

Welcome to this final talk, but in a sense one is only just beginning the Canticle, there's so much to be said, could be said, explored. Of its nature, as we have seen it's about something that cannot be put into words. No matter what images John uses and what lengths he goes to, even more so as one comes to the final part of the Canticle, particularly what he's dealing with in the last five stanzas, which perhaps can be summed up in chapter 17 of John's Gospel, 'Eternal life is to know the Father and His Son Jesus Christ'. Now John is speaking about exploring the life of someone living in this world who knows the Father and Jesus Christ as well as can be known in the limits of this world or as well as can be known through the light of faith. And so as I keep on saying, and I said it particularly yesterday, we don't know and we can't say and the closer one gets to God, the less one knows and the more that one doesn't know but yet one knows something.

This isn't really a conclusion but because there can be no conclusion to the Canticle, as John explains this is in the beginning of The Living Flame and at the end of the Canticle he says, that is as far as one can go in this world, because of the very nature of love there can be no point of arrival. There can be no ending because love can always get deeper; love is constantly living and growing and developing. Love of its very nature can never stand still. One can never say one has arrived when one is dealing with love, because there's always more, there's greater depths. He uses the image of fire and flames, flames being sent out etc., so there can be no ending; and yet at the same time we're at a point where only eternal life can add to what the person has or what the person has in faith in the full light of eternity. In the stanza before this, stanza 38, John tries to explain, drawing mainly from chapter three of the book of the Apocalypse. "These are true words of the Son of God, explaining the "What". They cast the 'What' in very perfect terms, but they still do not explain it. This is a peculiarity of a thing that is immense: All the explanations of excellence, grandeur, and goodness is fitting, but do not explain it, not even when taken together". (Stanza 38:8). So all these explanations he's giving for this 'What' they all fit, even putting them all together they don't explain it. What he has done is put together the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 of the Apocalypse. He has pieced together what is appropriate from each of them, but none of them, not even altogether can explain it.

Now he comes to stanza 39, and yes we can not know this and yet the person knows something he said, and so we have to say something about it. We have to say something about the kind of life this person is living. What he's really saying something about is Christianity when it is well lived, when Christianity is well lived in this world. As I've already said, the person, the human being he's describing here is the human being who has reached the fullness of human maturity; the closer one comes to God the more human one becomes, or the greater the expression of humanity. So this is humanity at its best, human life well lived. So stanza 39 pulls it together because something must be said, it can't be kept back. He quotes words from Job 4:2 "Who can keep back the word he has conceived without saying it." The desire to say it which is all the time there; I already spoke about this in the Prologue, the desire to say it, yet it cannot be said. But whenever something is profoundly experienced by a human being, even experiences the person has no awareness or understanding of, the need to express it is there. That's an extraordinary thing, the person doesn't even know that they need to express it. I think I already illustrated it, by reading of a passage of Scripture you might be very familiar with, a certain line or something will simply jump out of the page; it will strike you in a way it never did before, or see a meaning never seen before, speak in a way that's never been spoken before, and that's because it's like a spark hitting something there within. This is something you've already experienced, this is something that has need of expression and no language to express it, and no awareness that it needed to be expressed, shedding light on something already experienced.

John gives us five lines of this stanza 39:2 Five things that we can say - he sums them up for us.

“First, she says it is the breath or spiration of the Holy Spirit from God to her and from her to God.

Second, that it is rejoicing in the fruition of God.

Third, that it is the knowledge of creatures and of their orderly arrangement.

Fourth, that is pure and clear contemplation of the divine essence.

Fifth, that it is a total transformation in the immense love of God”.

And so he has to draw out a little of what each of these might mean. The first one we've seen quite a bit of already; what he calls God by participation, or transformation in the Trinity. Breathing the air of the Trinity or the air Jesus gave from the Cross. He gave His breath. He gave His breath when He appeared the disciples, He breathed on them, gave them His breath, 'Receive the Holy Spirit', the Holy Spirit being the breath of God, the life of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son. Gal 4:6 'Since you are the children of God, God sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts calling to the Father'. It's this mutual relationship one is breathing in, the air, the breath, the Spirit of God and breathing out toward God that same Spirit, that same relationship that there is between the Father and the Son that Jesus speaks about in chapter 17 of John's Gospel is now made possible by the Holy Spirit. Just one paragraph (39:4) "One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God, through participation as God breathes in her. For, granted that God favours her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God by participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love-or better that this be done in her-in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation. This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in His image and likeness that she might attain such semblance". That of course is the very first page of the Bible, created in the image and likeness of God. Now that image and that semblance comes to completion. And of course, as we have already seen, all of this, all that he's attempting to put into words cannot be put into words. The reality is always a lot more than the words are saying not less, but always more, the words are always inadequate. The words are always less than the reality that's being expressed.

