to get a certain appreciation that, first of all, we are ourselves God's work of art. As he tells us in the Canticle. Everything that God has created, each one of us is a great work of art by God and he is continuing to create something in us and through us to do doing something truly great in our lives.

John's poem and Canticle is a celebration of that it is a **duet. It is a love song**. As he tells us, **it's the love song between the soul and God. Within the deepest place within us, between our most true self and God.** That love song is going on, within each one of us. It's the love song between a Bride and Bridegroom, each one of us as Bride. Jesus Christ as the Bridegroom. **It is that love song that has always been going on deep within us. From before we were created. It's an eternal love song.** There within each one of us.

And in this poem of the Spiritual Canticle we are being brought in there, to listen to that song. To *sing* that song. To be *aware* of that song. Each one of us *is* a love song. The deepest place within us, our souls are singing that love to God, and listening to the voice of the Bridegroom, the voice of God, deep within. That song is going on deep within each one of us. So deep that we do not hear it. That we are not aware of it. Yet it's there.

John's Canticle is taking us in there. Helping us to listen to it. Helping us to listen to the effects of this song. As he tells us, **it's for this song, this love, this love relationship that we exist, that we were created.** As it is that song, that deep relationship that **brings us to life, brings us to the fulness of life.** That is, the true life that we are living. The authentic life that we're living.

So that's what John's Canticle is in essence. And when John was in prison, in his most difficult, challenging time of his life, That's the song, he took refuge in. That's the song that emerged out of the depths within him. That's the song that opened him up to a more profound life. That's the song. that saved him. That liberated him. That made him the person that we now know.

Just one final thought.....we are of course in this year celebrating the centenary of St John being made a Doctor of the church 100 years ago 1926. 200 years before that being Canonised. And so... It's this opportunity that we have this year to listen to John of the Cross again. And to do the kind of listening that his writing, and particularly his poems, inspires us and ***exhorts*** us to do, **that listening to the Holy Spirit, the unique voice that the Holy Spirit is, in each one of us.**

Talk 2 *Seeking Union with the Hidden God*

07/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY:

St John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle* explores God's presence in three forms: presence by essence, presence by grace, and presence by spiritual affection. Presence by essence is God's constant, sustaining presence in all creation, while presence by grace is a gift of God's grace that can be accepted or rejected. Spiritual affection is a deeper, more intimate presence that God grants to devout souls, bringing them glimpses of His divinity and beauty. St. John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle* explores the soul's longing for union with God. Despite experiencing God's presence through various signs and feelings, the soul ultimately desires a deeper union, a likeness of love, where God's will and the soul's will are perfectly aligned. This union, achieved through purification and transformation by love, is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life.

We continue from where we were last night, introducing what St John of the Cross is trying to communicate to us in his *Spiritual Canticle*. John's starting point is **God's presence in us. God is with us, present in us and everything else flows from, or is the effect of that presence.** We are always inclined to think: '*Oh, I've got to do X, Y, and Z. I've got to get this. I've got to do that. I've got to.*' No. God is there. God is with you.

John's process of writing his Canticle was long, it took at least ten years, from the time he wrote the first stanzas of the poem in his prison cell to when the work as we've got it now was complete. He wrote 39 stanzas, wrote a commentary on them, then rewrote the whole work again, rearranging some of the stanzas. And at the very end, he added a stanza, and that stanza is number 11 in what we have. And it's interesting to note (it's a beautiful stanza). But I just want to pick one thing out of it now, and that is **he defines more what that presence of God means.** John doesn't tell us this, so I'm doing a little bit of guesswork. But I guess that his experience was of using the Canticle, teaching people with it, sharing it with people, listening to people's response, that somehow *he felt the need once more to emphasise this presence of God. We somehow forget it, we don't guess it. We don't quite appreciate what it is, how fundamental it is.*

St John of the Cross, Complete Works pg. 473:

**11. *Reveal your presence,
and may the vision of your beauty be my death;
for the sickness of love,
is not cured
except by your very presence and image.***

**11. *Descubrir* tu presencia,
y que la visión de tu belleza sea mi muerte; pues el mal de amor
no halla remedio
sino en tu propia presencia e imagen.***

So this Stanza 11 begins with the famous words: '*descubrir tu presencia!*' uncover, reveal your presence. Let your presence be known. And so, this presence of God, though he has done this other times, both in the Canticle and elsewhere in his writings. He defines for us here (See Commentary on Stanza 11 paragraph 3 page 511).

And he said: "*..... it should be known that God's presence can be of three types.*" So it's three types of presence of God. The first, he said, is what he calls **his presence by essence.** And he goes on to tell us what that means.

The first is **his presence by essence. In this way, God is present not only in the holiest souls, but also in sinners, and all other creatures.** With this presence, he gives them life and being. Should this essential presence be lacking in them, they would all be annihilated. So there's a presence of God in each of us, in the depth of our being, that is never lacking. That's always there. And that presence is in everybody. He said, even in sinners, even in the worst of sinners. Elsewhere, he said, even people in mortal sin. Because without that presence, not only would a person not be alive, the person simply would not exist. There's no existence without this presence of God.

And as we heard there, this presence of God isn't just in people. But in all his creatures. And when John of the Cross speaks about creatures, or what God has created, he means **everything**. Not only the animals and the birds and the insects, he means objects, things, the worlds, the planets, the skies. All the earthly and heavenly worlds, he means the angels. He means everyone, everything. But he also means God's wisdom, understanding **all that we can know, all that we can experience**.

Our feelings, our emotions, or values like justice and peace. It means everything. All that God created. Now that God's creation, is not just the making of something eg The person who made this beautiful table. He probably made the table and left it be and other people have been using the table ever since. **God creates he enters into relationship with what he creates. He's always present to and in what he creates.**

Therefore, when St John speaks about 'creation' as '*everything that God created*', God has left something of himself there. The artist leaves something of himself in what he has painted or sculptured or composed. God leaves something of himself. So there's something of God in everything that he created. He's there, present, **sustaining** all existence depends on God. And so he's sustaining that existence.

But there's also another dimension to it and very important in St John of the Cross' teaching. In his poem, which he also wrote in prison, his Romances on Creation and the incarnation (pg. 60), he tells us there that everything that God creates. And as we see in that poem, everything that God creates is effectively everything that's outside of the Trinity. Everything that is not God, father, son, and spirit is created by God. And everything that he has created, he has created as a Bride for his son. So everything that God has created, He has created out of love for his Son. As a Bride for his son.

Hence the care, and the detail, and the love, and attention, and everything else that has gone into creation. The Father loves the Son. Love is the relationship within the Trinity. That love that's there. And not only does he create everything as a Bride for his Son, but the Son becomes *part* of Creation through the incarnation. Again, John of the Cross tells us that **in the Incarnation, God has raised up all of creation**. All of creation is raised up to another level because God became part of us. So it's no longer just something God made and sustains in being. It's also something he becomes part of. So this presence by essence, this 1st kind of presence is something so essential and that is always there. Both in ourselves and in everything else. So that's the first presence of God. And that's never ever wanting or never ever less.

The **second kind of presence is what John calls presence by grace**. In which God abides in the person and the person's soul in the depths of the person's being and *God is pleased and satisfied with this presence*.

But not all people have this presence. It can be lost. And it can only be lost through mortal sin. In other words, through a very deliberate choice that a person makes. It has to be something very serious. The person can say *no* to this presence by grace. There's choice here. So this is presence by grace, the grace of baptism, the grace of the Sacraments, the grace of God's presence in our lives.

As St John's Gospel tells us to all who accept the Son of God, he gives grace. As that gift. **It's that something of God that God gives to the person. Something that enables relationship, enables reciprocal relationship.**

That's the fundamental difference between the first kind of presence and the second kind. The presence by essence is always there. It's God. And dependent solely upon God. The second kind of presence means mutual relationship. Yes, it's God and grace is a gift of God. But grace must be *freely* accepted. It can be rejected. That's the difference. The first essential presence we have, if we reject, then we no longer exist. There is no rejecting. Second one, yes, we can reject the grace of God.

Then there's **a third kind of presence and this is what John is mainly dealing with here in the spiritual canticle. And in all of his writings.** This 3rd kind of presence he terms as **spiritual affection**. And again, **it comes from God**. God grants his spiritual presence to devout souls in many ways by which he refreshes, delights, and gladdens them.

So not only now, Is there a relationship there. But the person has some kind of awareness of this relationship. Or the effects of the relationship. It refreshes, delights, gladdens, there's some experience of this relationship there. Something... that the person becomes aware of. He has sort of told us just a little bit earlier on there, in his introduction, he said: *'In the spiritual sense of this presence, now the spiritual presence. God. Reveals some deep glimpses of his divinity, and beauty, by which he greatly increased her fervour and desire to see him.'*

So the person is being given something of God's divinity. Some glimpse of the reality of God, and of God's beauty.

However, it is always a slight glimpse, some slight hint. Some awareness of the consequences or the effects of this presence. Because he tells us for all 3 of these presences, all 3 of them. They're **always hidden**. God's presence is always hidden.

God *never* reveals himself as he is. That's impossible in this life. While we are within the limits of this world, within the limits of our bodies, our human condition. We cannot be fully in the presence of God by essence. We can't be. **But yet, in this life, as John shows us in the Spiritual Cantic Poem, not only can we have some awareness of this presence, but is that awareness that totally changes and transforms our lives.** Or our response to that awareness. That totally changes and transforms our lives.

So, the person then has some awareness and what the awareness does it increases that desire, that longing, that hunger, that thirst, for God. For the very being, the very essence of God.

So to come back for a moment to that 1st kind of presence. That *presence by essence*. That God is fundamentally present in every person. The implication of that, for each of us, because God's presence is always in terms of relationship.

God is never just present. God is always relating. Even more than that, more than just relating, in *our* sense of understanding relating. **God is always giving of himself. God is always pouring out his gifts.**

And so. The person then. Who becomes aware, or has some awareness of this presence. **What the person becomes aware of is something that's fundamental to our existence as human beings. And that is our desire for union with essence of God.**

Here's how John puts it: the person longs for, (at the very beginning of the Canticle) **the person longs for Union with God. Through a clear and essential vision. It's for the essence of God. She seeks the manifestation of this divine essence. God himself.**

And what the whole early part of the Canticle shows us, the 1st ten stanzas of the Canticle. The person is longing, is searching. And is receiving so much information about God and hints about God and signs of God's presence. But *none of these satisfy*. **What they all do is increase that hunger, that desire, for the essential presence of God.**

Now, an important principle that John sets before us here. I read it to you: (St John of the Cross Commentary on stanza 1 paragraph number three pg 479).

*".....It is noteworthy, that, however elevated, God's communications, and the experience of his presence are. And however sublime a person's knowledge of Him may be, these are not God, essentially. Nor are they comparable to him, because, indeed, He is still hidden in the soul. Hence, regardless of all these lofty experiences, **a person should think of Him as hidden and seek Him as one who is hidden....**"*

So. Whatever we might consider to be experiences of God, and people might have a sense of God's presence somewhere in some location, or some particular time, or happening, a sense of God's presence, and that's good. A gift of God. *But it's not God essentially.* It is a *human feeling, some kind of human experience*, something that has lifted us, inspired us, given us peace, consolation, all good things, but they're not God. **They are not God essentially.** There any other kind of experience. Or whatever wonderful knowledge people may have. I studied all the theology and all the books. These have wonderful ideas and are able to express them beautifully in music or poetry or. Whatever it might be neither, they are not God.

They can inspire, they can do good. They can uplift us. But they are not the fulfilment of the person's deepest desire. There's a desire there that's deep within every person. Coming from how God has created us. Because he hasn't just created us to exist. To be who we are. He has created us to be in union with him. He has created us for a relationship of love with him. He's created us for oneness with him, the very purpose of our creation. Is only fulfilled. When we're one with God, in essence, in the very depth of our being.

That's something ultimately that's only possible in the next life. But here in this life, we live something of that. We experience something of us.

