

Father Matt Blake OCD

Going deeper into the Spiritual Canticle

Belmont Abbey, 29 June to 3 July 2025

TALK 2

What I want to do this morning though is to look at one of his letters; a letter we could say that gives us a very practical application of his teaching. It's John's teaching applied to a very specific person at a very specific time in her journey. And perhaps it might be helpful to us, for a little bit to reflect on that today, to get a sense of how John used his own teaching.

It's letter number 19 in this edition, though all editions aren't the same. It's the letter of October 12th 1589, two years before John's death. He is stationed in Segovia: the letter is to a lady called Dona Juana Pedraza, who lives in Granada. She is somebody he got to know during his six years in Granada 1582-1588. He has now left Granada and is living in Segovia, but is in correspondence with Dona Juana, a person we know very little about.

There are two letters that have come down to us that he wrote to her. We know little about her but she's somebody he got to know in Granada and came under his spiritual direction and is clearly living his spirituality. We'd love to have the letter that she wrote to him that he's responding to here but of course we don't. But we can pick up a few things from the letter that she wrote to him. She obviously reprimands him for not writing to her enough, and she thinks he's ignoring her because she's poor; and he's being idle or lazy. She also has, much more importantly, recounted to him her spiritual life; she's feeling very much in darkness, nothing is happening in her spiritual life; nobody understands her, neither human being nor God. She feels very much neglected and derelict in her spiritual life.

And so this is John's response to her.

I think maybe I'll simply read it through first - we just listen to the letter and then I'll comment on various parts of it. Maybe we just listen first to what John says to this woman.

It's not long but it's a very profound letter.

'Jesus be in your soul and thanks to Him that He has enabled me not to forget the poor, as you say, or be idle as you say. For it greatly vexes me to think that you believe what you say; this would be very bad after so many kindnesses on your part

when I least deserved them. That's all I need now is to forget you! Look, how could this be so in the case of one who is in my soul as you are.

Since you walk in these darknesses and voids of spiritual poverty, you think that everyone and everything is failing you. It is no wonder that in this it also seems God is failing you. But nothing is failing you, neither do you have to discuss anything, nor is there anything to discuss, nor do you know this, nor will you find it, because all of these are doubts without basis. Those who desire nothing else than God walk not in darkness, however poor and dark they are in their own sight. And those who walk not presumptuously, nor according to their own satisfactions, whether from God or from creatures, nor do their own will in anything, have nothing to stumble over or discuss with anyone. You are making good progress. Do not worry but be glad! Who are you that you should guide yourself? Wouldn't that end up fine! 1 You were never better off than now because you were never so humble or so submissive, or considered yourself and all worldly things to be so small; nor did you know that you were so evil and God was so good, nor did you serve God so purely and so disinterestedly as now, nor do you follow after the imperfections of your own will and interests as perhaps you were accustomed to do. What is it you desire? What kind of life or method of procedure do you paint for yourself in this life? What do you think serving God involves other than avoiding evil, keeping his commandments, and being occupied with the things of God as best we can? When this is had, what need is there of other apprehensions or other lights and satisfactions from this source or that? In these there is hardly ever a lack of stumbling blocks and dangers for the soul, which by its understanding and appetites is deceived and charmed; and it's own faculties cause it to err. And thus God does one a great favour when he darkens the faculties and impoverishes the soul in such a way that one cannot err with these. And if one does not err in this, what need is there in order to be right other than to walk along the level road of the law of God and of the Church, and live only in dark and true faith and certain hope and complete charity, expecting all our blessings in heaven, living here below like pilgrims, the poor, the exiled, orphans, the thirsty, without a road and without anything, hoping for everything in heaven? Rejoice and trust in God, for he has given you signs that you can very well do so, and in fact you must do so. If you do not, it will not be surprising if he becomes angry at seeing you walk so foolishly when he is leading you by a road most suitable for you and has brought you to so safe a place. Desire no other path than this and adjust your soul to it (for it is a good one) and receive communion as usual. Go to confession when you have something definite; you don't have to discuss these things with anyone. Should you have some problem write to me about it. Write soon, and more frequently, for you can do so in care of Dona Anna when you are unable to do so through the nuns.

I have been somewhat ill. Now I am well, but Fray Juan Evangelista is sick. Commend him and me also to God, my daughter in the Lord.' From Segovia, October

12, 1589 Fray John of the Cross So that's his letter, responding to very specific questions that his listener, disciple, spiritual daughter has posed to him: and the response is, as I say, a synthesis of John's teaching, particularly his Ascent of Mt. Carmel and Dark Night. Simply this person is living what he teaches there. And we could say that there are two principal paragraphs that are the centre of this letter. She's walking in this darkness of spiritual poverty, and he gives a very good description of this darkness, this spiritual, poverty and it's very much 'you think everyone and everything is failing you, and it seems that Gods is also failing you'.

That kind of experience a person has, 'Nobody understands me; nobody helps me; nobody seems concerned about me; God doesn't answer any of my prayers; prayer is totally empty and dry; nothing is happening, it's not like it used to be. I've gone backwards, I've slipped away.' etc,etc,etc. It's very familiar, everybody has found themselves there, in various forms. It's going to vary with each individual, but that kind of 'Nothing seems to be working, nothing seems to be going right', and John says of course it's the opposite.

Nothing is failing you and you don't have to discuss anything, there's nothing to discuss, there's no problem here. But you don't know this, for you have no way of working this out for yourself. You're not going to find this. All these doubts have no basis.

The reality is the complete opposite. And the fundamental reality is this - that she, Dona Juana is someone who desires nothing else than God. She desires nothing other than God; and this is the experience of one who desires nothing else but God. All others desires are secondary to the desire for God. And whoever desires nothing else but God never walks in darkness, rather walks in the brightest of light, however poor and dark they are in their own eyes. Of course, she at the moment is very poor and dark in her own eyes, and the poverty which she is referring to, whether it's material or spiritual, presumably spiritual poverty when she says he's neglected her because she's poor. This poverty she's living in, the darkness, the poverty, the sense that she's got nothing, when in reality God's light is shining. As we know, John of the Cross' Dark Night is never the absence of light but always the super abundance of light, and the brighter the light, the deeper the darkness is going to be. Clearly he is saying to her, 'Juana, the light is very bright' and therefore she's in greater darkness and the closer one comes to God the further away one seems to be etc, and the closer one gets to God the less one understands.

So she's in a place of great closeness to God, because her desire is only for God, and God is shining his light upon her but she cannot see it. And he goes on 'And those who walk not presumptuously, or according to their own satisfactions, whether from God or from creatures, nor do their own will in anything, have nothing to stumble over or discuss with anyone'. So that's what God does, he takes away all the things

one could stumble over. We'll look at the text in a few minutes in another part of John's writings where he shows us this very clearly: what God does he removes whatever one could stumble over; and the things one could stumble over, presumptuousness, complacency, pride, or one's own satisfactions. If one is getting satisfaction from something, one can misinterpret it, whether this comes from God or anything else in this life. Creatures for John means everything, everything of this world, whether it be spiritual or sensual, to use John's own terms; or from one's own will, something one may have done or achieved or brought about, anything like this. God removes all of this, so there's nothing to stumble over. So he says to her 'You are making good progress, don't worry but rejoice, be glad, celebrate. It's good.' 'Who do you think you are, trying to guide yourself?' There is a tease in there as she's trying to work it out for herself - but of course a person can't. If we try to work this out for ourselves we'll get nowhere. Just stop and accept.

So that's his first response to her; then he goes on to focus more on what God is doing, and what following God in this life is really about: and where she really now is as distinct from where she's not. All these things have been taken away and she's put into darkness; but now he's going to show that's the best place she could possibly be. And he starts the next paragraph by saying 'You were never better off than now' and how she may have heard that already, or read it, as he has probably said many times before, 'This is wonderful, this is great.' But sometimes for people it can be very shocking when they come and their spiritual life has gone all wrong, it has gone the wrong way and someone like me says 'This is great', it must seem like 'Has this guy gone mad!' That's what John is saying, 'It's great, you've never been better off than now.' She thinks she's miserable and has gone the wrong way, and everything has gone wrong and her spiritual life has fallen apart, when in reality she couldn't be in a better place. And why couldn't she be in a better place? Because, he said 'You were never so humble or so submissive. (Humility, always a sign of God's work.) Or that you considered yourself and all worldly things to be nothing; both yourself and all that you possess and all that you had and everything else the world could offer you is all nothing. I said nothing of course because it's seen now in comparison with God.' Though the person can't work that out for themselves, but nothing else seems to matter either, because of course they're seeing it now in a very unfamiliar way; seeing it as God sees it. 'Nor did you know that you are so evil and God is so good'. Again that could be misinterpreted or could be shocking to say that she is evil, of course she's not evil, she's good and she's getting better and better, but in her own eyes she can seem to be evil. Because that's a characteristic again of someone coming closer to God; the light is shining brighter so the smallest little thing will appear much bigger and any darkness, any evil, any sinfulness, will seem much bigger than it did before. Of course sin is not seen at all if there isn't some of the light of God there.

Without the light of God we would never see sin, we would never know that something is sinful. Now she's getting closer to God she sees her own worthlessness, her own evil and sinfulness and therefore could well consider herself sinful, even though in reality she's getting better, she's living a better and better life: or that God was so good, because God gets bigger and bigger and greater and greater and more mysterious and more incomprehensible and everything else. We tend to reduce God to our own terms and understand Him on our own terms, and now that no longer works and something of the real light of God is shining in, not the illusion of God nor the God created by our own way of seeing things. And so God is bigger and greater.