Then he turns to Scripture as he always does, the Prologue to John's Gospel. The power to become children of God, to become children, to grow into being children of God. The Prologue and chapter 17 of John's Gospel are both so fundamental to John of the Cross' way of thinking, because what Jesus speaks about there is reality, this is reality, it's not some dream out there, it's not something that can be arrived at by some rarified few. No, this is the very nature of being human, this is the very nature of human life, this is who we are, this is our true selves. That's what he's been speaking about. If human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, as we're told on the first page of the Bible, then that's what a human being is, not anything less but much more than we might understand by those words. Much more than those words however we express them could ever mean, much more than they convey to us, because that's the nature of God's word as John of the Cross always tells us. It's saying more than we understand it to be saying, it's saying more than we could even imagine it to be saying. It's saying far more than the very limits of the words that are used, because the words are always inadequate.

Therefore, as he says in the Prologue, we can never reach the end of these words, wherever they might mean. And just to emphasise this, he gives us a passage from the second letter of Peter.

“May grace and peace be yours in abundance through knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and power. Through these, He has bestowed on us the precious and very great promise, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature”. (2Peter 1:2-5). That’s the second letter of Peter, partakers in the divine nature, that’s what John of the Cross is trying to express here. It’s there in the second letter of Peter, it’s there in John’s Gospel, this is the word of God, therefore it’s true, it’s real, it happens, and much more as I said than the words convey. That’s the first of these five.

Then John of the Cross in very typical John fashion breaks off from this, doesn’t go immediately on to number two but rather turns to prayer, but it is not a prayer addressed to God, but to his readers, listeners, he makes an appeal to us here, his listeners. A very passionate appeal, this is 39: 7. “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 miseries! O wretched blindness of your eyes! You are blind to so brilliant a light and deaf to loud voices, because you fail to discern that insofar as you seek eminence and glory you remain miserable, base, ignorant, and unworthy of so many blessings”. Souls, people, readers, those to whom he is speaking, he’s saying to all of us, we’re created for this and we’re called to it and both of those are important in the whole dynamics of the Cross. It is a very strong impression of what we’re created for.

Creation is so essential to the Canticle; it’s a praise and celebration of creation, who we are, what we’re created for and the whole world around us, and what it is. We haven’t the time to go into the beautiful passages he has on creation. But, the Canticle is more than what we’re created for, it’s what we’re called to, in other words, relationship. God created us and He relates with us and the two must be held together. We’re created by God and we’re in a relationship with God. Being created by God gives the capacity to grow into whom we’ve been created to become, but we only grow into who we’ve been created to become when we grow into relationship with Him; it’s through relationship that we grow, it’s through relationship that we become. So the relationship between creation- the call of God, vocation and relationship with God is essential to the Canticle. “So created by these grandeurs and called to them” let us continue here with what he’s saying. So then he challenges his readers “What are you doing? How are you spending your time? Your aims are base and your possessions miseries! O wretched blindness of your eyes! You are blind to so brilliant a light and deaf to such loud voices, because you fail to discern that insofar as you seek eminence and glory you remain miserable, base, ignorant, and unworthy of so many blessings”. So that’s very strongly put, he’s telling us of this, but how are we living our lives, how are we spending our time? So a very strongly put appeal. He’s telling us all of this, but why are we not embracing this? Why are we still being blinded by our own ambitions? Our own eminence and glory, our own works, and everything else which only leads to misery? So there’s a very strong appeal here to look at ourselves.

Ok, and then he goes on to the next one. The next expression of the ‘what’. “The song of the sweet nightingale”. In many respects the song of the nightingale can be considered the point of arrival of the Canticle, because the whole Canticle as we saw in the heading at the beginning is the love song between the Bridegroom and the bride, the human being and Jesus Christ, and the human being and God. It’s the spiritual love song that’s going on within. As someone very rightly said yesterday, but this love song is almost all sung by the bride and only a few stanzas by the Bridegroom. Now of course, the song itself is transformed: it’s no longer the Bridegroom and the bride singing but it’s the Bridegroom’s song that the bride is also singing; the Bridegroom gives the

bride His voice. It's just like with love and with beauty, the person's love is transformed into God's love, and therefore the person loves with God's love. With beauty the person sees everything with the beauty of God, now it's the voice that's transformed