And particularly in the last part of the Canticle in the last 5 stanzas in particular, we see something of that creeping into the person's experience. But it is that fundamental desire, that fundamental longing, that's deep within the person.

What has now happened to the person at the beginning of the Canticle, is that the person has grown in some awareness of this. And because she has grown in some awareness of this, Nothing else now is going to satisfy her. She can be content with nothing less.

And so John describes her experience in the first Stanza of the Canticle *as the experience of God's absence*. God is absent.

**1. Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
you fled like the stag
after wounding me
I went out calling you, but you were gone.**

The image that he uses of the stag, the stag has fled. That has left a wound of love, a profound wound of love, deep within the person. That the person must respond to. And so what the person is experiencing is that sense of God's absence. He's gone. He has fled. But spiritually speaking, of course, the experience of God's absent absence is never an indication that God is absent. It's always an indication that God is present. Because we cannot experience absence without experiencing presence.

We cannot experience absence, the kind of profound absence that the person is experiencing here without having experienced love. Without having experienced the presence. **So an experience of the absence of God, is always an experience of God's presence.**

We are beyond here the boundaries of language. I just want to read another little bit here of what he says here so: *".....No matter what sublime communication, nor awareness in the senses of the nearness is a sure testimony of God's presence. And neither a dryness or a lack of this, an experience of his absence.*

(So we can feel very dry, very empty. Absolutely nothing in our prayer. That's not a sign that we're not praying. Are that our prayer isn't good or that God isn't present they are with us. They can be the moments of greatest closeness. When God is really doing something. We can think some experiences are very close Communication with God and they may well be. But we can never rely on them to be sure indicators. We, do not know. We do not have a way of telling. Because God is always a mystery beyond the limits of what we can know, understand. Comprehend. He's always a mystery beyond that, beyond those boundaries. At the closer a person gets to God. The grace of that mystery becomes. One gets a greater and greater sense of that mystery. That is beyond us.

So God's presence, which is always there, deep within the person. That cannot ever go away, never does. And yet, All the early part of John's Canticle is all about searching and seeking, and longing, and desiring, and hungering, and thirsting, and many other words of that nature. **All of which are expressing that profound feeling, a sense, of God's absence. And that's the inspiration, the motivation, the energy of all of these early stances of the Canticle. The absence of God, that feeling, that sense of God's absence, is really the source of life, something that is life giving and purifying. and transforming.**

It's not something that's negative. It's not real absence, because God cannot be absent. But, of course, if he was, we wouldn't even think of it. It wouldn't even enter our heads to think of. Nobody even starts to search for God or even think about God if God has not put the desire there in the first place. God is always the beginning of our spiritual lives. He's always the starting point. The initiative is always God's. God has put that there.

So whatever, however, His presence may manifest itself to us, whether it be a *feeling* of presence or a *feeling of absence*, a desire, a longing, a joy, a peace, whatever it might be. **It's been put there by God. We can't push it there.** Neither can we make it, prolonged or alter it or do anything to it. We are powerless it's in God's hands it is his doing.

So, John, in this wonderful poem, then is opening our eyes or making us aware of this inner hidden work of God in our lives. And how we respond to that. And how we grow. Ultimately into what he calls ***union with God***. For him, that's the goal. The object, the point of arrival of the spiritual life is union with God.

Let's look at HOW St John *defines* that union with God, what that would look like. We look to St John's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Chapter 5 Book 2) which describes this nature of union with God. And again, like with the presence of God, there's a union that always exists that wouldn't be there, we wouldn't live. But then what he's now speaking about; **the goal of the spiritual life is the person or the soul's union with and transformation in God. That does not always exist. It only exists when there is LIKENESS OF LOVE of love.** That's the essential. Likeness of love. This exists when God's will and the souls are in conformity. St John teaches us:

'.....So there is nothing in one that's repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and un-conformed to the divine will, is rest transformed in God through love.....'

So that's this whole process. Anything that is not conformed to God. In the person's will. That has to be purified. and transformed by love, because God's work in our lives is always a work of love. And then there is likeness of love. **The person is one with God. That's the goal, the objective, the point of arrival, of the spiritual life.** And that's what John wants to make us aware of. And wants us to respond to, and live by, that God is with us, present in our lives and everything else comes from that, flows from that, how we see life and how we see the world around us.

Talk 3: God's joy as the soul is set free to make a complete 'yes' of love

07/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

Summary:

The third talk of the retreat explores St. John of the Cross' "Spiritual Canticle," focusing on the moment of union between the soul and God, symbolised by the spiritual marriage. It is revealed that it is God, the Bridegroom, who has been searching for the soul, the Bride, all along. This realisation brings about a profound sense of liberation and freedom, enabling the soul to make a complete and true "yes" of love to God. John of the Cross' poem celebrates the soul's liberation and union with God, a state of ultimate freedom and love. This union, beyond words and thought, brings immense joy to God, the bridegroom, and the entire church. Though the soul experiences a profound sense of God's presence and delight, this union is not yet perfect and will be perfected in the afterlife. St John of the Cross' spiritual canticle explores the transformative journey of the soul towards union with God, using the imagery of love, marriage, and the cross. The canticle follows a similar trajectory to his poem "The Dark Night," depicting an escape from darkness, an encounter with the beloved, and a life lived in union. John emphasises the gradual nature of this union, achieved through the soul's spiritual growth, and highlights the role of the cross as the ultimate symbol of God's love and reconciliation.

We continue exploring St John of the Cross and his Spiritual Canticle and there is a **principle** in St John of the Cross' writings that we find time and time again. Perhaps it's best express for us in the 'Living Flame' Stanza 3, line 28:

"..... in the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more."

So we think that we are seeking God, in reality, it is God that is seeking us. **The very fact that a person is seeking God, that's a sign that it is really God that is doing the seeking.** And God has put the desire there in the person to seek God. Nobody would seek God. Nobody would want God. Search for God. Turn to God, pray to God unless God had put the desire there in the first place.

So now, when it comes to John's Spiritual Canticle, **the entire first half is all centred on the person's search for God.** The bride is searching for the Bridegroom, longing for the Bridegroom, pleading with the Bridegroom. Crying out to him, suffering the pain of his absence, etc.

*22. The bride has entered.
the sweet garden of her desire,
and she rests in delight,
laying her neck
on the gentle arms of her Beloved.*

When it comes to **Stanza 22, which is the centre of the canticle, that moment of arrival** is probably not the right word, of union with God. **In John's term, the spiritual marriage. Where the two are now completely totally united.** What one realises, he gives a wonderful opening paragraph where it suddenly, we see that it's not the Bride who has been searching for the Bridegroom at all. It's the opposite, the bridegroom has been searching for the bride. It's the complete opposite to what we had thought it was, or what we'd been following, if you read the canticle straight through. It's sort of turned around and everything has gone before is now suddenly seen in a *completely different light*. And the way that John presents it here, he draws from chapter 15 of Luke's gospel. He bases it on two. Parables. (The sheep that has gone missing, he leaves the 99 and goes searching for the one or the woman searching for the coin. And then the 3rd parable of course, the prodigal son. It is the rejoicing! The celebration that the sheep/coin has been found.

So. Here then is how John introduces Stanza 22 for us:

"Great was the desire of the Bridegroom to 3 and ransom his bride completely from the hands of sensuality and the devil"

(St John' Commentary p559)

Just pause there for a moment. The desire of the Bridegroom. We spent all the early part exploring the *desire of the bride. The desire of the bridegroom. God is desire.* John, back in the prologue to the Canticle tells us '*....nobody can describe the desires that God gives to the person whom he loves*'. Out of love, God gives the person desires.

As we've seen those desires, ultimately, though the person may feel and experience them in all sorts of different ways. **Ultimately, the deepest desire that the person has is for union with God.** And now we might say we could argue that now, at this point in the Canticle, the person has received the fulfilment of these desires.

In reality, of course, it is God's desire. The two desires become one, each desires the same thing. The person is created with this desire for union, with the essence of God.

God has created the person. With that same desire. That desire for union of love, relationship with love, with the person that he has created, and that he has revealed his presence too. And that he has now healed and transformed. So such is the desire of the Bridegroom.

So, the first thing there, for the person; on becoming *aware* or entering this union, they become aware not of the fulfilment of her own desires, but the overwhelming desire that God has for union with her that the Bridegroom has, that overwhelming desire. And now he goes on to express that, give us some sense of what that is.

Firstly, it's **like the good shepherd rejoicing and holding on his shoulders the lost sheep, for which he had searched along many winding paths.** So the rejoicing of the bridegroom. Over this lost sheep, which he had searched along many winding paths, we think, of course, that our lives are a long search, and we go through many winding paths and the journeys of our lives. And we think that it is a great burden, challenge to us and all the things that have happened in our lives, so we can all look at our lives and see so many things. But the realisation that, God, has been searching along winding paths, calling us, speaking, accompanying us, **walking beside us all the time.** The winding paths that we've got on are actually God's winding paths. There are paths that God has been on. He's been accompanying us, **with us all the time. That's what we so often fail to see to recognise the presence of God.**

And particularly, in those times when we think he's not present, are we think those stages or passages or roads in our lives where we think we have gone astray or gone in the wrong direction; God has been walking this path with us. God is here. He's here, has always been. That's the realisation that comes to the person.

And then the second of those parables, then is the woman. This woman in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, *'...like the woman who, having lit the candle, and hunted through her whole house, for the lost drachma, the lost coin, holding up her hands with gladness, and calling her friends and neighbours to come and celebrate, saying, rejoice with me.....'* (St Luke Chapter 15.) So that *rejoicing* of the woman. Who has lit the light and hunted through the whole house again, *the sense of God on a long search.*

And the important word here that John keeps using is that the soul is **liberated. Set free.** And I've already read the sentence where he tells us **what we've been set free from two things he said. From the hands of sensuality and the devil.**

What does he mean by the both of those? The devil we think we know what the devil is or we might know, evil or everything that's opposed to God, whether it be in ourselves or in our world. In practice, it can mean all sorts of different things or different experiences.

Sensuality, of course, is the one that John's writings mostly centre on. And that's everything that's deep within us. All that lack of inner freedom.

Ultimately, when we ask ourselves the question. **What has changed then? What's changed now in this person this bride? She has been set free! She has been set free of everything she needed to be set free. She now lives and knows and experiences what true human freedom is.**

STANZA 20-23 Bridegroom:

20. Swift-winged birds, lions, stags, and leaping roes, mountains, lowlands, and riverbanks, waters, winds, and ardors, watching fears of night.

*21. By the pleasant lyres and the sirens song, I conjure you
to cease your anger
and not touch the wall,
that the bride may sleep in deeper peace.*

*22. The bride has entered the sweet garden of her desire,
and she rests in delight,
laying her neck
on the gentle arms of her beloved.*

*23. Beneath the apple tree
there I took you for my own
there I offered you my hand
and restored you,
where your mother was corrupted.*

A little bit earlier on, John defines this for us in Stanza 20. **These four stanzas, 20-23 are really the fulcrum that the whole canticle is balanced. There now she has arrived. And what she's now able to do is make what John calls the complete and true yes of love. That's what enables the bridegroom to enter totally completely.**

The complete and true, yes, of love. That's what the person is now able to say, able to express. The person's life is that expression of love. That's what ultimate freedom is. True human freedom. To be able to say yes. Truthfully, in truth and completely, without compromise, without question.

It is a yes to love. It's a yes of love. It's a loving, yes. It's one love saying yes to the other love. *That's what the person now has the freedom to do.* Because everything that could compromise that freedom has been taken away, has been transformed, purified, healed, whatever was needed.

So it is that inner freedom. And that's always what the obstacle is. There's always within us, some obstacle to that inner freedom. Now, **John's poem celebrates the person who has been liberated. Liberated from everything that's there within, that needs to be liberated from.**

So the soul is liberated. This loving shepherd and bridegroom rejoices. **It's God's joy.** The bridegroom, the shepherd's joy. And that's something to behold here. We would expect, by our way of reasoning, assume that it's the person, the bride will be rejoicing. She has got there. She has achieved what she want to achieve. She's got it, no. It's the bridegroom that is rejoicing. It's God. **It's God's joy.** God's rejoicing.