'Nor up until now did you ever serve God more purely and more disinterestedly'. Service, she's serving God with no self interest now, with no other motive, with purity and no self interest. 'Nor do you follow after the imperfections of your own will and interests', your own will and interests no longer have control over you, they are no longer luring you, like you were accustomed to before. So then he poses the question to her 'What do you desire?', a very good question it is. The answer of course is only one thing, it's God. He's already told us the answer in the previous paragraph, but he's putting it to her now when he's analysed the life that she's living and set out before her the reality. 'What are you looking for, what are you desiring'? Then he poses another question 'What kind of life or method of procedure do you paint for yourself in this life?' There's no method or procedure, it's been taken out of her hands. That can be one of the very difficult things for people, How should I be praying now, what should I be doing? There's no answer to that; there's no method, procedure, or road map, and to be desiring one is to be looking for some kind of crutch, a prop, when none is needed. God has taken over, God is doing it. To be trying to put something in place here is to get in God's way, so why are you looking for something? The questions in this letter are very good. John puts very good questions here. Then he poses a third question. 'What do you think serving God involves'? and John answers the question for her; a sort of rhetorical question but has a very simple answer - fundamental Christianity - three things - avoiding evil, which she's clearly doing; keeping God's commandments; and being occupied with things of God, as best as one can, or to the best of one's ability, or of one's resources, or one's means, serving God. Avoiding evil, keeping the commandments, serving God, the scriptures, life of a Christian, put very simply, but now being lived at a very deep level. Then the next question he poses, 'Well, you have all of this, you're doing all these things, why do you need other apprehensions, or lights or satisfactions from this source or that? You need nothing, you don't need anything else, why are you looking for something else, any kind of satisfaction, light or understanding or wisdom'? he goes on to say 'In these there is hardly ever a lack of stumbling blocks and dangers'. And he comes back now to the fundamental stumbling blocks or dangers. One's understanding can be charmed and deceived by one's understanding or one's appetites. What does John

mean by that? It's fundamental to all of John's teachings. Whatever we understand, whatever can be formulated in our minds, whatever can be put into any kind of worldly, human or scientific terms is not God. God is going to take us beyond the boundaries, so if we get caught in an understanding or way of seeing things, or our appetites which for John is anything that one sets one's heart upon which is not God. An appetite is something that has control over us; an addiction, an attachment, something that I cannot live without, or without which I cannot function, it's a false god in scriptural terms. Scriptures are all the time speaking against the false gods, the idols - since John's appetites are effectively the same thing, they're an idol, a false god.

The false gods demand sacrifice, sacrifice to the gods, they're demanding, they take from us, there's no freedom in that kind of a god. So our understanding and our appetites are the sources of the stumbling blocks that enable us to err. 'And if one does not err in this, what need is there in order to be right other than to walk along the level road of the law of God and of the Church and live only in the dark and true faith...' Now theological life, dark and true. Faith, certain hope and complete charity, that is the life of the Christian, expecting nothing else, looking for nothing else, attached to nothing else in this world, only where God is. And he gives a lovely description of life in this world - the life of a Christian he said 'Living here below like pilgrims the poor, the exiled, orphans, the thirsty, without a road and without anything, hoping for everything where God is'. It is a wonderful description, it's a description of John's own life, and a life in this world.

A PILGRIM - a pilgrim of course is always somebody on a journey, they haven't arrived, just temporary wherever one is. One is passing through, one is going somewhere, and one's on a journey of change and transformation. Pilgrimage changes the person on a pilgrimage and all the wisdom and tradition that's behind the idea of a pilgrimage. Life in this world is a pilgrimage.

POVERTY, THE POOR - He's already spoken about spiritual poverty. Being possessed by nothing; it's not about what one possesses, it's much more about what one's possessed by, what has power over one. What controls one. To be controlled by nothing, nothing has power over us, that's spiritual poverty.

THE EXILED - not in one's real home, our real home of course is with God. Life in this world is an exile and all the biblical tradition around exile is so fundamental to the whole understanding of God in the Bible. The exile is fundamental to how God is understood.

We're exiles.

ORPHANS - again very biblical, the orphan is very much favoured by God, the one who is in need, neglected, excluded, does not belong, has no home, nobody to parent, to nurture.

The orphan, the spiritual orphan.

THE THIRSTY - A gain there's so much biblical imagery behind that. To be always thirsty, never satisfied. Never, because one can't be, because the object of one's thirst is God; nothing else. As we see in John's Spiritual Canticle the closer that one comes to God the greater the thirst becomes, because what might have satisfied the thirst no longer does.

The thirst becomes greater. Like the deer that yearns for the running water. That kind of thirsting.

WITHOUT A ROAD - Now of course there is no way. A very John of the Cross image; go by the way that is no way. If you want a way, go where there is no way. There's no road, no road map. One has gone beyond the limits of every road. Without a road and without anything, hoping for everything in heaven.

So rejoice and trust in God, he said to her and says to anybody in darkness. Rejoice in it and trust in God that's what you must do 'For he has given you signs that you should very well do so'. You have all the signs here that you should rejoice and trust in God. That's what you must do and it would be very wrong if you didn't because you would be betraying God, and God might be very surprised and may even be angry that you should walk so foolishly when He is leading you by a road most suitable for you, and has brought you to a safe place. You simply rejoice and trust in Him. And that sums up the place of God in everybody's spiritual life according to John's teaching.

If we were to ask John of the Cross, 'John, what is God doing in my life, in my spiritual life?' John's answer, 'He's leading you by the road that is most suitable for you, has brought you to a safe place, so you simply rejoice and trust in Him'. That's the truth. Don't go looking for another path, just accommodate yourself to this and adjust to it; there's no need to be discussing this because other people won't understand it. Don't be discussing it; go to Communion, confession, all of that, continue with your normal things.

Write to me if you have a problem. He gives her means of writing because post in his day was difficult, so give it to Dona Ana. She's clearly a friend of Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa for whom John wrote the Living Flame. And then he says he has been ill himself; a bit of personal news, and Fray Juan Evangelista, John's secretary and close companion is ill, pray for him. So that's the wonderful letter applying John's reaching to Juana.

I just want very, very briefly, to go more deeply into this, to look at the Dark Night, book two, chapter 16, 1-2. Here John is commenting on the beginning of the second stanza of the poem, The Dark Night, the words are 'In darkness, and secure', that of course is where Dona Anna is. she is in darkness and he is saying 'You are very

secure'. I'll read the first two paragraphs as they're really summing up the answer that John gives; it applies practically to Dona Juana.

'We already said that the darkness the soul mentions here relates to the sensory, the interior, and the spiritual appetites and faculties, because this night darkens their natural light so that through the purgation of this light they may be illumined supernaturally.' (The whole person, in other words, is darkened, for all the light that they could possibly have, because they're now being illumined supernaturally. The person is not yet adapted to seeing that supernatural light, in fact that comes in the next life. In this life as we know in John's teaching, the entire spiritual journey is a dark night. It is to be lived in faith.). So John goes on then (para 1) 'It puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens then and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything. It binds the imagination and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over all this hangs a thick and burdensome cloud that afflicts the soul and keeps it withdrawn from God. As a result the soul asserts that in darkness it walks securely'. That's where Dona Juana is; that sums it up pretty well. She thinks she's failed, even God has withdrawn; everything has been withdrawn at every level. But that's where the security lies.

Para 2 then explains the situation.

The reason for this security has been clearly explained. Usually a soul never strays except through its appetites, its gratifications, or its discursive meditation, or through its knowledge and affections. By these, people usually fail through excess or defect, or they change because of them or go astray, or experience inordinate inclinations'. (Anything that could cause you to go astray has been taken away).

'Once all these operations and movements are impeded, individuals are obviously freed from error in them, because they are not only liberated from themselves but also from their other enemies, the world and the devil. The world and the devil have no other means of warring against the the soul when it's affections and operations are deadened. Para 3. In the measure that the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely'.

So that's what the person is living, and that's what John is applying to her (Juana) life. It's a wonderful letter to take up and spend time with.

TALK 3

So then, to continue our exploration of John of the Cross' teaching. If we were to ask John the question 'What is authentic Christian prayer? What might it be like?' It's not something that John speaks at length about, for his concern is much more for the effects of prayer. But there is one passage that pretty much answers that question for us. It's in the Ascent of Mount Carmel, book 3, chapter 44. And here in this particular section he goes through all sorts of stuff, false interpretations, things we're doing for the wrong motive. The context here is ceremonies and rituals, things that are good in themselves; we can be putting too much trust in them or doing them for the wrong motive. And here now he comes to the people who pray in order to get something from God, in order that God may answer our prayers, in order that God may do what it is I might want Him to do, and that's what inspired John to give this reflection here. Ch. 44 :1 'Some pray more for their own aims than for the honour of God'. There's a certain amount of self-centredness there. 'Although they pray with the supposition that if God is to be served their petition will be granted, and if otherwise it will not. It doesn't work like that. 'They nevertheless over multiply their prayers. They are praying in this way because of their attachment to the desired object and their vain joy in it.' Whatever, it's their motive he's reflecting upon.

And John's response here is twofold. 1. It's an exploration of scripture; what's prayer like in scripture? What can we learn from the Bible? John's a great listener to the Bible. Everything John teaches is from the Bible; particularly for the more difficult issues, the Bible has the answers.

What does Jesus teach us? And of course, it's principally the Lord's Prayer, but also other teachings of Jesus. They're the two places John looks to for his answer. And the first of those answers in para 2 is a fundamental principle for John of the Cross.