39:8 "The result of the soul's breathing the air (that's the air of the Holy Spirit) is that she hears the sweet voice of her Beloved calling to her, (she hears His part of the song) and she in this voice expresses to Him her delightful jubilation and calls both voices the song of the nightingale. Just as the nightingale begins the song in the spring, once the wintery cold, rain and changes have passed and provides melody for the ear and refreshment for the spirit; so in this actual communication and transformation of love which the bride has now attained in this life, in which she is freed from and protected against all temporal disturbances and changes, and divested and purged of imperfections, penalties and clouds in the senses and the spirit. She feels a new spring, in spiritual freedom and breadth and gladness. She hears the sweet voice of the Bridegroom". (So this voice, this new spring, this new beginning, this new life, spiritual freedom, spiritual breadth, spiritual gladness. He goes on) "He gives His voice to her, so that united with Him, she may give it together with Him to God". (39:9). The song now the two are singing with one voice, the Bridegroom and the Bride are singing with one voice, it's no longer a duet, it's one voice and it's the voice of the Bridegroom, it's the voice of Jesus Christ singing to the Father with the breath of the Holy Spirit. So this voice of jubilation is sweet both to God and to the spirit. So that's the second aspect of this, this joyful song.

"Yet (he says, he always puts this kind of proviso in all the time) this song is not as perfect as the new song of the glorious life, the soul in this bliss becomes mindful of the new song of glory, hearing faintly in the song of this life the excellence of the possession of glory, which is incomparably more precious". (39:10). So all the time in these last five stanzas a little bit of eternal life is kind of creeping in, because it's already there. The person already knows the Father but in faith, always in faith. Therefore there is something incomplete. What the person is actually experiencing has a sense of being incomplete. So the reality is there but at the level of experience it's still incomplete, because the person is not in eternal life.

Ok, move on! The third one then is contemplation. Contemplation is a very important word for John in his teaching and important that we understand it in the way that John understood it. Nowadays I think that people sometimes struggle with this because contemplation is used in all sorts of different ways. For John as he defines it in the Dark Night "It's the inflow of God into the soul" and when that inflow of God into the soul is not hindered or compromised it purifies and transforms the person and makes the person like God. So contemplation for John is the whole work of God, it's always the work of God, that the person at some point in their prayer life becomes aware of. For John meditation is everything a person themselves does in prayer, whatever that may be, whatever form that might be. Therefore the critical change in a person's prayer life for John is the transition from meditation to contemplation.

Now that is not some kind of a point of arrival, or some achievement on the part of the person, rather it is what constitutes an awareness, therefore the very first words of John's commentary on the Canticle, the person who has become aware, or the person who has grown into awareness. At some point along the way in one's spiritual life there gradually creeps in a certain awareness of something different, something new. But of course it's not different and it's not new, it's always been there. God has always been present, but an awareness of His presence gradually creeps in and that can take all sorts of different forms, and John gives a whole list of them in that very powerful

opening paragraph of the Canticle. But they're only possibilities and it could be a lot of different things that makes the person aware, but it's always the initiative of God. It's always the inflow of God into the soul and it's always that work of change and transformation that God brings about. And now this is contemplation, he has to emphasise again and again "This night, this dark, is the contemplation in which the souls desires to behold these things. Because of it's obscurity, she calls contemplation night. So whatever awareness the person has of these things it's always in darkness. It's always in darkness always the dark night.

In John of the Cross' teaching when he's speaking about contemplation, when he's speaking about the dark night, when he's speaking about faith, though they are three different entities for John he uses the same language, the language of darkness, of night, of obscurity, because it always is. So this exalted reality that John is speaking about here is always in deepest darkness, because that's the nature of faith. So contemplation is critical here and a right understanding of contemplation, so the contemplation is the means of her transformation. "However sublime this knowledge may be, it is still a dark night when compared with the beatific knowledge she asks for here". (39:13). So she's still asking for the light, she is still in darkness.

Ok then, we'll get through this pretty quickly!! The third one, which I skipped, is very important. The new relationship with the world around, with what he calls creatures. And creatures is very thing, everything outside of the Trinity basically. Not so much a new relationship as a right relationship with everybody and the creation, and the trees, and the stars and everything. For now one relates to creation as God does and sees creation as God sees it.

The final one then, is being transformed into God. This whole transformation in the immense love of God, the transformation that takes place cannot be put into words. So maybe that's enough there, that whole transformation into God that we have already been speaking about in various ways. The person doesn't become God but is absorbed into God, becomes absorbed into God at some very profound level. Thirty nine is a wonderful chapter to spend some time with. It pulls together all that John has been trying to say and pulls together what a right relationship with God is and a right relationship with God leads to a right relationship with everything.