Coming back to something, I said, yesterday evening - For John of the Cross to understand John and understand his teaching. Fundamental to **it is the nature of God. Not how we are, what we are like. But what is God like?**

That's the bit we always get wrong. And this is another aspect of it here. God's rejoicing, God's joy. **When a person, is who she's meant to be, is living as she's meant to live, has become the person he has created her to be. Has now been set free to receive and to give love.** Has been transformed by love and all the other so many other ways that he expresses this in his writings.

This is the nature of God. This is God's joy. It is something we find right throughout the scriptures, God's joy. We find Jesus in the Gospel' rejoicing. Crying out to God with joy -That his word is being accepted by mere children and said, this joy of God.

So, and of course, these parables, the shepherd rejoicing that he has found the sheep that was lost. The father of the prodigal son inviting everybody into this party for this son that has gone away that has strayed. **God is a God of joy, of celebration.**

So, the soul is now liberated. This loving shepherd and bridegroom rejoices. And John goes on:

'.....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'.

On his shoulders, held there by his hand; a very subtle reference there to the cross, of course. That's what ultimately has rescued, has freed the person. And that will come up a little bit later on here. Just like chapter 15 of Luke's gospel does that John is drawing so heavily on here. The rejoicing extends, it is not just the bridegroom rejoicing. God rejoicing. The shepherd rejoicing. **But also makes the angels and saintly souls share in his gladness. The whole church, in other words, the church in this world, the church in heaven, all of creation.**

Or to use John of the Cross' term, *the whole bride of Jesus Christ*. I mentioned already that all of creation is created as a bride for the son. And now, the bride rejoices. The bridegroom rejoices. **All rejoice, because this one person has been liberated. Has been set free. It's been purified. I can now say the full and complete yes of love.**

So that's. The high point. Of this whole poem. This rejoicing, this spiritual marriage. **That the person has arrived, has been brought by God's work in the person. That total transformation.**

And he goes on then to show that the person has come through. All sorts of things in order to get there. All sorts of trials that the person has gone through. But it's not perfect yet. As I've already said, **it cannot be perfect in this world. This union cannot be perfect. Although it is beyond words and thought.** So what the person has experienced is beyond words and beyond thought. Though it's not perfect yet in the way, it'll be perfect in the next world.

But we're dealing with something that cannot be described. It is beyond words beyond the boundaries of words beyond the boundaries of thought. It is there somewhere.

So just to go a little bit deeper into this. So this restlessness is still there. That's always been, that's always there, for as long as the person is on this planet. **She never rests.** Or to reach in this state of perfection. *'.....She finds in this state, however, a more greater abundance and fulness of God. A more secure and stable peace. An incomparably more perfect delight, then in the spiritual betrothal, which was the previous stage, here's as though she were placed in the arms of her beloved. As a result, she usually experiences an intimate spiritual embrace, which is a true, veritable embrace, by means of which she lives the life of God.'*

The words of St. Paul are verified in this and these are very important words from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatians 2:20: *"I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me."*

Those are words which are so important to John of the cross, Saint Teresa. All the mystics. Because they're expressing something. That all of these people experience. But cannot put into words. We could imagine Paul when he wrote those words to the Christians in Galatia. He's trying to describe something. That is John of the Cross says is beyond the boundaries of words or thoughts.

That's particularly difficult for Paul because. He's the first. To put Christianity into words. To put Christianity into writing, to put the experience of Jesus Christ into words, no Gospel were written when Paul was alive, he was dead before any of the gospels were written or before anything else in the New Testament was written. He's writing before there anything written about the experience of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, there were stories going around the place about the life of Jesus. And his miracles and his teaching and records of that were going around the place. But to try and write the experience of living Christianity.

And, of course, Paul had never met Jesus in person. So, he has so much in common with all of us. Paul had lived Judaism very profoundly, lived by the Bible, a person of the Bible. But he knows very well that there's something completely different in Christianity.

Something much more complete. Than was there before the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, there's some greater possibility in human life.

Paul knows it, he experiences it. He knows the truth of it. But how is he going to put this into words for the Christians in Galatia? And these are the words that he comes up with.

It's no longer I, it's no longer; this life that I'm living is no longer mine. The life that I could call mine has died. And now I'm living something else. Something completely new that is not me. It's not I. But it is Jesus Christ living in me. He's not claiming to become another incarnation of Jesus Christ. It's not something like that he's claiming. **He's claiming that**

there's a new life being lived. He's living a new life. And the only title that that new life can have, the only explanation it can have is Jesus Christ. And a life that Jesus has put into him or a life that his relationship with Jesus has made possible in him. It's no longer I. So in other words, it's no longer something that I can have ownership of. Or understanding of. But it is more real and more complete, and it can only be of Jesus.

It is the result, the consequence of his relationship with Jesus. So that line from the letter to the Galatians is so critical, to *understand*. (Maybe understanding is the wrong word here, because we don't, we can never understand this. But at least to try and express.)

This new way of living. A new life that Jesus Christ lives in us. There's a sense that my life is no longer mine. It's Jesus', in some way.

And so here now the Canticle, that's what is happening and St John is trying all sorts of different ways too. Express it here. **This peace, stable, secure. Placed in the arms of her beloved, the arms again the cross. Placed there. Somehow close to him.**

So. This new life, then, that begins here. Effectively, what we're talking about is Christianity. Christian life. Another expression that Paul uses, of course, is that the person has 'gone into the tomb and come out again with Jesus'. Has died and has risen.

The life of the resurrection. St John of the Cross' spiritual canticle is taking us into that. From the perspective of experience.

The Dark Night

1. *One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings,
-ah the sheer grace!-
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.*

2. *In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
-ah the sheer grace!-
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled*

3. *On that glad night in secret,
for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything with no other light or guide
than the one burned in my heart.*

To touch briefly on John's other poem 'The Dark Night' the first three stanzas. **It is all about being set free, being liberated. And he uses the imagery of his escape from prison.** Just pick up that poem a few minutes later on. Look at it that escape, in darkness in faith in concealment. Following no other light, but a light that burns deep within.

4. *This guided me
more surely than the light of noon to where he was awaiting me
-him I knew so well-
there in a place where no one appeared.*

And then, the next stage of the poem STANZA 4 is the **encounter**, the meeting, and there's an expression that the poem uses there "...with him whom I knew so well." Him whom I knew so well. Him whom I was in relationship with. Him whom I knew from the beginning. It's like, it's like a coming home. It's like, it's not meeting a stranger. That encounter.
That union.

The dark night follows a very similar course to the Canticle Poem. The escape, the setting free, the encounter, the union, and then the life that's lived from there on. But it's like this coming home *to him whom I knew so well. To where I really belong. To what to where I was created to be.* To relationship, that's the fulfilment of all those deeper desires.

So to him, I knew so well. That's the key there. It expresses beautifully what John in these central stanzas of the canticle is also expressing. John as we've seen, is struggling for language and ways of expressing what is beyond the boundaries of words and thoughts. He's drawing heavily from the Scriptures. Because the Scriptures give him sets of imagery that he can use. And he tries to express it in different ways. **And as we've said, the cross is critical to all of this. Because that is ultimately where Jesus Christ has set us free.** The Jesus Christ that we encounter. is always the Jesus Christ of the cross.

In the Commentary in Stanza 23, number 6. He clarifies something important for us here. The espousal he said. Because all of this is, he's using the language of love, the language of matrimony, all of this as an image. The espousal made on the cross is not the one we are now speaking of. John in his writing speaks of the cross often as an espousal. As a great marriage feast.

It's the ultimate union between God and humanity. The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 2, chapter 7. Is Jesus upon the cross bringing about the reconciliation, the union. between God and humanity. Ultimate espousal, the marriage upon the cross. That's not what we're speaking about now, he said.

Because he said **that espousal on the cross is accomplished immediately.** When God gives the 1st grace bestowed on us in baptism. So in baptism were given that, the cross.

The espousal he said, we now speak of, is in reference to perfection, and is not achieved, except gradually, and by stages. For although it's all the one espousal, there's a difference. One is attained at the soul's pace, and just little by little, the other is God's pace, and thus immediately.

Now we're dealing with something else that's in the very nature of God. God saved the whole world on the cross. Through Jesus Christ, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The whole world, the whole of creation was saved. The relationship totally restored and transformed with God. **But that same process, must also happen personally, in each one of us. And God accompanies us, walks beside us at our pace. It's one of the great mysteries of how God works in our lives. He doesn't just do something for us. He walks beside us, at our pace, as that very thing is being done in us.** So it is God, walking at our pace. This is an espousal, a union. A

reconciliation. That takes place at the pace of the human being's spiritual growth. Not at the pace of God's work of creation, which is instant.

One final point I'll make for now, something else that we notice in the Canticle. Indeed, in John's way of using scripture sometimes he'll give us a passage of scripture. And he will simply put it there. No explanation. It doesn't seem to fit or flow with anything else that is there. Often this is the only time that he uses it. But he puts it there as a light. As another way of reflecting on what's taking place. And he places here, at the end of his commentary on stanza 23. At the end of these critical four stanzas at the centre of the canticle - A passage from Ezekiel which fits so well with what John is trying to express here on what God is doing in the person's life.

This is from Ezekiel chapter 16. Verses 5 to 14. This is what we're talking about here. This is what his whole spiritual canticle is all about. It's *expressed*, summarised for us here:

*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,
That you were in your blood.
Love and be as multiplied as the grass of the field.
Increase and grow great.
And enter and reach the stature of womanhood.
And your breasts grew, and your hair increased, and you were naked, and full of
confusion.
And I pass by you, and looked at you, and so did your time was the time of lovers.
And I held my mantle over you.
And covered your ignominy.
And I swore to you, and enter into a pact with you, and made you mine.
And 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 on your head. And you were adorned with gold and silver, and clothed with fine
linen, and embroidered silk, and many colours.
You ate very choice bread,
and honey, and oil, and you became exceedingly beautiful.
And advance to rule and to be a queen. And your name was spread among the people
because of your beauty.*

St John just concludes these are the words of Ezekiel. And so it happens with the soul of which we are speaking. So that sums up all of that. Those words just aids us to reflect upon and to help us to see something of what God is doing in each of our lives.

Talk 4: True Freedom, Spiritual Marriage and the Life of Love

08/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY:

Stanzas 27-29 of the Spiritual Canticle describe the new life of a person transformed by the spiritual marriage with God, characterised by a complete giving of self in love. This union, achieved through purification and healing, allows the person to fully employ their strength in love for God, as commanded in Deuteronomy 6:5 the Shema Yisrael. John of the Cross emphasises that this life of love is the ultimate goal and is rooted in the biblical understanding of God.

When someone loves the Lord God with all their heart, mind, and strength, they experience a profound and subtle transformation. This love, a mutual self-giving between the person and God, leads to a state of spiritual espousal where the person's every action becomes an act of love. This love, equal to God's, transforms the person from within, making them instinctively respond to every situation with love, unaware of their own transformation.

True freedom is an instinctive state of being, beyond conscious awareness, where one lives authentically and unhindered by personal or external desires. This freedom, exemplified by Jesus, allows individuals to act with love and compassion, free from manipulation. John defends this way of life, recognising it as the ultimate purpose of human existence and the most precious work one can do.