'The Lord has promised in the Gospel: 'Seek first and chiefly the kingdom of God and His justice and all these other things will be added unto you', Mt. 6:33, part of the Sermon on the Mount. And that's John's fundamental principle here. If we seek the things that God wants then everything we need is given to us; rather than seeking the things we want or think we should have, or think would be good for us, seek the greater things that God wants. Seek the kingdom of God, the will of God, and then everything else you have. Because everything else is contained in that, and our greatest good is in what God wants, not in what I want or think I want, or enjoy or aspire to, but in what God wants. So seek first the things of God, the kingdom of God and His justice.

John goes on to comment on that. Para 2. 'This is the aim and petition that is most pleasing to God. To obtain an answer to the requests we bear in our hearts, there is no better means than to concentrate the strength of our prayers on what is more pleasing

to God'. To please God more than pleasing myself, to seek what pleases God. And John goes on to say 'Then He will give us not only the salvation we beg for but whatever else He sees is fit and good for us, even though we do not ask for it'. So, will we seek what He wants to give, what is most important? He will give us what we need even if we didn't ask for it. We don't have to ask for it, if it's something fit and right for us He will give it.

Then John backs this up with two quotes from Ps 145, 'The Lord is near to those who call on Him in truth', v 18; and then 'He will fulfil the will of those who fear Him, He will hear their prayers and save them. For God is the guardian of those who love Him', vv19-20. Then John furthers his argument by going to Solomon and his famous petition. Solomon had asked for something pleasing to God, that is wisdom. John quotes then from the Second book of Chronicles.

'Because wisdom pleased you more than any other thing, and you did not seek victory through the death of your enemies, or riches, or a long life, not only will I give you the wisdom you seek to rule my people justly, but I will even give you what you have not asked for, that is riches and substance and glory so that no king either before you or after you, will be like you'. 2 Chron. 1:11-12. So Solomon did not ask for what a king would be expected to ask for, he asked only for what God wanted, the greatest gift God gives, wisdom, and God gives everything else as well. John goes on to expand on that ' And God in fact did this and pacified Solomon's enemies too, so that all who were around him paid him tribute and did not perturb him'. 1 Kgs. 4:21-24.

Then he gives the example of Abraham and the promise to Abraham's posterity. In all of this John of the Cross is exploring the scripture and how God dealt with these great figures of scripture: and here they all carry a lesson for us in our prayer. So we direct our prayer then to God in every way, and why? The Ascent of Mount Carmel, book 3, ch. 44:3. 'For God is such that if people live in harmony with Him and do His will He will give them whatever they want, but if they seek their own interests it will be useless for them to speak to God'.

That's a very important principle for John of the Cross. It's the very nature of who God is and of how God deals with His people. Those who live in harmony with God and do God's will, they have everything. He gives them everything that they want, they could want nothing else. And if we look back to the letter that we looked at this morning to Dona Juana, there she thought she had nothing, but John points out to her that she has everything, because she only seeks God and therefore God is giving her everything that she could ever want. She doesn't see it, she's in darkness, she's not able to see that, but he has shown her that she in fact has everything. What else could she want? John says to her 'What else could you desire? You have everything'. And so that is the very nature of God. The person who is in harmony with Him, in a right

relationship, they have everything; but those who seek their own interests, they're not speaking to God, they're not praying, they're speaking to themselves. That principle, as I say runs through John's writings.

I'll just look very briefly at two other examples, and then we'll come back to this chapter again for the second point. But just two places where this comes up again might help to throw a little light on this point. They're both from the Spiritual Canticle. The first one is from the commentary on stanza 1 of the Canticle no. 13; and here he's commenting on love and the Lover, the Beloved. John says she calls Him, Beloved; the soul calls the Bridegroom Jesus Christ, Beloved. 'She calls Him 'Beloved' to move Him more to answer her prayer'. When God is loved He very readily answers the requests of His lover. So that's what it means to be in harmony and a right relationship with God.

To love, when a person responds in love, knows that they are loved and is requesting from God who loves them, because God is love and the very nature of love is that the one who is loved will always want to give to the one who loves them. And that's the very nature of God, so when a person truly loves God, God cannot not give that person what they need. He cannot not respond to their prayer. It's the very nature of love, it's the very nature of God.

Spiritual Canticle, stanza 32:1, Introduction. Now we're at the very heights and union with God.

'The power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God Himself'. The power and tenacity of love captures and binds God, that's the power of love. 'Happy is love loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner, and He is surrendered to all her desires. God is such that those who act with love and friendship toward Him do all they desire, but if they act otherwise there is no speaking to Him, or power with Him, even though they go to extremes.' That is what John is warning about in The Ascent of Mt Carmel. People who think that going to extremes by doing this or that, or speaking these words or those words, or doing this ceremony or that ceremony will win God over, they won't. It's only love. It's only when one's will and God's are totally united, it's only through love. 'Yet by love they bind Him with one hair.' So, this binding of God, the power of love when a person is united with God, that power, that oneness with God, that's the very nature of God, and so God gives everything because of course God gives Himself. The very nature of God is to give and to give everything. And that's expressed in Jesus Christ, who gave everything.

Ok, so then, the second part of this, as I said, the second answer in the sense that John gives here, is what does Jesus Christ tell us? What does He tell us in the Gospels? And here in The Ascent of Mt. Carmel book 3, stanza 44:4 is a summary of the teaching of Jesus Christ regarding prayer; but it's both the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ, because Jesus teaches what He does or to put it another way, Jesus

teaches who He is. Because prayer is the very nature of who Jesus is. So when His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, and Jesus as One who knew His Father's will, would have told them all that was necessary. So Jesus would have given them an answer, and would have known what to give, and whatever is necessary to obtain an answer from the Eternal Father. So Jesus would have given them everything that they needed. And John now makes the point that Jesus told them very little. He just said the Our Father, the seven petitions of the Pater Noster, that's all. They include all our spiritual and temporal needs, everything is contained in that prayer. He didn't teach them other ceremonies or prayers, just that one.

And of course John refers to St. Luke's Gospel and St. Matthew's Gospel also (which we'll have for tomorrow's Mass, so it fits in very well with that). So everything is contained there. Lk. 11:1-4; and then he quotes from St. Matthew's Gospel 'At another time He told them they should not desire much speaking because our Heavenly Father clearly knows our needs. Mt. 6:7-8. So not much words as the Father already knows. He only exhorted them, John said to persevere in prayer, and persevering in prayer is the Pater Noster, pray it over and over again. Pray without ceasing not with words but just with silence, trusting that God already knows. Jesus did not give us quantity of petitions just these seven to be prayed with fervour and care. John goes on to say 'In these, as I say, are embodied everything that is God's will and all that is fitting for us. Accordingly, when His Majesty had recourse three times to the Eternal Father, all three times He prayed with the same petition of the Pater Noster, as the Evangelists recount 'Father, if it cannot be but that I drink this chalice, may your will be done.' (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42.). And he quotes from the three Gospels that give us that petition, 'That your will be done'. That is Jesus Himself, His own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane; he prays that the chalice may be taken from Him, but 'It is your will not mine'. If it be your will, whatever may be your will, is the example of perfect Christian prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In that moment of greatest need in the life of Jesus, that's how he prayed, and John of the Cross is singling it out here as an example for us of how to pray, and particularly how to pray when we are in great need. Jesus teaches us by word and by example.

And as John of the Cross has so often pointed out to us in his writings, 'To fix one's eyes on Jesus', never stop looking at what He is doing, how He is living, and listening to His words. And nowhere is that more important than in His teaching on prayer, so, the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father.

And then John picks out two other messages or examples from the life of Jesus; the first one is praying in the concealment of our inner room. Going into the inner room where we can pray with a more perfect and pure heart, without any noise, without having to tell anybody, that inner room that's there within us. 'When you pray enter your inner room, and having closed the door, pray', Mt. 6:6. That inner room that's

deep within each one of us, that place within. It's what Jesus exhorts His disciples and of course it's what He does Himself. And the other one is the prayer in the wilderness, in the best and most quiet time of night; and we know from many testimonies in the life of John of the Cross, that he loved to go out at night; out into the dark night; out into the countryside late at night, to the mountains or the woods and pray there. He loved to spend hours in the darkness. He points out the fact that Jesus did that, we know that John did it himself, we know that it was something he really liked doing: and it's another part of the background to his most important image of the Dark Night. Out there in the darkness and the wood, and the hills and the mountains one has the entrance into a whole different world. A world that speaks. So John of the Cross, we know, did what here he's pointing out that Jesus did. So in the inner room within, in the silence, in the quiet, the remote places at night, that's the teaching of Jesus; that's the example that Jesus gave.

John of the Cross goes on to clarify that he's not condemning feast days or ceremonies or practices, he's simply looking at the motive and saying do not complicate prayer, keep prayer simple, keep prayer close to the prayer of Jesus and of the prayer of the Bible. Keep listening to the scriptures, they're the greatest teaching, and here of course in this passage, no doubt, we're coming very close to the prayer of John himself. John doesn't give us anything we might say explicitly autobiographical in his writings, yet everything at another level is autobiographical; his experience or the experience of others.

This prayer that he outlines for us here in this chapter, is really how he prayed himself, because all his writings are the fruit of this. His writings are just full of scripture; they're the writings of someone who has spent his life listening to the word of God in the scriptures; and listening to the word of God throughout scripture, not just one particular part or particular parts that are used a lot in the liturgy, or are popular, but everywhere, he goes everywhere. And he seems to be able to quote at ease, he's very familiar with scripture and in a particular way with the prayer of Jesus Christ; the teaching of Jesus because there we have everything that we need. What is of fundamental importance here, as you can see looking at this, is one's image of God. Who God is for us. That more than anything else determines if we are praying in the right way or not; that we have a right understanding of who God is.