Father Matthew Blake: The part I want to draw mostly from this morning is from Stanza's 27, 28 and 29 of the Spiritual Canticle (p.475):

*27. There he gave me his breast; there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
and I gave him myself to him keeping nothing back
there I promise to be his bride.*

*28. Now I occupy my soul
and all my energy and his service;
I no longer attend the herd,
nor have I any other work
now that my every act is love.*

*29. If then I am no longer
seen or found on the common,
you will say that I am lost;
that, stricken by love,
I lost myself, and was found.*

And in these stanza's and all that second part of the canticle; what John is doing, he is trying to give us a sense of the new life that the person is now living. Or perhaps a better way of putting it is; of what life is like. Or is meant to be like. Because, really, this is not, living Christianity, as is meant to be lived, it is human life as is meant to be lived. It's living the life that God created us to live, it is living the life that we're meant to be living. That's right for us, that there is this greatest good that brings out the best in us, that is the most fruitful. In all sorts of other ways we could express it. But it's not some... how would I put it, some strange worlds that, if you elite people are brought into and everybody else lives outside, but no, actually, **it is where we are ALL meant to be. It's how life is meant to be lived.**

And what has now taken place as we saw yesterday from the central part of the canticle stanzas; 20, 21, 22, 23 when the person now has been changed and transformed. And has the inner freedom, has grown in that inner freedom, to be *able to say the full and complete yes of love*. **The bridegroom, Jesus Christ, God, the Trinity, brings about what John calls the *spiritual marriage*. The union of love between the person and God.**

And we looked so yesterday at John's definition of what union with God is. And we saw that **the union with God that he's here speaking about *only* exists when there is LIKENESS of love. Where everything that compromises or hinders or distorts that love, has now been purified and healed and transformed.**

Therefore, there is no obstacle now to the total self giving in love. That's now where we have arrived at. And before I get to those stanzas, I want to briefly dip into. I want to go to one other place in Saint John's writings. I want to go to the Ascent of Mount Carmel book 3 chapter 16. And here, John, is beginning to speak about the purification of the will, in John's thinking, **the will is where love is**. And in the Ascent of Mount Carmel, he links the will with love.

So, it is at the beginning of this purification process that is now completed in the part of the canticle that we're looking at. And I just want to read a little bit from what he says here when **he's trying to express what it is that the person is now called to** what it is that John wants to show the person here.

And he said he could find no more appropriate passage than Chapter 6 of the book of Deuteronomy. And he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, this great command to Israel, the *Shema Yisrael*. Listen, Israel. This great command that the Jewish people recite several times a day, they write it on their foreheads and their door posts and it's this. Command to Israel, and John quotes it here:

‘.....you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength’.

And John goes on then to comment on that. He said **this passage contains all that spiritual persons must do. And all, I must teach them here, if they are to reach God by union of the will, through love.** In it, he said, human beings receive the commands to employ all the faculties, appetites, operations, and emotions of their soul in God, so that they will use all this ability and strength for nothing else.

And he quotes from another passage of scripture that he quotes several times in his writings is from Psalm 59 verse 10:

I will keep my **strength** for you.

You can see here that. The word that stands out for John in that command is the word strength. Because with all our attachments and all of these things that distort us and limit us and compromises do, they take away that strength. The sap that energy from the person. Now the person. We might say is together, whole, free, mature, and therefore **all the strength, in every dimension of the person, can be employed in love.**

There's nothing now that can distort or compromise the person's capacity to respond in love to God. And of course, also to receive, to be totally up to receiving. That great love of God. When we come to this part of the Canticle, what John teaches here. Is **fulfilled** in the person.

There's another reason why I wanted to go to that particular passage. At this this time. Is that I just want to say to note, that the God that John of the cross speaks about all the time. Is the God of the Bible. I say at the very beginning that is critical to understand John of the Cross's thinking. About how we live a good, right, healthy, mature, spiritual life, is all **dependent upon how we see God. Who is God for you? What's your image of God? How do you see God?**

John all the time refers back to the Bible. Who's the God of the Bible? How does God relate with people in the Bible? It's this constant listening to the God of the Bible, all the New Testament. And that through that constant listening. To the God of the Bible, he draws all his language. **His way of seeing things, his way of expressing things.**

John of the Cross' writings have been described, I think, very accurately as a Lexio Divina of the whole Bible. They're a prayerful listening to the whole Bible. And here are the most critical part of all of his thinking, of all of the process that John sets before us. He's using the most critical passage in the whole Bible. The most fundamental passage for the people of the Bible, Deuteronomy *Shema Yisrael*.

There's a lovely passages in St Mark's gospel. Where the Scribe comes up to Jesus. And he asks Jesus, what's the most important commandment? They both agree it is the *Shema Yisrael*. The scribe who is so expert on the Old Testament and Jesus totally agree on this: '*...master, you have spoken well,*'. This is the heart of everything that Jesus believes in, that Jesus teaches that the whole Bible teaches. That's why this so fundamental to the Jewish people. This is so important to them here **John singles it out again everything he said he wants to teach.**

But he's teaching us, as we see, not from some *theory, but from experience*. **What John is teaching is the experience of somebody who grows into this, who matures into it, and whose living is.** And it's from that experience that John's teaching comes, the experience of growing into it, being healed and purified and transformed into which is John's whole Dark Night and all of his teaching. What's the experience of that whole process of growing and maturing? And what can we learn from that? What can we draw from it? Because John's thinking all the time is, how do we learn? How do we learn to live like this?

We learn to live like this from the experience of those who do. Not from some set of rules or regulations, a set of instructions or following some rituals or customs, no. We learn it from those who live us. We learn it from the experience of it being lived. **And that's what St John's poetry is expressing. The experience of *Shema Israel* being lived.**

When someone loves the Lord God, with all one's heart, all one's mind and all one's strength. What kind of a person is this? What kind of a life is this person living? And that's what John is trying to express for us. And they can't, as we keep saying, be easily described. This is not something that's easy to describe because we're talking about something that is **very profound, very subtle**. And what the person is really living from is something that is *beyond* the boundaries of language beyond the boundaries of any rational understanding.

Just to dip in to what he tells us here (all of these Stanza' from 24- the end of the Canticle are all **Celebrating** different aspects of how these these people are living. So I picked out these three stanzas. Very important Stanzas in the teaching of St Therese. You've probably all read Therese's autobiography. You know how important these stanzas are for her. These stanzas, she said, *she kept coming back to over and over again because* she sees so much of herself in what her Holy Father St John of the Cross is speaking about here.

What we have here is this mutual self-giving. God gives himself. See, the very nature of the God of the Bible and this is how the God of the Bible differs to us as human beings. It's something that the Bible is constantly struggling with. The people of the Bible. **The Bible obviously covers many centuries of people's experience of God** the difference between God and the people always comes down to this.

God is a God who gives. God is always pouring out. God is always giving of himself. People are always trying to hold on to, to take, to possess, to control. And that's that's always the great obstacle. And so now, **at this stage of the Canticle the person is able to give, to let go. The person is set free. The person is able to give of herself as God is able to give.** And therefore, there can now be this mutual meeting. There can now be this coming together. That each surrenders. God, of course, surrenders, but the person also surrenders. And now the person can be summed up (St John' Commentary number 8 of Stanza 27 p.583):

“.....the soul that has reached this state of spiritual espousal, knows how to do nothing else than love, and walk always with its Bridegroom in the delights of love”

She can only now love. And that line which keeps repeating itself here, *all her actions are now love*. That's a line that Saint Therese, of course, loved that line. Every act is love. (It's the last line of stanza 28) it was repeated in various ways right throughout the commentary in these stanzas.

**28. Now I occupy my soul
and all my energy in his service;
I no longer tend the herd,
nor have I any other work
now that my every act is love**

All her actions. All her responses, all her first thoughts and moves are love. The person can now only love. And that, of course, is what God is like. That's how God always deals with us. **God can only love. Now the person also can only love, because there is nothing else to hinder or compromise that capacity to love. So whatever happens, whatever situation the person is in, the person's response is always one of love. So love in everything.**

And why? because she knows now that that's who her Beloved is. Just another line from that same paragraph. She's conscious now. The bride, the person now knows that love is so valuable in her Beloved' sight, that she neither esteems nor make use of anything else but love. And so she applied **all her strength, in the pure love of God, desiring to serve him perfectly. All her strength.** Up until now, she could not apply all her strength. Now she can. In that love of God and that desire to serve him alone. God could only use love. He can only make use of love. Nothing else.

Perhaps to emphasise that, I read a line from the 'Living Flame' poem it is saying the same thing using imagery (St John' Commentary on Stanza 1 paragraph 3 p. 642):

“Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love; the interior acts he produces shoot up flames, they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely. Thus these acts of love are most precious; one of them is more meritorious and valuable than all the deeds a person may have performed in the whole of life without this transformation, however great they may have been.”

So one little drop of this love is more valuable than anything else one may have done in the whole of one's life. No matter what grace works, we might think we have done in our lives. One little drop of this love is more valuable. John tells us here over, over again. This love is so precious. That this is the only thing that God can use. This is what God uses, makes use of. **This is the good that a person does in this life, this love.** Whatever else, if it is without this love, then it has no value in God's sight.

God makes use of nothing other than love. That's everything for God. That's what God can use. It can only use love. **So, since there is no way by which he can exalt her more, than by making her equal to himself, he is pleased only with her love, for the property of love is to make the lover equal to the object loved.**

That's a fundamental teaching of St John's teaching that the lover becomes equal to the object loved.

And now we see the fulfilment of that. Love makes the person equal to God. True love. But earlier in John's teaching, particularly right throughout his 'Ascent of Mount Carmel', he is all the time, saying that if one puts one's heart, one's love in something that is less than God, would become slave to that. That's the slavery, the imprisonment that we put ourselves into. When we love something that's less than God. We make ourselves equal to that. We make ourselves slave or whatever it is that we love.

And now the person is totally set free to love God with all one's heart, with all one's mind, with all one's strength. Then it is that love. That enables the person to respond with a love equal to the love received.

That, of course, as we know, is not possible. But we'll see later on. We come to it tomorrow where John shows us **how God makes that possible in us because now, God, there's no limit to what God can do now in the person.**

He can completely transform the person. And enable the person to love as she is loved with God's strength, with what God makes possible in the person.

An important clarification to all of this and again, it's very much consistent with what we've already been saying. This is the Commentary on stanza 28 paragraph number five pg. 585:

“ All this energy (every dimension of the person) is occupied in God and so directed to him that even without advertence all its parts, which we have mentioned, are inclined from their first movements to work in and for God. The intellect, will, and memory go out immediately towards God; and the affections, senses, desires, appetite, hope, joy and all the energy from the first instant inclined toward God, although, as I say, the soul may not advert to the fact that she is working for him as a result she frequently works for God and his occupied in him and in his affairs, without thinking of being aware that she is doing so...”

Although, as I say, the soul may not advert to the fact that she is working for him. That's an important clarification. A person will have no awareness of this. It is said the person has been transformed from deep within. Instinctively, the person now, responds to every situation in love. But it's not thought through. The person is doesn't think this. It is not in the conscious mind. **The person is living from something deeper within. It's instinctive.** The person, if you meet one of these people, **they don't see themselves as anything special, or doing anything in particular, or wonderful. They're simply being themselves. The person is just being herself. She's just following that instinct, that gold- that's deep within her.**

So she's not conscious of the fact that she's doing something. These people are not aware if a person thinks they're doing something special or something wonderful then they do not have this freedom. That we're speaking about here. **This freedom here is not something that one is aware of** or thinks that they have. Because it's not, they don't see it as anything special. It's simply who they are. They're not conscious of this. It's not in the mind. It's not something that's rational in the conscious mind. It's simply an instinctive factor. They're just being themselves, totally themselves. **That inner freedom, that they're living from, and acting from, without anything else.**

That inner freedom, they have no awareness, consciousness, that that's what they're doing. So, it's not so, you know, as we've already seen, the closer a person gets to God, the less aware the person is that they're close to God, because **God is simply the air that they are living, the air that they are breathing. But also because God has become a greater and greater mystery.**

So, whatever it is that the person is living is totally beyond, what they can think about. Or think that they knew. So it's beyond any consciousness. The person is simply being themselves.

Another aspect of this freedom I spoke a bit about this freedom yesterday and it's very much what the person is now living through human freedom. We've seen, in John's writings, all the time, the term that he uses his favourite term for this, these things that limit our freedom, that **compromise our freedom, are our appetites.** And the appetite for John covers a whole range of things. We might use other terms nowadays, maybe like addictions or attachments or we could use a whole number of other terms, but John tends to favour the word. Appetite.

Because the appetite, whatever it is, we've an appetite for, a craving for, a longing for, a lusting for. That is a control over us. That is a hold.

And now these people, he tells us (pg. 585 paragraph 6 of the commentary on stanza 8): "I no longer tend the herd" - she no longer goes about satisfying her own appetite. And very importantly, neither satisfied the appetites of others. And that's a very interesting one. Because so often in life we can be controlled by the appetites of others. All kinds of ways that other people can manipulate us, control us, distort our thinking. Influence us in one way or other, that is not healthy or life giving. The appetites of others. And sometimes it can be more difficult to set ourselves free from other people's appetites than it can be from our own appetites.

So the person is now free, both of her own appetites and the appetites of others. Therefore, nobody can control this person. Nobody can manipulate this person. Nobody can have a hold on this person. She can act with freedom. And that's why sometimes, too, these people are often misunderstood, misjudged. Rejected.

Jesus Christ, of course, a good example he more than anybody else lived with this freedom, lived his whole life free. Of his own appetites and the appetites of others. And, of course, he ends up crucified. He was a danger, a threat, to society, to the empire, to everything. That kind of distortion within human, but if we can't control something then it's a threat to us.

If we cannot control a person, that person becomes a threat to us. Distorted thinking of humanity. The person here is free of that. Free of their own appetites, free of the appetites of others.

Therefore these people are so precious. And John, at the beginning of stanza 29, makes a very strong defence of these people. And the lives that they're living. Because they're so important. **John recognised that these are the people who do more good in our world than anybody else does.** And so John gives this defence of these people. And what they're doing, how they're living. Just to read a little bit of it:

Commentary Paragraph 3 on Stanza 29 page 587:

*“Great wrong would be done to a soul who possesses some degree, even some degree of this solitary love. As well as to the Church. If we were to urge her to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works were very important, and required only a short time. Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a soul from this love...” (a quote from the song of songs) “.....who will dare do so, and remain without reproof? **After all, this love is the end for which we were created. Again, a important phrase, some child, this love is the ends to which we were created”.***

This is what we're created for the life that the person lives here is the life that one is created for. The what? Living in the image and likeness of God that we're created for. As the Bible tells us, and that's what John is showing us here. In one way or other, how we can grow into become the image and likeness of God. And it is in love, not in any other way, but it is in love. It's the love. Because God is love.

And the person who has grown and matured into the image and likeness of God, is love. Totally transformed in love, all her actions are now love. A love that is totally free.

And a love that is the greatest work anyone can do in this world. Because it is purely the work of God. And therefore, In John's teaching and John's way of seeing it, these are **the most precious people.**

These are the people doing the most precious work. And to in any way disturb this, would be to do great harm. So John puts this great defence of these people to defend them.

Just one final point then to sort of conclude this particular part about LOVE. He gives another take on this again, another aspect of how a person is.

St John' Commentary on Stanza 29 Paragraph 11 Page 590:

*“Should we decide to interpret this verse more spiritually and in closer accord with what we are discussing here, it ought to be known that when a soul treading the spiritual road has reached such a point that she has lost all roads and natural methods in her communion with God, and no longer seeks him by reflections or forms or feelings or by any other way of creatures in the senses, but has advanced beyond them all and beyond all modes and manners, and enjoys communion with God in faith and love, then it is said that **God is her gain, because she has certainly lost all that is not God.**”*

So all modes and methods and ideas and where persons grown beyond them. There's no road. They are living beyond all of that. So people don't conform and fit into any particular mode or methods. They've grown beyond them to a place of this total freedom that the person has now grown into. And it can be difficult to, in practice, to discern that, obviously, not personal. Sometimes we say, these people have gone completely off the road. They've gone completely off the rails. They're gone.

There's a lovely illustration of it in the gospel that we had a few days ago. Where these disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and say to him, 'We fast, and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but you're disciples do not fast. Why aren't you all not fasting?' And Jesus said, no, the Bridegroom is with them, then goes on to discuss new wine skins it can be very difficult for us to rationally work out what the argument here is. **But at another level, it's really saying you're in the presence of Jesus. None of these rules apply anymore. None of these methods, because you're here with him.** You're in the presence of the of the Bridegroom there, you don't need any methods anymore. We are in a completely different place. And so it is with these people. They're in a completely different place. So also, there can be misunderstood and misinterpreted and all of that. That's another aspect to this.

Talk 5: Consumed with Desire for the Wisdom of God

08/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY

The final five stanzas 35-40 of St John of the Cross' "Spiritual Canticle" emphasise the transformative power of union with God.

This union, characterised by a deep, interior solitude and a constant exchange of love, results in a life of profound humility and a desire to express love. The person becomes a beacon of light and a source of life for the world, embodying the limitless and dynamic nature of true love.

The Canticle speaks not only of life but also about beauty, which is a characteristic of God. The soul, transformed in God's beauty, sees everything as God sees it, leading to a profound desire for God's wisdom.

This wisdom is pure gift from God that cannot be acquired or counterfeited, and it brings the purest joy and light, even amidst suffering, transforming the Cross into joy.

So welcome back again, we continue reflecting on St John of the Cross' Spiritual Canticle and **we have seen at least a little glimpse this morning of the kind of life that the person lives, who is now living, what John calls *union with God*, a union of love with God, or 'likeness of love'**. Various other similar terms that he uses. But the person is now living. And what the person has entered into is a relationship of love, is moved by love, acts from love, ALL her actions are acts of love.

And now, what I want to do now is to go a little further with this, and start to look at what John gives us in the last 5 stanzas. John emphasises that this is not a new phase. However, there's a definite shift when we went to stanza 36. It's like we're entering a different atmosphere. And there's two things that we notice. Or that John points out to us. One is that there's something of the light, or the atmosphere of the life of eternity which breaks through.

The image that he used in the *Living Flame* is this very thin veil between life here and life beyond whatever:

*Oh Living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
in it's deepest centre
Since now you are not oppressive
Now consummate
If it be your will
Tear through the **veil of this sweet encounter***

The other side of that very thin veil and something of the light is getting through. So the person is living something of eternity, though, John will always emphasise it is always in darkness, in the deepest darkness, it is always in faith. Because while we're in this world, we can only relate with God in faith.

And as we've already seen, **the closer one gets to God, the deeper the darkness is. Because the light is brighter, and therefore we can see less. So it is less that's understood. It's less that seen.**

The other aspect of these last 5 stanzas is that that; They're down to earth. If that's the right word. It's human life, the person becomes, more human, the closer we get to God, the more human we become. The more truly human. Human life is lived. Celebrated, embraced. When the closer we get to God, the more human we become. It's not entering into some kind of a divine life or another worldly life. But these people are living with feet firmly on the ground. There's a humility. There's a truth to how this has been lived.

So. When we get to stanza 36, in the Canticle. Like John did before, we already saw yesterday his commentary and stanza 23, where he gave us a passage of scripture, simply, like a light shining there to give us another perspective on what's going on (e.g. we read that passage from Ezekiel). John does something similar here now with a passage from Isaiah. It's like, it is simply there, as a light for us, to give us another perspective or a broader perspective on what's taking place.

So this is in the words of Isaiah, it's God addressing the person. Isaiah 58: verses 10 - 14 see SC pg 610:

*"Then your light will rise up in darkness. And your darkness will be as the noonday. And your God will give you rest always. And will fill your soul with brightness. And deliver your bones. And you will be like a watered garden, and an unfailing font of water. And the solitudes of ages will be built in you. You will raise up the beginnings and foundations of generation and generation. And you will be called the builder of fences. Withdrawing your paths and ways to quietude. If you separate your labour from the day of rest, and from doing your will on my holy day. And call yourself the delicate, holy, and glorious Lord's day of rest. **And if you glorify him by not doing your own ways, and not fulfilling your own will, then you will delight in the Lord, and I will extol you above the heights of the earth, and feed you on the inheritance of Jacob.**"*

And John just comments then that the *inheritance of Jacob* here is God himself. A passage, obviously, filled with symbolism, biblical symbolism from the prophet Isaiah. **But what John is using it here for is to show that this person is a light for the whole world.**

Something GREAT is being done through the person. The person has no awareness of it, or very little, might have some sense of it. **There's something far greater is happening. God. You've received God himself. God in the person. God has become alive.**

There is so much there. But it's like John giving us a very strong signal. This is big. Something really big is happening. **We've already seen that one little drop of this love will do more good than all the great works that a person might do in their whole life. Here now it's like that's being lifted up again to another level. That all the works of God, are dependent upon this person, or these people, all the great works of God in our world.**

So it's a very exalted vision of the person who has been transformed in God raised up. Now your light is a light for all. Your light will rise in darkness, your dark light will be as the noonday, etc. and you will be the day of rest and you'll be a new creation. You'll be restoring and rebuilding and reconciling all the things that God does. The person, united now with God, will be doing.

In the Stanza prior to this, and we haven't got the time to look at it, but it would have been lovely to have looked at Stanza 35. Which is all about **solitude**. It's like a celebration of solitude. **That the great work that God has done in this person's life. All has happened. in a certain solitude.** The solitude that's within. It's not a physical solitude, It's not that the person is away from everybody else or sort of a not, not a rarefied world. The person is right in the midst of the world, but there's a solitude deep within. **A solitude of relationship. The kind of solitude that lovers live.**

And he begins his introduction to Stanza 36 by referring us to that. He tells us *'that strange it is, the property of lovers. That they like to enjoy each other's companionship alone. Apart from every creature and all company. And the reason they desire to commune with each other alone is that love is the union between these two.*

That there's an aloneness, a solitude between the person and God. It's an interior solitude. It doesn't mean that others, the person is in the midst of life in every possible

way. **But within, there is a solitude that can't be touched, that nobody can enter. That the person is constantly in communion with God.**

As I say, it's not that the person objectively, intellectually, whatever word we want to use, is all the time aware of this. But, the fruits, the results of it are to be seen. **So this interior solitude, where God and the person meet, where God and the person are in communion with each other, and nothing can change that, nothing can interfere with that.** Nothing can get there. Nothing can get there. Where this constant exchange of love is going on.

Remember, at the very beginning, when I was introducing the Canticle, and John's introduction, I read what he says. At the very beginning, the very beginning of his commentary, the first words that he uses, introducing the Canticle. He said:

"It's the exchange of love between the soul and Jesus Christ. It is this love song that is constantly going on within that never stops. The love song between the bride and Christ".

Now, in these last stanzas, since we're taken into that love song, into where that love song is always happening. But, of course, there's a difference. Now, that love song is what is informing and guiding the person's life. That love song is somehow being expressed in how the person lives - that constant exchange of love, that's what he meant when he says that all the person's actions now are acts of love. So this interior love song that's going on.

Now that she surrendered to the lights and joys of this intimate love of her Bridegroom. And all that's left now is eternal life to enjoy in eternity. However, there is another characteristic of this love, or it's not so much another characteristic, it is the fundamental **when love takes root. It has this characteristic It always makes one desire to taste the joys and sweetness of love in the inward and outward exercise of love. So, the person always now wants to taste the joy, the sweetness of love, inward and outward.**

In other words, **that love that's being lived in the deepest place within the person. MUST be expressed.** That's something that John alerts us to at the very beginning of the canticle in the prologue. This exchange of love that's going on within. And all of these stanzas are expressions of that. **But the person wants to go further. and put that love into action.** Whatever that may mean in a person's life, however that may be, **there's that desire, not just to be in communion with God interiorly in love, but also to exercise that love.** In real, practical ways, whatever that may be. However, that form may be that the person cannot stop. The very nature of love is that a person cannot stop.

And what are the characteristics of the Canticle. John tells us, the canticle takes us as far as this relationship of love can take us in this life. All that's left is eternity.

However, when he starts to write his *living flame*, which is actually written before he completes the canticle, he tells us that, yes, he said, in the Canticle, we go as far as we can go with this love in this life. **However, he said, love can never come to a point of arrival.**

Love can never become something static. You don't reach somewhere, and this is it now. There's always deeper layers. There's always grace or depths to be discovered in love. Or the image that he uses, is the fire, the fire can get hotter. The fire love can always get hotter, and it can throw out flames. It's never static. It has never come to a point of arrival. It's, it's dynamic. **Love is always dynamic. Love is always living and life giving.** And that's what's happening here.