If we rightly understand the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus, if we rightly understand what Jesus has taught us, then we will pray in the right way. Our prayer will be genuine. But of course the struggle that there is throughout the scriptures is that people have a false or distorted understanding of who God is; the false gods of the Bible, all the times that the people stray away from the authentic God, then they lose the favour that God gives them, and God's support and help. And that's fundamental to how John sees prayer; if we know who God is, if we've a right understanding of who the God of the Bible is, then we will know who we are in

relationship with God, and we will relate to God as did the people in the Bible who prayed in the right way; effectively Solomon, David, Abraham, all these figures there, and of course first and foremost Jesus Christ Himself.

TALK 4

For John of the Cross, of fundamental importance for the life of prayer, for spiritual growth, was a right understanding of God. The difficulty we have is, as he points out so often, is that we create God in our own image; we project onto God how we see things, our understanding of things, and our ways of relating. To get perhaps the best overall view of how John sees God, there are the wonderful poems that he wrote in prison; the Romances on the Word who became flesh, we're probably all familiar with them. I mentioned them already when we were speaking about La Fonte on the first evening. In so many ways they follow a very similar line. Take the very first edition of John's writings, these poems have been described as a prologue to all John's teaching. So even people who knew John of the Cross, who were familiar with him saw these 9 poems as a prologue to all of his teaching; the rationale behind that was that this is John's theological perspective. It's how John sees God, and everything else flows from that.

It's particularly important for a right understanding of the Spiritual Canticle, and indeed for all of John's writings; this is where John is coming from, this is how John sees God, this is how John wants us, wants the reader to see God: because this will enable the person to have a right understanding of what relationship with God is. These 9 poems are very well put together, very carefully constructed: they come really in 2, 2, 2, 2 and then 1; and begin with the Trinity, and then predestination, creation, the Bible, the story of the Bible and particular people in the Bible. Then the Incarnation, and finally the 9th poem, the birth of Jesus. It follows that route. We can imagine John in his prison cell reflecting on all of this. He entitles it a Romance on the Prologue of John's Gospel; but it's really some aspects of that, but there is also much biblical imagery. And contained in it of course, as I say, are those key principles around which everything in his spirituality is built.

So it begins at the beginning, before there is any beginning. The Word is the beginning, so the beginning was God the Word. 'He was Himself the beginning and therefore had no beginning'.

The beginning, back there before the beginning, which isn't the beginning, it's before the beginning.

'The Word is called Son; He was born of the Beginning Who had always conceived Him, and was always conceiving Him, giving of His substance always, yet always possessing it.' What a statement of the nature of God, of who Jesus is; all the time conceiving Him: all the time giving His substance away; giving, all the time giving. The very nature of God is to be always giving and yet always possessing. God is the One who can give, and continually give, and give everything and yet also possess everything at the same time. That very nature of God! The poem goes on 'And thus

the glory of the Son was the Father's glory, and the Father possessed all His glory in the Son.' That word 'glory', such an important word in John's 'Living Flame'; the very atmosphere of God, the very environment of God; to be in the presence of God is glory; so the glory of the Father, the glory of the Son, one glory in the other. So then the person who is living the fullness of spiritual maturity is living in that glory. That word 'glory', the very nature of God, there before all.

Then he goes further into the very nature of God 'As the lover in the beloved each lived in the other, and the Love that unites them is one with them, their equal, excellent as the One and the Other: Three persons, and one Beloved among all three.' The love, inspired of course by ch.17 of John's Gospel, the Love that there is between the Father and the Son will be in Them, it's the very nature of the Trinity. Each in the other, the Love into that relationship of the Trinity.

And we already mentioned it at some stage along the way when looking at the Trinity, what John has in stanza 39 of the Canticle, where he has the person who has grown fully into the image and likeness of God. God is community, God is communion. So we're made in the image and likeness of God, then this is the image and likeness of God, this love, this communion of love, this indwelling.

Just a little bit further on then 'Thus it is a boundless love that unites them, for the three have one love which is their essence; and the more love is one the more it is love.' In that first poem then, it's the very nature of God and the very nature of love, and what love is, and the two are equated; God is love, love is the very nature of God. John puts it elsewhere that love is God's language and he means that in two ways, both what God speaks, and the language through which God is heard; only those who listen through the language of love can hear God. So it's love that unites them, the Three have one love: and that of course is the nature of John's Spiritual Canticle, the person is transformed in love, in God's love. God gives His love to the bride and she is transformed in His love; there is only one love, and it is into that love that the bride is brought. So that's the first of the poems.

Then in the second poem again we're still before creation, we're still in predestination, we're still only the Trinity. This poem is the communication within the Trinity. The Father speaks 'In that immense love. Proceeding from the two (which of course is the Holy Spirit) 'the Father spoke words of great affection to the Son, words of such profound delight that no one understood them; they were meant for the Son and He alone rejoiced in them. What He heard was this 'My Son, only your company contents me and when something pleases me I love that thing in you; whoever resembles you the most satisfies me the most, and whoever is like you in nothing will find nothing in me.' Imitation of Jesus Christ. The Father only loves the Son and whoever resembles Him. Then another fundamental of John's teaching - be like Jesus Christ; The Father only loves Jesus. Only the person who resembles Jesus

Christ will find favour with God. 'I'm pleased with you alone, O Life of my Life! You are the light of my light, you are my wisdom, the image of my substance in whom I am well pleased.' All the biblical imagery is there, the Baptism, the One with whom I am well pleased; the light has come into the world. 'My Son, I will give myself to him who loves You and I will love him with the same love I have for You, because he has loved You whom I love so.' That same love that He has for the Son, that's how He will love those who love the Son. Ch.17 of John's Gospel of course, that's what Jesus prays for there, that the love that there is between the Father and the Son will be in them, and I will be in them, that love. So they're the first two, the nature of God, of Trinity, of love, and love is the communication within the Trinity, the communication between Father and Son, Love is the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is Love; the communication of love.

So now we come to creation and hear this dialogue between Father and Son. Again we have two poems on creation. The first one has us again prior to creation, before the beginning, the Father and the Son speaking, 'My Son, I wish to give you a bride who will love You. Because of You she will deserve to share our company, and eat at our table, the same bread that I eat, that she may know the good I have in such a Son; and rejoice with me in your grace and fullness.' What a great statement, the bride to share our company, eat at our table the same bread: the imagery of bread, the manna in the desert, the Eucharist; so many other biblical images there around the bread, that most intimate of sharing. 'She will know the good I have in such a Son and rejoice'. Joy, rejoicing, the very nature of God that the bride will have. Now we have the Son's response, the Son saying 'Yes'. Notice in this poem there are two 'yes's'; there's the 'Yes' of the Son and later on there the 'Yes' of Mary that we will look at. Both answer yes, two fiat's we could say. The Son here answers yes before all of creation, before anything was created He says yes. And here's His response, 'I am very grateful the Son answered; I will show my brightness to the bride you give me, so that by it she may see how great my Father is, and how I have received my being from your being. I will hold her in my arms and she will burn with your love, and with eternal delight she will exalt your goodness.' Love, I will hold her in my arms - the bride, and she will see in me how great you are. No one knows the Father except the Son, St. John's Gospel. He will reveal to the bride who the Father is; she will burn with your love, and rejoice in eternal delight, so what He will give to the bride.

Now the second poem on creation - it happens; now we're coming to creation and the beginning, the fourth poem. 'Let it be done, then, said the Father, for your love has deserved it'. So creation is a response to Jesus' love for the Father. It's a gift He gives both out of His love, the Father's love and as a response to the love He has received from the Son. 'for your love has deserved it. And by these words the world was created,'. Creation is the great act of love between the Father and the Son.

Creation is a 'a place for the bride made with great wisdom and divided into rooms, one above, the other below.' The lower being the earth, the higher being the heavenly world: so both heaven and earth are the bride, all of creation, everything outside of the Trinity is bride for the Son. 'The lower was furnished with infinite variety, while the higher was made beautiful with marvellous jewels, that the bride might know the Bridegroom she had.' The bride might know the Bridegroom and who knows the Bridegroom? the angels and humanity. The angels are placed in the higher, humanity has the lower place, for both have the capacity to know the Bridegroom, that's what singles them out from everything else in creation, though everything else is also the bride. 'Those higher ones possessed the Bridegroom in gladness; the lower in hope, founded on the faith that He infused in them'. So hope and faith, that's what we see throughout John's writings, hope and faith and love of course, the Theological Virtues. That's the life of the Christian. 'for He would make Himself wholly like them, and He would come to them and dwell with them; and God would be man, and man would be God, and He would walk with them and eat and drink with them; and He Himself would be with them continually til the consummation of this world, when joined, they would rejoice in eternal song; for He was the Head of this bride of His to whom all the members of the just would be joined who form the body of the bride'. And you can see that the bride is the Church; there's the individual and there's the Church. And there's so much of the language of St. Paul here, the Body of Christ, the teaching of the Church and the liturgy of the Church is brought into this; the Church is bride and the individual is bride and the whole of creation is bride. 'He would take her tenderly in His arms and there give her His love; and when they were thus one, He would lift her to the Father where God's very joy would be her joy. For as the Father and the Son and He who proceeds from them live in one another, so it would be with the bride; for, taken wholly into God, she will live the life of God'. That's the point of arrival for John of the Cross' teaching, to live the life of God. God through participation, that great term that he uses, no longer I who live but Jesus lives in me, and so much else.

So he's set out here in creation not only making, but rather the goal of creation is union with the Trinity. The goal of creation is oneness with God, is relationship. Creation is an act of creating relationship. It's an act of love and it's object, it's goal is relationship of love between Bridegroom and bride; between all of creation and God. The goal of creation is relationship, is love.

Then we come to the next 2, numbers 4 & 5; which is the scriptures and again there's so much scripture and imagery. I'll just put it very briefly, it's the prophets, the Bible, and particular individuals in the Bible. These are the hope of the people of God; the looking forward, the wanting, and everything that the scriptures have, all of that and the longing, the waiting, and then no. 6. 'In these and other prayers a long time had

passed: but in later years their fervour swelled and grew when the aged Simeon burned with longing, and begged God that he might see this day.

And so the Holy Spirit answering the good old man gave him His word that he would not see death until he saw Life descending from the heights, until he took God Himself into his own hands and holding Him in his arms, pressed him to himself.' Simeon representing all the other individuals of scripture who had the same longing.

Now in numbers 7 & 8 it's the Incarnation, and firstly it's seen through the Trinity, through the relationship between Father and Son. 'Now that the time had come when it would be good to ransom the bride serving under the hard yoke of that law which Moses had given her, the Father, with tender love, spoke in this way: 'Now you see, Son, that your bride was made in your image, and so far as she is like you she will suit you well; yet she is different, in her flesh, which your simple being does not have. In perfect love this law holds: that the lover become like the one he loves; for the greater their likeness the greater their delight'. This again is one of John of the Cross' great principles, right throughout his teaching but particularly in the Spiritual Canticle. Love brings about likeness; so the more one loves the more one becomes like the one one loves. If one's love is only for God then one becomes like God, but if one's love is for something else one becomes like that and John says, even subject to it; hence the great damage done by any kind of attachment to anything other than God, we make ourselves slaves to that. 'My will is yours, the Son replied, and my glory is that your will be mine'. (Thy will be done). 'I will go and seek my bride and take upon myself her weariness and labours in which she suffers so; and that she may have life, I will die for her, and lifting her out of that deep, I will restore her to you.' So there's Jesus before the Incarnation promising the Father that He will die to give her life. He will die to give her life, the purpose of the Incarnation before it happens. Everything is in God's plan predestined by God.

So in number 8 we come to the actual Incarnation; 'the virgin Mary at whose consent the mystery was wrought,'. So now she's giving her consent; the Son had given His consent much earlier, now she's given her consent. The Bridegroom has given His consent, now the bride is and Mary is giving her consent in the name of the bride, she ultimately is the bride, and the Incarnation is presented here as a great wedding feast of the Bridegroom and the bride. So Mary gives her consent and the mystery is wrought. He receives His flesh and He is now called Son of God and of man.

And then the birth, the final one. 'When the time had come for Him to be born, He went forth like the bridegroom from his bridal chamber, embracing His bride, holding her in His arms, whom the gracious Mother laid in a manger among some animals that were there at that time.' The heavenly and the earthly world meeting. 'Men sang songs and angels melodies celebrating the marriage of Two such as these'. All the bride is singing, heaven and earth united. 'But God there in the manger cried and

moaned; and these tears were jewels the bride brought to the wedding'. There's an enormous amount of symbolism here in all of this. 'The Mother gazed in sheer wonder on such an exchange: in God, man's weeping, and in man gladness, to the one and the other things usually so strange'. So that's the point it comes to, the celebration. Now God has become human, humanity and God are alike, the likeness of the two; He is now in flesh, we can see our God as one of us, but we can also see ourselves in God.

May I just finish with this. This marriage that takes place, this rejoicing, this celebrating is very similar to the very first paragraph of the introduction to stanza 22 of the Spiritual Canticle. That's the point of arrival of the Canticle, the point of the Spiritual Marriage, the union between Bridegroom and bride. I'll just read that paragraph, and conclude with that, it just helps us to see how this whole poem is the preface, the preparation for all of John's teaching. Here we're at the point of arrival, and the Bridegroom is celebrating, just as in the poem bride and Bridegroom are celebrating, now there's a great celebration taking place. What happens in the Incarnation, which is that great wedding feast, that great spiritual marriage, is what happens in the spiritual life of each person, bride and Bridegroom become one, the union of the two, the spiritual life of each individual. So we look at this wonderful paragraph. 'Great was the desire of the Bridegroom to free and ransom His bride completely (that's language almost identical to what we had in the poem, the Father sending the Son to free and ransom the bride) from the hands of sensuality and the devil. (It's this personal spiritual life; now biblical imagery from Luke's Gospel). 'Like the good shepherd rejoicing and holding on his shoulders the lost sheep for which he had searched along many winding paths (Lk 15:4-5), and like the woman who, having lit the candle and hunted through her whole house for the lost drachma, holding it up in her hands with gladness and calling her friends and neighbours to come and celebrate, saying, rejoice with me and so on. (Lk 15:8-9) now too the soul is liberated'. Again back to the Romances, the Bridegroom has come to liberate the bride. 'Now, too, that the soul is liberated, this loving Shepherd and Bridegroom rejoices. And it is wonderful to see His pleasure in carrying the rescued, perfected soul on His shoulders, held there by His hands in this desired union.' Again language almost identical to the poem, 'I will hold her in my arms'. John goes on 'Not only does He Himself rejoice, but He also makes the angels and saintly souls share in His gladness'. The heavenly and the earthly world is rejoicing. Then he quotes from the Song of Songs, important words for John of the Cross, he quotes them later on in the Canticle 'Go forth, daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon in the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his espousal and on the day of the joy in his heart'. (Sg.3:11).

'By these words he calls the soul His crown, His bride and the joy of His heart, and He takes her now in His arms and goes forth with her as the bridegroom from his

bridal chamber.' (Ps 19:5). So much of the same imagery as we have in the poem is here, the unity of John's teaching; what we might call the global, the great plan of God culminating in the Incarnation, is what happens in each individual's spiritual life. Each of us is created as the bride of the Bridegroom; created for this union, for this love, to be one with the Bridegroom. So as I said, that poem sets out the foundations of John's thinking and the foundations on which everything in his teaching is built.

This is who God is, this what the Incarnation is all about, hence John tells us several times that the Incarnation is the greatest of God's mysteries; it's the bringing about the union of God, humanity, and all of creation. It's the greatest of all mysteries and it happens individually in the depths of each individual.

TALK 5

As we saw a little bit this morning, about how John of the Cross sees things, how he sees God, how he sees all of creation, and most importantly, us, in relationship with God; and the central place of Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son of God, in all of that. All of creation is the bride of Jesus Christ, of course, and that image of the bride he uses for every Christian; every person in relationship with Jesus Christ is bride in relationship with the Bridegroom. I'd like to continue with that now, Jesus Christ and the place of Jesus in the spiritual life. I'd like to start with that 'Prayer of the Soul Taken with Love'; the soul that's enamoured with God, in the Sayings of Light and Love. Nos 26/27 in the newer edition, and page 668 in the older edition.) It's a beautiful prayer, a prayer of a person who is now totally taken up with the love of God and we see in this prayer that God has given everything in giving His Son, Jesus Christ; the person who has received Jesus Christ, which is all of us, has everything. Whoever has Jesus has everything; and yet as the prayer shows us, this person is experiencing emptiness, and longing, and is questioning.

That's where the prayer begins with the person questioning God and herself, questioning the situation that she finds herself in. There are really two halves to the prayer, so let's take the first half.

It is a series of questions, a series of affirmations, a series of statements. For it begins by addressing God 'Lord God, my Beloved'. It begins with this affirmation of love, God is whom I love, whom I'm loved by ; that relationship of love. That's the opening statement: she believes in that love. Then the first question, ' If you still remember my sins in such a way that you do not do what I beg of you, do your will concerning them, my God, which is what I most desire, and exercise your goodness and mercy, and you will be known through them'. Why is God not answering her prayers? Why is God not doing what she begs? Maybe it's my sins that He remembers? If it is, then God, only you can deal with those and why don't you? So that's the first thing that comes into the soul's mind, is it the sins ? Is that's what's stopping God? There's a sense that God is not giving, not revealing Himself, God is not answering her prayer.

Second question, 'But if you are waiting for my good works?' The first one is, is it my sins that are the obstacle? Now is it my lack of good works ? Something so human in this; and here it's somebody at the very heights of love and relationship with God. Is it my lack of good works? If it is then grant me the good works, because if it is I can't do them myself, only God can do it. Real good works can only be done through God through us; so grant them to me, and work them for me: and if it's suffering you desire to accept, let that be done; whatever it is that you're asking for. In both of these you see, she's expressing her total dependence upon God. Sinfulness,

I cannot get over without your help; good works cannot be done without God doing them. Both are expressions of dependence upon God. Humility, submissiveness, etc.

Then the next question; ‘But if you’re not waiting for my works, what is it that makes you wait, My most clement Lord? Why do you delay?’ If it’s not good works why do I have to wait? What’s the purpose of this waiting? The sense that there’s something missing. ‘For if, after all, I am to receive the grace and mercy that I entreat of you in your Son, take my mite, since you desire it, and grant me this blessing, since you also desire that’. So if I’m to receive everything, your grace, your mercy, that I’m asking for in your Son Jesus Christ, take the little I’m giving you, which is everything, because that you desire that I give everything, and grant me this blessing since you desire that.

of 1 5Because the nature of God is that God wants to give, we’ve seen that and she knows that God wants to give. God’s greatest desire is to give and there will be no limit to the giving. She also wants to give, how ever little or nothing that giving might seem to her, she wants to give. It’s like she’s saying all the pieces are in place here, yet there is this great sense that something is missing, something is not being given. This is the first part of this person’s prayer, and we’ve seen it already in various ways, the person who is really close to God has that sense that they are not, or that there is something missing or they are longing for something.