And as we can see from that passage from Isaiah, **that life-giving is limitless it is giving life to the world. Love that gives life to the world. This true love is the life of the world.** So that desire to express this love - it grows and continually grows and never stops.

Now, however. This isn't just about love. It's also about beauty. As we've seen, the Canticle isn't just a journey of transformation in love. It's also transformation in beauty. Because beauty is for John that characteristic of God. God is beauty. And God expresses himself through beauty. Everything that God has created. There is beauty there. And that beauty is that *something* of God. And now that beauty has been transformed. That is, that we see things now as God sees them. Not as we as human beings, the whole perspective, that the person has over everything; is completely changed.

And John gives us this wonderful paragraph here on beauty, which **we cannot resist with reading, because it is the most fascinating piece of writing in the whole of John the Cross's writings. It's extraordinary piece of writing.**

And just to note before I read this, it's not addressed to us. It's not addressed to the readers. It's like John is writing this, turns to God, and addresses God. Or addresses beauty.

He says in his Commentary Paragraph 5 of Stanza 36 (The complete works p611):

*'That I be so transformed in your beauty, that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing, then, your very beauty, this in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other their own beauty. Since both are your beauty alone. I being absorbed in your beauty. Hence, I shall see you in your beauty, and you will see me in your beauty, and I shall see myself in you in your beauty, and you will see yourself in me in your beauty. **That I may resemble you** in your beauty, and you resemble me in your beauty, and my beauty, be your beauty, and your beauty, my beauty. Wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in your beauty, because your very beauty will be my beauty, and thus we shall both behold each other in your beauty.'*

That's all one sentence! And according to the footnote, the word *beauty* appears 23 times. And it's not just any beauty. It's God's beauty. And **the soul, the person, the bride, sees everything now in God's beauty. It's like, one is given a whole new way of seeing things. Everything that God sees is beautiful.** God only sees beauty.

That total transformation of the person in beauty. But then, there is another aspect to this transformation. In Commentary on Stanza 36 paragraph 8 (CW page 612) He teaches us:

"The soul cannot see herself in the beauty of God, unless she is transformed into the wisdom of God in which she sees herself in possession of earthly and heavenly things'.

So the wisdom of God, you always see the beauty when one is transformed into the wisdom of God. That's a very biblical idea, the wisdom, wisdom in the Bible is God's greatest gift to human beings. Remember *the* story about Solomon? When he's asked by God, ask me for anything you want to ask me. And he asks for wisdom. And God compliments him for asking, **for he is asking for the greatest gift that God can give to a human being. wisdom. It's that something of God. It's something of the nature of God, the life of God that's put into us, that God gives us. Impossible to define. But so necessary. For us to be able to relate with God.** This wisdom in the New Testament is equated with the Holy Spirit. But they're not the same. The Holy Spirit is God but the wisdom is something that we are given, a gift that we're given by God.

And so this transformation in the wisdom of God. And in that, then one can see all the works of God. Because, as he tells us at paragraph 9 line 3 (page 613): *"...the soul always possesses this desire. To have clear and pure understanding of the divine truths and the greater her love, the more she longs to enter further into these truths."*

So this love is not some kind of fulfilment. The desire gets bigger and bigger, to enter more deeply into these truths. To know, to know more. This is not a knowledge that's an intellectual knowledge that can be expressed, and it's a knowledge that comes from love, a knowledge that's the fruit of love.

And now he uses an image, an important image for John, the image of the thicket, or the wood, the cluster of trees, that cluster of something that you can look at from outside, you can see in all sorts of different ways you could fly in a helicopter over us and get an image or see it from a distance, but to really know it, one has to enter into it, into the depths of it, into the darkness, and the rough, and the briars, the thorns, the touch the soil, as to enter deeply into it. So wonderful you have got to go deep within. **The desire of the person is to go deep into all the mysteries of God. And particularly the mysteries of the life and death of Jesus Christ. And the greatest of them now, of course, is the mystery of suffering, the mystery of the cross which is the depths of the mystery of God, and HOW God choose to reveal himself to us.**

Page 613 Para 10 line 6;

"This thicket of God's wisdom and knowledge is so deep and immense, that no matter how much the soul knows, she can always enter further. It is vast, and its rich is incomprehensible."

He then quotes some St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

"O height of the riches and the wisdom of the knowledge of God, how incomprehensible are his judgements, and unsearchable his ways, as some Romans 11:33.

So this immense knowledge of God, that the person wants to enter. Hence, the soul ardently wishes to be engulfed in these judgements, and know them from further within.

So, the knowledge that comes from love is very different to the knowledge that we receive in any other way. Because the knowledge that we receive in any other way comes from outside. whether it be from that book there, or somebody telling me something, or I noticing it, which my eyes are listening to it. It's all coming from outside. **The knowledge that comes through love comes from within. It's experienced within, and it is only afterwards, we come to some understanding of it. And maybe we**

never understand. And that's the kind of knowledge we're speaking about here, something that comes from within that the person just knew.

They don't know how they know, but they know. And maybe something can be put into words or images, but mostly not. That's the knowledge the person is longing for, the knowledge from within. From experience from within.

Then St John goes on, that this thicket of knowledge, then, into which the soul wants to enter. And by wants to, it is some very strong desire, compulsion. The soul longs for God's wisdom. He said it also signifies very appropriately the thickest and multitude of trials and tribulations, for suffering is very delightful and beneficial to her.

Page 613 Paragraph 12 Suffering, I'll just read on here a little bit,

".....for suffering is the means of her penetrating further into the thickets of the delectable wisdom of God. The purest suffering brings with it, the purest and most intimate knowing, and consequently, the purest and highest joy, because it is a knowing from further within".

No matter how much we try to get into that sentence, we would never fully understand this. It is pure gift of God. It's not something that a person can ever acquire of themselves. **But now, the bride, the person, she has some sense of what this means. Suffering, joy, wisdom. They all come together. And, of course, ultimately, they come together on the cross.**

That greatest expression of God's wisdom. Saint Teresa tells us, St John of the Cross does too, but Teresa puts it very clearly in her writings, that this is the one gift of God, that the devil cannot counterfeit. Paul tells us the devil can turn himself into an angel of light. Wherever God gives, whatever God does, the devil can imitate or make us think that we're receiving it when we're not. **This is one gift he cannot give. Because this is a gift that can only come from the deepest place within. You can only come from that deep place of encounter within the person.** The person cannot acquire it of themselves, and the devil cannot give it.

A person who has it, it's pure gift of God, and the person knows is pure gift of God. It's joy and light and wisdom. In the midst of suffering. That the highest and purest joy. This purest and most intimate knowing. It's not just any knowing or any joy. There's something, intimate knowing, pure knowing. And purest and highest joy. Because it cannot, in any way, be distorted. It is the superlative.

It cannot, in any way, be misinterpreted. Because the person has done nothing to acquire it themselves it is given purely by God. The person who has it knows it, this wisdom of God.

Jesus speaks about it in the Gospel, of course. In StJohn's Gospel, the last supper discourse, he speaks about joy, his joy being complete. He speaks about peace, a peace *that only he can give*. And all the wisdom that he communicates there - just before his passion and death. That light, that wisdom.

And John's gospel speaks about the crosses, the glorification of Jesus, the manifestation of the glory of God. **St. Paul, in the 1st letter to the Corinthians speaks about the**

wisdom of the cross. That those who believe in it see it as being the power and the wisdom of God. Something that is the complete opposite to human wisdom.

John of the Cross tells us over and over again in his writings that whenever something is least according to our way of seeing things, or our wisdom, or goes contrary to the wisdom of this world, then there is something of God's wisdom being revealed there, because God's wisdom is unlike ours. So when something seems to fit in with our wisdom, yes, it can be the wisdom of God. But when something is the complete opposite. It's there's something more profound, a sort of cross, because it is not what we would have chosen.

For us, it's totally incomprehensible that God should die in a cross that's totally incomprehensible to humanity. Therefore, it must be the revelation of the greatest wisdom of God. Something great is being revealed there.

So, the person transformed here now in the love and the beauty of God wants that wisdom, is crying out for that wisdom, will stop at nothing to get, to receive that wisdom, wants to be drawn further and further into that wisdom.

Talk 6: Jesus upon the cross *reveals* the nature of God

09/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY

St. John of the Cross's teaches us that the purest suffering is a gift from God, which leads to the purest and most intimate knowledge of God. This suffering, exemplified by Jesus on the cross, reveals God's nature as one of constant giving and humility.

St John teaches us that *true* spiritual growth and union with God comes through embracing this "living death of the cross," a concept that challenges our worldly understanding of nobility and success.

St John of the Cross emphasises the importance of the cross as the gateway to divine wisdom and the ultimate fulfilment of human life. He highlights that the desire for union with God runs with a desire to understand the profound mysteries of the incarnation, particularly Christ's suffering and death.

This shift in spiritual vision leads to a deeper understanding of both God and humanity and ultimately transforms the person into their fullest, most human self.

I will read again the line I read yesterday and pick things up from there; this is from St John's Commentary on Stanza 36 Paragraph 12 of the Spiritual Canticle:

*“The purest suffering brings with it
the purest and most intimate knowing
and consequently; the purest and highest joy
because it is a knowing from further within”*

I just want to pick up that question of suffering, because it can be a difficult one for us to understand. In fact, impossible to understand. And in John of the Cross' teaching, we find a lot of statements like that, but we must also look at the wider context. John's own personal experience. He's born into poverty, to destitution. His father and his older brother die when he is very young. He sees the struggle that his mother goes through to bring up her remaining two children. And right throughout John's life. We see this pattern, this encounter with suffering, and the tragedy of human life. Working in a hospital for sexually transmitted illnesses as a teenager. During his teenager years, his brother and sister in law, they lost 6 young children during those years, common in those days. Infant mortality was very high. So he encounters the tragedy of human life, of human suffering.

And John does not in any way say that this is good for anybody. It's the opposite. It does not help the person. It does not make the person a better person or a holier person or bring them close to God. John will spend his life trying to alleviate the suffering of others, whether it be helping the poor, nursing the sick, tending to people in all their needs, all the needs of the human being. So most suffering, 99.9% of suffering is not positive does not do good for the person, it is not a time of growth and of maturing.

But - **there is a suffering that is a different kind of suffering that he's now speaking about.** As I said yesterday, **it is pure gift of God** not something the person can acquire of themselves. St John speaks about it in terms of **desire for it, longing for it, for the desired longing, as we see is for the wisdom, the joy and most importantly, the love that is there.**

The things of God are seen in a completely different way to the things of this world. God sees things very differently. Just to illustrate this. I'll read a little passage from the ***Ascent of Mount Carmel, (Book 2 Chapter 7 Paragraph 11)*** **A very important chapter from the point of view of understanding who Jesus Christ is for John of the Cross.**

In this chapter, he reflects both on the teaching of Jesus, and on his life experience such as, what kind of a life did Jesus live? How did he die? What can we draw from that? What can we learn from that? And he has reflected upon the cross and the great work of God in saving humanity, reconciling, uniting God with humanity, upon the cross. And then he goes on to give this reflection. So here's what he says.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book 2 Chapter 7 Paragraph 11:

*“When they are reduced to nothing,
the highest degree of humility.
The spiritual union between their souls and God
will be an accomplished fact.”*

*This union is the most noble. and sublime state attainable in this life.
The journey then does not consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual
feelings. But in the living death of the cross,
sensory and spiritual, exterior, and interior."*

So there's a statement we could spend forever trying to unravel what he's speaking about. It goes back again to what I said yesterday or sometime anyway, about **the nature of God. This is always so important to understand St John the Cross's teaching. God is always pouring out, always giving.** The nature of God is to give. Our nature is to take, to hold on to, to control. And it is only when we have let go of those, become free of that compulsion, to take, to have to possess, to control. **When we are reduced to nothing; which he said is the highest degree of humility, that is Jesus upon the cross.** Has nothing. **John has already pointed this out to us, a little earlier on. Jesus upon the cross, everything is taken away, at every level of his being. Reduced to nothing.** That highest degree of humility and humility is always the sign that one is close to God. The person, the closer one is to God, the more humble the person is. **Humility is that sure sign of closeness to God.**

So the person now is in the highest degree of humility. He said, the spiritual union between their souls and God will be an accomplished fact. Because the person is most like God. Most like the nature of God. It's an accomplished fact. The person is reduced to nothing. **Has given everything. Then the person is most like God, because that's the nature of God. Jesus upon the cross is revealing the nature of God.**

That is our God upon the cross. That's **who** God is. Jesus said 'when I am lifted up you will know who I am'. (Full reference below)

"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he" When I am lifted up, you'll know who I am." (John 8:28).