Then we move to another paragraph, which is really an expression of profound humility. She is saying I can do nothing. ‘Who can free themselves from lowly manners or limitations if you do not lift them to yourself, my God, in purity of love?’ Who can do it? Nobody can. The lowly manners and limitations of life in this world and the human condition, only God can lift the person up from that; and He does so in purity of love, only true love, only God can do that. Now the second question, ‘How will human beings begotten and nurtured in lowliness rise up to you, Lord, if you do not raise them with your hand that made them?’ You made them, it’s your hand that raises them; those two questions are expressing her total dependence upon God; her own weakness, the humble situation that she’s in. This is a person putting into prayer what’s happening within. The questions and doubts and the situations she finds herself in, this soul is totally taken up with the love of God. Totally living by the love of God. Now there’s another shift, and it’s the acknowledgment that she has everything. ‘You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire’. Up until now, as we’ve been saying, she wants, wants, why have I not been given, why cannot I lift myself up? Now she’s saying, you have already given me everything, and you’re not going to take it away from me. You haven’t taken away Jesus Christ, therefore you haven’t taken away all the everything that you gave me.

Now the waiting has been turned into a celebration. 'Hence I rejoice that if I wait for you, you will not delay'. So, the waiting, the pain, having expressed the pain of waiting, now the joy of the waiting, the rejoicing in it. God is both holding back and giving and has of course given everything in Jesus Christ, which is the point of the whole prayer, and the point it gets to. So this is how she's addressing God in truthfulness, opening her heart in love; it's the prayer of love.

And then the prayer shifts (again), the second half is not addressing God but herself, addressing her soul, her deepest person who she is, as though she is a different person, this is who she's addressing now; starting with a question. 'With what procrastinations do you wait, since from this very moment you can love God in your heart?' Why wait? What's this all about? What's the complaining all about? There's nothing to stop you loving God; you may think He hasn't answered this prayer or that prayer, or you may feel that you're very lowly or humble, or that your works are not good enough, or whatever it is, but none of this can stop you loving, none of this can stop you responding in love to the love that God is giving you. He has given that love in His Son Jesus Christ. That's the love that He has given. So now the prayer goes on to express in a beautiful sense what God has given, nothing less than everything.

It goes on then - 'Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; of 2 5and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me'. The Father has given Jesus Christ, given Him before all eternity as we saw in the poem this morning; has given everything.

It's the very nature of God to give, and when God has given Jesus He has given everything, because everything is the bride of Jesus; and therefore he lists out everything here, the heavens, and the earth, everything God has created. The nations, good people, bad people, just, sinners, all people. And the angels, and the Mother of God, His own Mother; and all things,, everything else, everything that could possibly be included, and God Himself. He has given Himself, in giving His Son He has given Himself; and I possess it all, I have it all. Here's someone who is looking for something, feeling that something is missing, and now is telling herself if you have everything, you couldn't possibly be lacking anything because Jesus Christ has been given to you. If you have Jesus you have even God Himself because 'Christ is mine and all for me'.

So then, back to questioning again 'What do you ask, then, and seek my soul'? You're asking and seeking when you have everything! That's one of the extraordinary paradoxes of the spiritual life; here's somebody asking and seeking, yet she has everything. There's a wonderful image John uses in The Living Flame of the caverns, and these vast caverns, as the person is getting closer to God are getting bigger and bigger, he says, and emptier and emptier, hungrier and hungrier, the closer to God the

person comes: because the capacity for God is growing and increasing the closer one gets to God. The person has a great sense of that capacity for God.

God seems almost absent when He is closest and the person seems most empty when really God has given her everything. So why do you seek then? 'Yours is all of this, and all is for you'. And she knows that, that she has all of this, and it is all for her and yet she seeks and searches and he, John, is not in any way in this prayer condemning the seeking and the searching, or saying she's wrong to seek and search. No, this is the prayer, the seeking and searching is right. You keep seeking and searching even when you have everything, that is the prayer of the person. 'Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage yourself in something less or pay heed to the crumbs that fall from your Father's table. Go forth and exult in your Glory! Hide yourself in it and rejoice, and you will obtain the supplications of your heart'. You will obtain what you're longing, searching and seeking for, but go and exult, rejoice, don't pay heed to anything less; you have got all of this.

So, rejoice, celebrate God's glory. So it is a wonderful prayer, the prayer of somebody living the fullness of love, transformed by love; yet in that place where that seeking, that searching is the Cross, and at every stage of the spiritual life the Cross is there. In one way and another it's always there.

Right throughout John's writings we could go to so many places to the sense of who Jesus Christ is, and the place of Jesus Christ. I'll just pick out a few places worth looking at. There are three key chapters in The Ascent of Mt. Carmel which really are the answer to the question Where is Jesus Christ in the one's spiritual life? The first is Book 1 chapter 13, there in that chapter everything hinges on motivation. Jesus is the motivation. It is for Jesus Christ, those three words, for Jesus Christ. He is the motive for setting out on this road, He is the motive for every sacrifice, every decision, everything that one does. Out of love for Jesus Christ there can be no limit for what one will do, and that chapter sets out in very clear terms, do this out of love for Jesus. There can be no other reason to set out on the spiritual journey. There is no other reason to live a spiritual life. In of 3 5 John of the Cross' teaching; the motive always has to be love of Jesus Christ. The bride seeking the Bridegroom; the bride who has been wounded with love by the Bridegroom, that's the beginning of the Canticle, that's the motivation, there can be no other motivation. 'As one journeys along this road' a great John of the Cross phrase that we find over and over again, and 'Fix one's eyes on Jesus Christ'. Look to Jesus Christ, look at Him not at yourself. Keep looking at Jesus Christ, that's very much the theme of the second chapter of the Ascent, Book 2, chapter 7. Again a very profound chapter on Jesus Christ. There are two parts to the chapter. The first part is about listening to Jesus, listening to His words in the Gospels. And John in particular emphasises those sayings that were not so attractive; some of the things that Jesus said were very attractive. We like some of the phrases, some of the sayings, there are others we're not so attracted to. The ones

we're not so attracted to, are because, John says, there's more of God being revealed there. Our inclinations, our preferences are very different to God's. God sees things in a very different way.

So if we're not attracted to some particular saying, and we find it particularly challenging, go there he says, stay there; there is something there that God is saying to you.

The second part of that chapter is looking at the example of Jesus, how He lived, at the Cross.

It's His self emptying, His giving totally of Himself, that total self giving, and there upon the Cross Jesus calls out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' John of the Cross focuses on that.

Here's Jesus believing that God has forsaken Him. All the people have abandoned Him, all His friends have abandoned Him, He has given everything, He has died to everything, John said there is nothing more to die to. Now Jesus believes God has abandoned Him, yet that is the very moment John said, when God is doing His greatest work in Jesus Christ. He is uniting the world. It is the moment of the Spiritual Marriage; it is the moment of reconciliation of God and all of creation. It is the greatest work of God. Jesus could not be closer to the Father, the Father could not be closer to Jesus. And there is a lesson there in the whole spiritual life for us all. As we've seen over and over again in different ways, when we seen further and further from God that's the moment of greatest closeness. When we think God is missing or has abandoned us, or not answering our prayers, that's the moment of grace; that's when He's doing something beyond our knowledge, beyond our understanding.

The third chapter to pay close attention to in the Ascent is Book 2: chapter 22. Jesus is the Word of the Father. He is God's Word. Everything God has ever said in the past or would ever want to say is contained in Jesus. He is the Word. Everything we could ever want to hear, or long for is there in Jesus, listen to Him. All the Scriptures speak about Him; everything God would ever want to say to us is contained in Jesus Christ. John says don't be looking after other things, or seeking after other things, everything is in Jesus Christ. Just like this prayer The Soul taken in Love, God has given us everything in Jesus. Everything He would ever want to say is contained in Jesus. I'm very much reminded of one of the famous 'Sayings of Light and Love', 'The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul'. (Newer translation page 92:100, older book page 675:21). In all of history from the creation, God spoke one Word only and that Word is Christ, and that's the Word spoken in eternal silence and one has to enter that silence to hear that Word. It silences of 4 5everything else, every other word. Silence. So those three chapters of The Ascent of Mt. Carmel are worth pondering.

Jesus is the end of the spiritual life. When it comes to the final stanzas of the Spiritual Canticle, there we see that Jesus is the Bridegroom, all of the Canticle is an entering ever more deeply into relationship with Jesus, and that relationship keeps evolving, but it is always going to take a person to where life took Jesus Himself, to the Cross, because the Cross is the deepest mystery of Jesus.

It's the most profound revelation of who God is. The wisdom of the Cross, as John speaks about, that's where we're drawn to, the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life. And the origin, the source of that is creation itself. This is what we're created for, we're created for a relationship with Jesus Christ, that's what we saw in the poem this morning, and as we grow spiritually, we grow into a relationship with Jesus Christ; and the motive is always love for Jesus Christ, and He is the model.

He has gone before us, we follow Him, look to Him and live as close as possible to the life He lived.

That is the life of a Christian as John of the Cross teaches it to us.

TALK 6

We begin with something John says to us in *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, book 2, chapter 28:1. We're well into the book and he makes this important statement. 'The discreet reader must always keep in mind my intention and goal for this book:' and here's his intention and goal. 'to guide the soul in purity of faith through all its natural and supernatural apprehensions, in freedom from deception and every obstacle, to divine union with God'.

There in one sentence John tells us what all his writings are about, everything he wants to write and teach summed up in that sentence; but he's not just summing it up for us there, he's also giving us a very important principle for reading his writings. We must keep before our eyes the goal. Where is this going to? That's something John tells us a number of times in different ways, it's a fundamental for the spiritual life. St. Teresa also puts this very strongly, 'If you set out on this road, you must have your eyes upon the end of the road, not the beginning, not the middle, you must be focused on the end'. She puts it very strongly at times 'Keep going to the end of the road, no stopping anywhere on the way'.

And to understand John's writings we'll need to keep this principle in mind; always where is he going with this? Sometimes his writings can be difficult, sometimes we think 'What is he talking about here?' But we keep in mind, where's this going to, what's the purpose of this? So 'The discreet reader', and John puts it in at this particular stage of the *Ascent* because he realises that this is the place where people can really lose track of where this is going.

He pulls us back to the purpose of this. So it's his intention, it's why he writes and it's the goal and most of this we have seen in various ways already. But the person, the soul, is guided in purity of faith, that is the only way to make this journey. In purity of faith, there can be no other way, we only make progress through faith, by living in faith. So it is always walking in faith.

If we look at his poem *The Dark Night*, one sees there that the entire spiritual journey is within this dark night of faith. There doesn't come a stage when one is no longer in the dark night, as we've seen one is in deeper and deeper darkness. Every stage of the spiritual life is living in faith. The guidance is always in the darkness of faith, that's the guidance that's given, how to live within the darkness of faith and what it is. Through all its natural and supernatural apprehensions, that's everything a person could ever see, hear, receive, experience, in everyday life in one's person, or whether it is supernatural visions, revelations, ecstasies, whatever one might be having, whatever it might be, natural or supernatural, whether from the devil or from God, or from life experience or imagination, or whatever it is that the person is perceiving, knowing, experiencing, everything, the person must be guided through in purity of faith, nothing else.

‘In freedom from deception’, because anything can deceive as St. Paul said even the devil can turn himself into an angel of light; everything can deceive, even things that are very good, ‘and from every obstacle’ whatever the obstacle might be, and of course the greatest obstacle is always oneself, and one’s incomplete understanding of things, or one’s appetites; so whatever the obstacles might be; ‘freedom from deception and every obstacle to divine union with God’. Nothing less than that, union with God; or as we’ve seen that’s John’s preferred way of expressing the goal at the end of the spiritual life. He prefers that to sanctity or other terms that are often used.

Union with God, John has already defined what he means by that, and I think it would be worth perhaps looking at it. It’s in the Ascent, book 2 chapter 5. One of the things one notices about the Ascent is that it might be at some level the most difficult of John’s four main works to read, or to follow his arguments at times. It’s the book that contains so many essential pieces of advice that one needs to understand John’s thinking; to understand his overall way of seeing things and this term union with God. Here he defines for us what he means by that. He speaks about it many times in his writings, it’s everywhere, union with God. But here is the one place that he actually defines what he means by it; and it’s in book 2, chapter 5:3. Really the whole chapter is what’s meant by it, but the kernel is here at paragraph 3. ‘To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it He conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist.’ He then goes on to say that this isn’t the union we’re talking about but is a very important union in John’s way of thinking, and the way that he sees the other person and the way that he sees the whole of nature, of creation. God lives substantially and that’s the word he uses, in every person, even the greatest of sinners, even those who have very explicitly rejected God, rejected a relationship with God, He dwells substantially in them. He is in relationship with them. never ceases to be in relationship with a person, though a person may cease to be in relationship with God, God never ceases to be in relationship with the person. And that’s a very important fundamental for how John sees the human being, for the whole way that John ministered to people. Every human being is somebody in whom God dwells, and God is in relationship with them, and is sustaining that person in being, because for the whole of life we are dependent upon God.

But, he says, that is not what we are now speaking about, we’re speaking about a different kind of union, and the union that we’re speaking about, he said, is the ‘soul’s union with God and the transformation in God that does not always exist except where there is likeness of love’. That’s the key to it all. It’s union with a transformation in God. In other words not only is one united with God now, but one

is transformed, changed; transformed through a process of growth and maturing that only exists where there is likeness of love.

That is the key, where love now goes in both directions, not just in one direction; God always loves the person, but this union with God exists when the love is reciprocal. And as we see in the Spiritual Canticle, it is impossible for a human beings love to be equal to God's love; but John says there that the very nature of love is that the person wants to respond with a love equal to the love received; but that is impossible when it is the divine and the human, because no matter how much the human being loves, the person is always going to be limited, compromised, distorted, incomplete, because of the human nature. In the Spiritual Canticle (Stanza 38) we see that the Bridegroom so transforms the bride that He gives the bride the instruments with which to love. Therefore the Bridegroom puts into the bride the very ability to love reciprocally, so that the person now has the capacity to love with a love equal to the love that God gives, which is God's own love. This reciprocal love is what John of the Cross calls God by participation.

Sometimes over history that term has been misunderstood in John of the Cross' works, he's not saying that the person becomes a god or an equal to God, but rather that God gives the person the capacity to love with a love that is beyond the limits of human nature.

With a love that is bigger than the limited capacity that a human being has. A love that is something of the love of God. That's what he means by being transformed into God's love.

So where there is likeness of love, it's when a person loves with the love that God has given her, the capacity for love that God has given her. John goes on then just to clarify what he means by that. 'We will call it the union of likeness; and the former, the essential or substantial union. The union of likeness is supernatural; the other natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love'.

So that's the process of spiritual growth, everything that's repugnant, everything that's opposed, everything that's not in conformity with God's will, with God's love, that has to be healed, purified, and transformed, so that the person is transformed into God through love.

So that's how John defines what he means by union with God, and that's something that we must always keep in mind, that's where it's going to, and that's the process.

And so John's teaching is all about helping the person to make this journey; and John's purpose most particularly is to help the person at the time when the person is in most need.

The key word to describe the experience of prayer of the person is contemplation, and in the traditional understanding of the word. It's used differently nowadays, that's why it can confuse people sometimes; for John it's what God does in prayer; prayer is a dialogue between God and the person, contemplation is God's part of the dialogue. It is supernatural, it's what God does. And the journey is one of conforming oneself to what God is doing.

Just want to look briefly at the Dark Night, book 2, chapter 5, where John defines contemplation for us. Another key definition of John's writing and thinking. There a few other texts where John defines contemplation, but one is enough for us. To set the scene for that, let us look at chapter 4:2 where he defines the journey for us, before he begins to speak on contemplation. He's commenting now on the first stanza of the poem the Dark Night for the third time in John's writings, each time from a different perspective. The entire Ascent of Mt. Carmel is one commentary, the Dark Night book 1, and chapter 3 of book 2; and now the third time beginning of chapter 5. In chapter 4:2 he sets the scene for us.

'This was a great happiness and a sheer grace for me, for through the annihilation and calming of my faculties, passions, appetites and affections, by which my experience and satisfaction in God were base, I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God's operation and way of acting'. From everything that is base to God's way of acting, God's way of seeing things, nothing less than that is happening. That's this total transformation of the person, from a human way of acting, according to one's faculties, passions, appetites and affections, by that he means the whole person, every way that we act, operate and perceive things. All of that now has been calmed and annihilated and the person sees things in God's way.

He further defines it saying, 'My intellect departed from itself, changing from human and natural to divine. For united with God through this purgation, it no longer understands by means of its natural vigour and light, but by means of the divine wisdom to which it was united'. The mind of a person is adapted, and John tells us that it doesn't mean that the person stops using the knowledge that they have and the experience they've acquired or anything like that, it's that the light of God's wisdom now shines upon it. So when the person uses scientific knowledge, yes, they're using the scientific knowledge the person has learned and acquired, but God's wisdom is now shining on it. It's not a rejection of any earthly and human knowledge, because that also comes from God, but it's now seeing it in a completely different way, through the light and wisdom of God.

And then, 'the will departed from itself and became divine', that's loving as God united with divine love. 'The memory too has changed into eternal apprehensions of glory. And finally, all the strength and affections of the soul, by means of this night and purgation of the old self, are renewed with divine qualities and delights'. The whole person, that's the transformation of the whole person, and that's taking place at this point in the Dark Night, and it's here now, that John reminds us of what contemplation is; gives another key reminder of what is going on, when a person most needs to be reminded; because a person doesn't know what is going on as we've already seen and is in the deepest darkness here.

So, the beginning of chapter 5:1. This is John's key definition of contemplation, 'This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul'. And that's a wonderful expression, this inflow, the flowing in. Elsewhere he describes it as a river that saturates everything. Water reaches everywhere as we know when there's a flood, there is no stopping water, it goes everywhere; so this divine inflow goes everywhere in the person. By soul, of course we have to be careful with that; nowadays we tend to understand soul in a more restricted way than John did, John had a broader understanding of the term soul, for him it's the whole person, or the true person, the person as God created them to be. When he says here that it's an inflow of God into the soul, he means that the grace of God, this life of God has reached every dimension of the person. For as he has shown earlier on, all transformation is spiritual, it's the spiritual that effects the whole person; it's the work of the Spirit and therefore it completes the spiritual transformation of the whole person. So that's the inflow of God reaching everything in the person; and that includes the person's relationships, outlook, ways of seeing things, the whole person in every sense of the person.

And now he defines what happens. It purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, we've already seen the cleansing and purging of everything, at a natural and spiritual level. We're now talking about infused contemplation and mystical theology, terms that were very much used in John's time, 'Through this contemplation then, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love, without it doing anything or understanding how this happens'. This knowledge we've been speaking about, this life that comes in, a whole new way of being and seeing things. So God teaches secretly and instructs in the perfection of love; that's what God is always doing, teaching always about love and perfecting love. And the teaching is secret, in other words it's secret from the mind, the intellect, it's secret from the heart, it's secret from all the ways the human will perceive something. But at another level, of course, it's not secret at all, because the person becomes aware in some way of the change that has happened.