The identity of Jesus is revealed upon the cross. **That's where we come to know who God is, that image of Jesus upon the cross. This is the nature of God.** It's the complete opposite to how we think, how we see things. So this, it's an accomplished fact. And he goes on to say: "... *that this union is the most noble and sublime state attainable in this life*". **So Jesus upon the cross. The broken, emaciated body of Jesus upon the cross is the highest and most noble state attainable in this life.**

We can see that, it is seeing things in the completely opposite way to how we would. Our image of nobility, of the highest state we can achieve in this life as one of grandeur and all, it would look completely the opposite to a broken body upon a cross. A criminal's death. Not just in terms of suffering, but also in terms of the shame of the cross, which was very much the Roman idea, it was to shame the person. **So the person's reduced to absolutely nothing at every level. But in the eyes of God, that's the highest and most noble state attainable in this life.**

And therefore then he goes on to say;

'.....the journey then doesn't consist of the things we might be attracted to, which are consolations, the light, spiritual feelings'

(though if we have those, John has no problem with them. That's fine. If that's what you experience, that's okay). **But they are not the moments of real growth, are the signs of real maturing.**

THE SIGNS OF REAL GROWTH AND MATURITY ARE HE SAID:

‘.... IN THE LIVING DEATH OF THE CROSS’

(The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book 2 Chapter 7 Paragraph 11).

And that is at every level of the person's being; sensory, spiritual external, interior that living death of the cross. That giving of everything. That dying to everything. **That IS the real journey into life.**

A very **important** passage in St John's writings, taken from Matthew's Gospel 7:14 part of the Sermon on the Mount:

*“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life,
and those who find it are few”*

The narrow and restricted way that LEADS TO LIFE. Entry through that narrow gate. But that's the way that leads to life. The door of entry into life is narrow and constricted but few choose it. Yet that is the very door of entry into life.

So, for John then the following of Jesus Christ, as a fact that is what matters. How closely aligned is one's life to Jesus Christ. And John, when he chose to join Teresa's reform of the Carmelite order, he changed his name to *John of the Cross*. That tells us something about him, something about his thinking. About how he chose to live, what matters to him in life? And now for us, what the message of his life is!

Entering into this wisdom. I just want to read the next final paragraph here of Stanza 36 of the Canticum, where he explains further, or takes us further into this. He said, ‘oh’, (& whenever we see that kind of expression in John's writings, we notice something that he's emphasising’. We know this is something important to him, something that's coming from **deep within him**:

“Oh, if we could, but fully understand how a soul CANNOT reach the thicket and wisdom of the riches of God, which are of many kinds, without entering the thickest of the many kinds of suffering. Finding in this her delight and consolation”

If we could only understand this, that the wisdom of God which we long for and these riches of God, that, as we saw at the begin of the Canticum -it's that *deepest* desire within the person. To be united with God, with the very nature of God, with the very essence of God. And this is the closest that we can come to that in this world.

The life and death of Jesus Christ, the person of Jesus, how he lived. So we enter into this thicket and “...how a soul with an authentic desire for divine wisdom, one suffering first in order to enter this wisdom by the thickets of the Cross.” So the cross is a door, a door of entry, into this thicket, into this wisdom of God. So this is all there. In St Paul's

first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is trying to explain this to the Christians of Corinth, something that he himself is personally experiencing as what John of the Cross is doing here also.

But then St John goes on to quote Paul, not from one Corinthians, but from the Ephesians. This most beautiful text in which: St Paul admonished the Ephesians, **not to grow weak in their tribulations, and to be strong, and rooted in charity. In order to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and height and depth To know also the supereminent charity of the knowledge of Christ, in order to be filled with all the fulness of God**"

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family[a] in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God Ephesians 3:13–19.

And that's what Paul is speaking about, and that's what John wants here. And then he sums it up by saying the gate entering into these riches is the wisdom of the cross. This CROSS IS THE GATE, entering into these riches. That's the wisdom of the cross, which is narrow. And few desire to enter by it. But many desire, the delights obtained from entering there. A very important sentence in John of the Cross's teaching, because it sums up so much of his thinking. Of how he sees things, how he sees the Christian life. **What people really desire, what people really need.** And coming back again to where I began with the poverty, the destitution that John knew so well so personally.

John knew that **the usual answers**, food, money, help, education, all things which John spent his life working for, all the time in helping people with in every way. **They do not fully answer that fundamental need that's within every person and that is, for this wisdom, this wisdom of God, to be united, to be transformed in the wisdom, and a joy, and the beauty of God. That's what every human being, no matter how impoverished, no matter how compromised or damaged that person's life is. This is what every human being longs for, is created for.**

If we were to look at John of the Cross, look at his life. Look at everything that he has taught us everything that he stands for. How might we sum it all up? It's somebody who has a keen interest in human life. WHY we exist, WHAT we're here for. What the PURPOSE of life is. **And HOW God has revealed that to us. He has told us this. He has answered that most profound question for us.**

He has answered it in the SCRIPTURES. And most importantly, he has answered it **in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.** Or as John of the Cross so often tells us in his writings in the INCARNATION. That for John is the greatest of all mysteries.

If God has chosen to become human. To become one of us. To be born as one of us, to live as one of us, to suffer and to die as one of us, as a human being. As part of this world and this creation. Then, to be a human being, to be part of creation, is something truly

great. And it is only in Jesus Christ, and the experience of Jesus Christ that that greatness is to be seen. And in particular **that greatness is to be seen, in those parts,** those aspects, which seem **most unlike how we would see things.** That seems so different to our impoverished way of seeing things, our impoverished and narrow and restricted way of thinking. And first and foremost among all of that, of course, is suffering and death and suffering and death upon the cross.

The next paragraph that John gives us here in his introduction to Stanza 37 gives us this in another way and he comes back to this mystery of the incarnation. Which is so fundamental to John's thinking. This is what I'll just read this paragraph because it's such an important one.

"One of the main reasons for the desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ....."(and that's from the letter to the Philippians. He's drawing so heavily from St. Paul here, you notice in this part Paul is so important here). *The desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ.* (That's the desire to give everything. That's the desire to be completely annihilated to be in that fulness of humility that we saw, that desire to follow Jesus Christ in his experience of self-giving. That total giving, that desire for that, and to be with Jesus Christ.) Is this, he said:

"....is to see him face to face to come face to face with Jesus Christ and thoroughly understand the profound and eternal mysteries of the incarnation, which is by no means the lesser part of beatitude. The profound and eternal mysteries of the incarnation."

That the creator would become part of what he has created. And not only what we would consider to be the good bits. Or the beautiful bits or the interesting bits. But the parts of creation that we are least attracted to, which we see as being destructive, pain, suffering, death. He becomes part of all of that. If we could only understand that, that's the nature of God. **And as John tells us there's a desire deep within us to understand that.**

We can't, of course, not until we come face to face with Christ Jesus in the next life are we going to have any understanding of that. But that's what he's bringing us before here, that greatest of mysteries. Then St John of the Cross quotes some of John's Gospel Chapter 17 (such an important Chapter in John of the Cross's writings the priestly prayer of Jesus) John 17:3:

"This is eternal life. That they know you, the one true God, and your son Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

So that's what eternal life is to know God and to know Jesus Christ. In all of John of the Cross's teaching we can see that theme running right through it. **If we only knew who God is. That's why I've come back to this over and over again, the very nature of God. If we knew really who God is. And we knew the nature of Jesus Christ. Then we'd live.** We're alive. We have eternal life. That's what life is. That's what it is to live. That's eternal life. **To know God, to know Jesus Christ. And this is Jesus praying for this at the Last Supper. The night before he died.** He's praying that his listeners, all of us. will know God, will know Jesus. Of course, **THIS IS THE REVELATION OF WHO JESUS IS ON THE CROSS.** In this great mystery. Then John goes on to say:

“The first thing a person desires to do, after having come a long distance, is to see and converse with a deeply loved one. Similarly, the first thing the soul desires in coming to the vision of God, is to know and enjoy the deep secrets and mysteries of the incarnation, and the ancient ways of God dependent on it.” That's what it is. To know the mystery of the incarnation. And then he goes on to say: *“Then she will know the sublime mysteries of God and of human beings”.*

This is John's greatest interest to know sublime mysteries. When we know the sublime mysteries of God. We also know the mysteries of human beings. Because we're made in the image and likeness of God. We are created for relationship with God. Our creation, our existence is only fulfilled, **we only become ourselves. When we are one with God, when we're united with God, we become who we truly are.** And that's what these last 5 stanzas of the Canticle in particular are showing us. **The person is now as close to God as the person can be in this life, has entered into the depths of the wisdom of God, has been transformed into the love and the beauty of God, is now truly living in the image and likeness of God.** Therefore, the person has grown and matured into the fulness of humanity. The person is now most human. And is living human life as it's meant to be lived. The person now knows, in her experience, the sublime mysteries of God and of humanity. Stanza' 35-40:

36. *Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty,
to the mountain and to the hill,
to where the pure water flows,
and further, deep into the thicket.*

37. *And then we will go on
to the high caverns in the rock
which are so well concealed;
there we shall enter
and taste the fresh juice of the pomegranates.*

38. *There you will show me
what my soul has been seeking,
and then you will give me,
you, my life, will give me there
what you gave me on that other day:*

39. *the breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
the grove and its living beauty
in the serene night,
with a flame that is consuming and painless.*

40. *No one looked at her,
nor did Aminadab appear;
the siege was still;
and the cavalry,
at the sight of the waters, descended.*

Talk 7: Transformation in Love

09/07/2026

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SUMMARY

The final session of the retreat focusses on the theme of transformation in love, as depicted in St John of the Cross's "Spiritual Canticle." The journey of transformation is portrayed as a love story, with the soul's ultimate desire being to love God as purely and perfectly as He loves her. This is achieved through God's grace, which transforms the soul into His love and gives her the strength to love Him in return.

John of the Cross describes the transformation of a person into God's love, a process that begins in this life but is perfected in the next. He uses five metaphors to illustrate this new life: breathing the air of the Holy Spirit, praising God, appreciating creation, contemplation, and being transformed into God's love. John emphasises the importance of free will in choosing to receive and live by God's gifts.

We have been drawing from St John of the Cross, listening to him, entering into his world, his way of thinking. We are only 'dipping in', let it speak to you in whatever way it speaks.

For this last session, and there's never any conclusion to the work of God! It's always goes on. But I just want to pick up on a theme that again we've been looking at the journey, the process that John takes us through in his Cantic; as we've seen, it is one of transformation.

Now, transformation for St John it's like a whole new creation. It's a *leaving behind* an 'old way' of living and living a whole new way. And we saw that this transformation is primarily one of beauty and of love. We also saw other aspects of this like transformation in God's wisdom and other words that he uses along the way but primarily, beauty and love.

So I want to kind of just focus a little bit now on the transformation in love. **The whole Cantic we see is a great love story. As our relationship with God always is. It's a love story. And it's best told in terms of a great love story, it is the eternal love story.** We are created out of love, we are created for love. It is through love, that we we grow, that we mature, that we discover our identity. And that we... contribute and do good.

So love. Is the heart of everything. As we've seen, God is love. And love is God's language. And God always communicates with us through the language of love. **Everything that God does in our lives is an act of love.** He never acts in any other way in our lives, except lovingly. *There are times we may not see it that way, or may not interpret it that way.* God is always giving, pouring out his love to us.

Throughout the Cantic the person has been responding to God's love. To that awareness of God's love. At the very beginning of the Cantic. She's wounded with love. The Bridegroom has wounded her with love. Love is a wound. But she doesn't focus on the pain of that wound, rather on the motivation, the energy, the life that that wound gives, that love gives. To search, to seek, to go out of herself.

Love is the starting point of the journey, that awareness of love, that realisation, that love has touched her. And she must respond. Not only must she respond, but she must respond totally. Every, she owes him every response of love.

That great phrase we find at the very beginning that us the realisation. Every response of love she owes him. Nothing less. And all the time, all the stages of the journey are responding to that love. And that total transformation love then, John takes us to show us in Stanza 38, which I just want to draw a little bit from now.

And all the time John is reminding us, we've seen a few of these reminders already of the very nature of love; the very nature of love. **What the person now seeks is to love God as purely and perfectly as he loves her. So that she may be able to repay him. By this, a love equal to what he gives her.**

So that's the nature of love. It's not enough to receive love. The person who receives love has that desire to respond, to repay love, with a love equal to the love received. That's the that's the nature of love.

So she now wants to love the Bridegroom as perfectly as he loves her. That's the soul's aim, a love equal to God's. But of course, there's a problem there. How can humanly speaking, we cannot do that. We cannot love with a love equal to the love that God gives us. We're not equal to God. We don't become God's or equal to him.

So. What does God do then? This is Commentary paragraph number 4 of Stanza 38.

"It should be noted, he said. That the soul does not say that there in this place now where we are. There he will give her his love, although he really does....."

She's not just saying he loves me. He's giving me his love. He is, of course, doing that. Because there, John says, she would thereby manifesting only that God loves.

"...She states, rather, that there he will show her how to love him as perfectly as she desires".

Because that's the desire that love gives. Love of its very nature can never be something that is just received. We have seen this mentioned various times in that fundamental difference that there is between God's nature and ours. God is always giving. And therefore **the person transformed in God's love MUST give, WANTS to give, DESIRES to give, as God gives. That is, the giving of everything. The pouring out of everything. So that's what she desires. That is the result, the consequence. The fruit of God's love for her.**

Is that desire to give everything. To pour out everything. To love as equally as the love received, that total self giving. And so it is precisely. John goes on to say:

".....by giving her His love that He shows her how to love as she is loved by him."

So in giving her his love, he is showing her HOW to love as he loves her. He goes on:

"...besides teaching her to love purely, freely, and disinterestedly as He loves us".

So that's what to love **purely, freely, and disinterestedly as God loves is**. That's the first part of it, and those three words (purely, freely, disinterestedly) are very important.

I know they are right throughout John's teaching purely, that love be pure. So much of John's teaching is around the purification of love. Because love, our love gets distorted. Compromised. Used, misused, freely to be able to love in freedom. **Love must always be an act of freedom. Of total freedom.**
It's not love if it is not totally free.

We have seen the nature of that freedom. It's not just the freedom externally, but more importantly, it's an interior freedom. The freedom of one's heart, free from all one's own ambitions, self-centredness, appetites (which is John's favourite words) or one's emotions, agendas, everything, to be totally free, interiorly, in the deepest place within. And then disinterestedly. With no self-interest, nothing, expecting nothing in return. **No motive, just giving. That of course, is the life of Jesus Christ. No greater love than to give his life.** To give everything.

With no possibility of anything in return. With no agenda, no self interest. So that's the love purely freely and disinterestedly as God loves us. That's how God loves us.

But then John goes on to say that God has to do something else also. And that is, he said:

"God makes her love Him with the very strength with which He loves her."

Back to this word *strength*. Very important word in John. We saw this in the Shema Yisrael:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength".

And then he also quotes from the Psalm 59: *"I keep all my strength for you"*.

That strength, because all of these other things, all these things that we have to be set free of, what they all do is; they *take away that strength*, they sap at that strength. They compromise that strength. The strength to love. That's the person who loves purely, freely and disinterestedly. **All the strength that the person has, at every level of the person's being can be put into love. And God gives his very strength. Strength that goes beyond human strength. God gives us strength to love.**

So that's what God gives her. That strength which he has. And John goes on then to tell us HOW that works: *"He's transforming her into his love. He gives her His own strength, by which she can love him."* So he gives her the means, To love Him in return. He not only gives her his love, he gives her the means by which she can return that love. She can love with a love equal to the love received.

I mentioned this morning chapter 17 of John's gospel. So influential on John of Cross's teaching. That's when Jesus puts into prayer what his life is all about, what his message is all about. And there in that prayer, among the things Jesus prays for his disciples, is that the **love that there is between the father and the son will be in them. They will have that same love. That there is between the Father and the Son.** Not a lesser love, but a love that **is the Trinity**. That they have that same love. So he's gives her that love, his love.

"So he transforms her into his love. And gives her his own strength by which she can love Him. As if He were to put an instrument into her hands, show her how it works by operating it jointly with her. He shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so...."

So we can imagine. the instrument of love, the musical instrument, and God giving the instrument to the person. Showing her how to use it, and using it with her. All of those aspects to this. Gives her his love. Gives her the ability to love and shows her how to.

All the different ways that God transforms the person into His love. So the person can love with the love that God has for her. However, he goes on to say: That while we are in this world, that is not brought towards total perfection. It can only be in the next. But here a person is getting some glimpse of it. Something of it creeps in, something of it is there. There is something more in the next life. That this is the first hint of something. That's only fully known in the next life.

So that's the transformation in love. Then in stanza 39 and I will look at this very very briefly and then I hope if anybody has any questions you'd like to ask. Stanza 39:

*The breathing of the air,
The song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its living beauty
In the serene night,
With a flame that is consuming and painless.*

In Stanza 39 John tries to pull all of this together and **gives a summary of what this new life is or life as it's meant to be lived is.**

And he gives five ways of looking at it, we might say. 1. **The first one is 'as breathing the air of the Holy Spirit.'** We've seen that the Trinity, being brought into the Trinity. That we are made in the image and likeness of God. He created her John says: "..... *in his own image and likeness, that she might attain this resemblance*".

The person grows into that image and likeness. That's been brought into the Trinity, made for the type of relationship that there is within the Trinity, resembling God in relationship. That's the 1st aspect of this. And here, John again is drawing very heavily on chapter 17 of John's gospel.

The song of the sweet nightingale

2. The second one then is the **praise of God.** And again, here's something very similar to love, giving the instrument here. The Bridegroom *gives her His voice. He gives His voice to her so that united together they may praise God.* This voice of jubilation, this voice of praise, that, whereas, again, is not as perfect as the praise in the next life. But the two together, bride and Bridegroom, the bride is praising God, glory singing God's praises, with the voice of the Bridegroom. The two being one, that spiritual marriage being complete, being one voice.

The grove and its living beauty

3. Then the third one creation. Knowledge of creation, seeing creation. This is all the time again, running through all of John's writings. That appreciation of all that God has created, because that's, the evidence that God has left all around us, of WHO he is, and of HIS work. **As we have seen, the person transformed in God's beauty is seeing everything through the beauty of God.** Or seeing beauty as God sees beauty. Which is very different to how we might see beauty or what we might judge to be beautiful or not.

The beauty of what God has created, and the relationships that are there within creation and the dependencies that are there. Now the person can see that. In a fuller, more complete way, that appreciation of creation.

*In the serene night,
With a flame that is consuming and painless.*

4. Then the fourth one, contemplation, contemplation, of course for John, **HOW we relate with God. Or as he defines it that "in flow of God into the depths of the person" that**

heals and purifies and transforms the person and enables the person to relate with God.

As he keeps saying and says, repeats here again, this is **always in deepest darkness. It is always in faith.** We can only know God in the darkness of faith. As I've said already, closer we get to God, the darker it becomes.

The less clear our vision of God is, because the light is brighter, God is bigger and bigger. So this contemplation of God, that the person is now doing, **she calls night. It's obscurity. He emphasis upon night, again. This contemplation, knowing by unknowing.** Phrases like that in John's work because it is a contemplation of God that cannot be limited to what we can know or what we can understand. Just to quote a line from him here:

"...However sublime this knowledge may be. It is still a dark night when compared to the beatific knowledge she asks for here".

And so she's praying for, longing for when the nights of dark contemplation of this earth, change into the contemplation of the clear and serene vision of God in heaven. The person is longing for that, but here, it is always in darkness. God is always a dark night to the person in this life.

The transformation into the immense love of God. That total transformation into God, into God's love, that's where to use the term that John uses, the person becomes God by participation. We don't become God. We're human, fully human, and more human than ever. **But through relationship with God, we partake in God through relationship, through this transformation in love,** that what the person is doing, everything - is an act of love as we've seen. All my actions are love.

We saw that yesterday and looking at Stanza 28. All the actions of the person, all the reactions, all the movements, all the thoughts of the person, are love. Therefore, they are of God. They're transformed into God. The person transformed in God can only act out of love, that is the only way, every response is a response of love.

And just one final thought then before we finish in the midst of these 5 after he's given the 1st one. John puts in paragraph number 7 of Stanza 39. Is something John does throughout his writings. If you are familiar with John's writings. You find this out. He will be writing about something. He'd be explaining something or teaching something. And then he sort of turned to his readers and put in an appeal or he might turn to God in prayer. He often it into prayer forms and starts start speaking in the depth of his heart. This is number seven, he starts **"Oh" That's a sign that John is saying something very important something that's coming from deep within him.** He makes this appeal, he said:

"O souls, created for* these grandeurs and called to** them...."

Now, just pause there for a moment, it for these, all the things they speak about all the things that this poem is about, all that he wants to express, and calls to them. And **both*** of those words are important. **We're created for this,** so we've seen that over and over

again, what we are created for. This is all fulfilling the purpose of what we are created for. But that's not enough, **we're called to it.**

And called is a very important word to us. Again, we have to go to the Bible to understand what John means here. Right throughout the Bible, when a person is called by God. Or a person is given some role or mission by God. **The person must freely choose it.** The person must say yes.

Obviously, the greatest one, the most famous one being Mary, saying yes, at the Annunciation. Or the disciples saying yes, when he called them by the sea of Galilee, the prophets etc God's gifts must always be freely chosen. It is part of the nature of God. He doesn't just give us gifts.

We must freely choose to receive these gifts. And freely choose to live by them. So our free choice, God, has given us free choice. God respects our free choices. It's something that's there right throughout the Bible, and often in the Bible, even as we saw at today's Mass and the priest commented on it in his homily, when given the free choice the people of God to reject Him or go in another direction. It is still free choice. And John of the Cross is reminding us of this, *you're created for all these wonderful gifts and all these wonderful things that we're talking about here, but you've got to freely choose it! What choices are you making? The challenge he sets us.* Here's what he goes on to say:

*O souls, **created for* these grandeurs and called to** them.** What are you doing? How are you spending your time? Your aims are base, and your possessions are miseries. O wretched blindness of your eyes, you are blind to so brilliant a light, and deaf to search loud voices, because you fail to discern that in so far as you seek eminence and glory, you remain miserable, base, ignorant, and unworthy of so many blessings."*

What a strong statement and so John of the Cross, so *true* to all of his teaching. What kind of choices are you making? How are you living? Here in the midst of all of this, he challenges his reader. How are you living? What choices are you making? What decisions? Look at your choices, look at your decisions. That's what he's asking his reader to do here, the challenge that he's setting there.

So maybe that's enough. There's so much else there.

Don't turn it into an exercise of trying to understand this or trying to master it, or grasp it. **JUST LET IT SPEAK, DIP INTO IT, BEFRIEND IT.** Befriend John's teaching. And let it speak.

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Transformation in Love

Note to the reader: These transcripts are from audio recordings of talks led by Carmelite Priest Father Matt Blake OCD there may be some errors due to the audio quality and AI transcription errors