That may take a long time to adapt to, this different way of seeing things. The effects of this teaching is that the person has changed but doesn't know how they have changed; the person knows but doesn't know how they know. This knowledge is

there. The way John describes it is that the knowledge is there without knowing how it has come, or where it has come from. Most things that we know someone has told us, or we've read it, or we have seen it, or experienced it, with this there is none of that, but the knowledge is there. So He instructs secretly without us doing anything or understanding how it happens. And that can be very difficult for us as we like to be involved, we like to have control and feel that it is our project, and that we're doing it. This can be one of the great struggles within the person, I'm not doing this! But without doing anything it doesn't mean that the person is idle, or in a term that John uses here, is passive.

The passive night, he's all the time using this word passive, but the person is not passive in the ordinary sense of the word; it's not like lying in an operating theatre and something is being done to you, that's not how it is. To be passive in a spiritual sense is to be wholly and one hundred percent involved. All one's prayer now is one of receiving. He tells us in *The Living Flame* it's a passivity that is giving one's consent, it's receiving, it's not being an obstacle, or getting in the way. The person is as committed or more committed than ever, and that's what is seen in the new way the person is living. The person has no awareness or even only the slightest hint that something of this may be going on in them; but what they may be aware of, and others aware of, is that this person is very committed to charity, to their Christian lives, to their prayer life, to everything in life: there's a level of commitment and self giving and the fruits of this; the person is not living some kind of idle or passive way of life, but is more active than ever. But that activity may not be great big works, with some people it might be but it's simply being faithful *The Dark Night* chapter 5:1 second paragraph, 'Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining,' it purges and cleanses, it takes away, it cuts off, and it gives light, and by purging and illumining it 'prepares the soul for union with God through love'. That's what it's doing.

And in order to be united with God, one has to become like God, and he then tells us 'Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and illumines the blessed spirits purges and illumines the soul here on earth'. John's teaching on purgatory. What happens here if it's not done in this world, God gives the opportunity in the next world for it to be done, because every person who comes face to face with God must be healed, purged and transformed by this loving wisdom of God. So whether it happens here or in the next life, it's the same process, it's the same preparation for coming face to face with God, preparation for complete union with God.

It's a journey of love, of growing in love, of being transformed in love, it is love that changes a person. So that's what John is setting out to teach and to guide the person along this road, and For John the human being is only changed by love. Nothing else changes the human being, no rules, coercion, persuasion or anything else changes the

human being, only love does. Those other things might change external practices, but only love fundamentally changes the human being, because it's only love that changes from within.

Love changes from the deepest place within and works outwards. Any other attempt to change starts from outside and works inwards and that ultimately doesn't work, because it doesn't change and transform the deepest place within. Only love can bring about irreversible, fundamental change in the person. Only the love that changes and transforms the person and it is always God's love or human love transformed by God's love; only that can bring about that fundamental change in the deepest place within, that place where God dwells, where the true human person is.

TALK 7

We were speaking about Jesus Christ and the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life; we saw John's poems, The Romances, where God the Father created everything for Jesus Christ, and in particular angels and human beings. And everything that He created is bride for Jesus Christ. And we saw that the Incarnation is the wedding feast, the union of the two, and that union of the two is completed upon the Cross.

The Ascent, book 2, ch.17. John says that on the Cross God completes the union of Jesus Christ and all of humanity.

Now, when I come to the Spiritual Canticle, the Canticle begins with that wound, that wound of love, 'Where have you hidden, Beloved and left me moaning?' and he begins his commentary by saying that the soul, the bride, the person has become aware. We might say it's the beginning of the spiritual life, the beginning of this journey of faith, this journey of growing, maturing spiritually; that awareness that has been there by the Bridegroom. That wound of love; and what in particular the person becomes aware of. Two things really, one is that she can only be satisfied with direct encounter with experience of God. And indeed the first ten stanzas of the Canticle are reinforcing that message. 'In this first stanza the soul, enamoured of the Word, her Bridegroom, the Son of God, longs for union with Him through clear and essential vision'. Sp.

Canticle 1:2. So that's the soul now, she's been wounded with love, enamoured, filled with love of the Word, her Bridegroom, the Son of God; and she longs for clear and essential vision. Not things about Him, or hints or signs, all of those things remind her of Him, but do not give that deep inner satisfaction, fulfilment, completion, that she's longing for. So that the first thing she becomes aware of, is that nothing less than a clear and essential experience of Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom; because as we've said it's for Him that she's created. Her fulfilment depends on a direct experience of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

But the second thing that she becomes aware of is His absence, He is absent. The experience of absence which is so strong; she complains of His absence, she suffers the Beloved's absence. That's what she's experiencing, the absence. And absence of course is a sign of presence, a person can only feel absence where there is love, experience. The sense of absence was so strong because she has experienced the sense of His presence; the feeling of absence is so strong because of the wound of love. She has been touched by His love. And that's the energy, the driving force of the whole Canticle.

That love song that's deep within the person, that love song between Bridegroom and bride that has been sung in the deepest place within the person. And the story of the

Canticle goes on. The person grows, matures etc., until she comes to the point in stanzas 20-21, of that full and complete 'yes' of love. Now we could say that the whole work of purification and transformation has been completed. She is now, as we saw this morning when John was speaking about contemplation, she is now prepared to enter into the presence of God, union with God, union with Jesus her Bridegroom.

Then stanzas 22-23 that union takes place, and the nature of that. Just look very briefly for the moment at stanza 23, the commentary there; this espousal that's taking place, and there's two dimensions to this. Stanza 23:6. The Cross is the espousal.

'The espousal made on the Cross is not the one we now speak of. For that espousal is accomplished immediately when God gives the first grace that is bestowed on each one at baptism. The espousal of which we speak bears reference to perfection and is not achieved save gradually and by stages'. So this union of Bridegroom and bride as I said, takes place upon the Cross, that's ultimately where the spiritual marriage takes place. God has totally united Himself with humanity, and that is brought about personally in each one who is baptised. But that reality that has been given through baptism, has a been brought about on the Cross has to then grow and mature in the person, the person has to be changed and transformed. Perhaps the way of seeing it are those words in the Prologue of John's Gospel, 'To all those who did accept Him, He gave the power and the grace to become children of God', or to grow into being children of God. There's a growing process that has to take place, though the gift is already given. God the Father has already given His Son completely through the Incarnation and through the Cross to each person who is baptised. That person, in the words of St. Paul has died and risen with Jesus Christ, is living a new life.

But now we might say there's another dying and rising that has to happen, and that is at the pace of the individual: it's one thing for God to do it instantly, but we have to, the human being has to grow into that, as we've already been seeing in various ways.

And what the Canticle shows is how that's possible in this life, and it's done through love, the transformation in love, God changes us through love. And so from stanza 22 in the Canticle onwards, the person is living this union with God. Bride and Bridegroom are united, are one. And what might that entail in a person's life? That's what John tries to express in the rest of the Canticle which is all about union with Jesus Christ, what it means to live a Christian life. A life that is truly Christian. I'm very conscious of the famous words of St. Paul in the letter to the Galatians 2:20, 'I no longer live, but the life of Jesus Christ is lived in me'. It's the life of Jesus Christ that's lived in the person.

And John shows us this in various ways. Let's just take a look at stanza 27. Really those stanzas 27, 28, 29, were as you know so important to St. Therese for her teaching, stanzas that she loved to come back to, inspirational for so many people; Elizabeth of the Trinity too, and so many others. We look at the introduction,

paragraph 1. 'In this interior union God communicates Himself to the soul with such genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she tenderly caresses her child, nor a brother's love, nor any friendship is comparable to it.' It's a relationship that nothing known humanly is comparable to. And while the Canticum is almost always entirely about the relationship between the person and Jesus, here it is with God the Father, 'the tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favours and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree - O wonderful thing, worthy of all our awe and admiration! - that the Father Himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though He were her servant and she His lord'.

We saw this yesterday, with one hair she has bound God, stanza 22. 'And He is as solicitous in favouring her as He would be if He were her slave and she His god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God.' And the term John uses here is one of complete surrender, God has completely surrendered to her love; she makes a complete surrender of herself, and gives Him the breast of her will and her love. It's that complete surrender of one and the other, this mutual surrender of God and the soul that's made in this union. It's this total reciprocal self giving; the very nature of God, as we've seen is to give. God is always giving, human nature is to possess.

Human nature has to grow and be transformed from possessing to giving; the very nature of God is giving though in giving He possesses all also. But the nature of God is to give. And the total self giving of Jesus, in the Incarnation and on the Cross is an expression of the very nature of God. God can not stop giving. God can put no limits on His giving, and that's the God that the person is experiencing now that the barriers and obstacles have been overcome. She is simply just in awe at what God is doing.

Para 5. 'The sweet and living knowledge that she says He taught her is mystical theology, the secret knowledge of God the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is a knowledge through love.' Para 6. 'In that sweet drink of God, in which the soul is imbibed in Him, she most willingly and with intense delight surrenders herself wholly to Him in the desire to be totally His and never to possess in herself anything other than Him.' So that's letting go of all possessions, to possess nothing other than Him. The nature of the person has been transformed into God. Possessiveness has been the obstacle, now all possessiveness has been transformed into God. The transformation has taken place.

So now para 8. '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.' etc. All her actions are love. 'She is conscious that love is so valuable in her Beloved's sight that He neither esteems nor makes use of anything else but love, and so she employs all her strength in the pure love of God, desiring to serve Him perfectly'. All her actions are love, everything is love, love employs all her strength -

that's the Ascent, book 3 ch. 16:1, where John quotes the Shema Israel. Deut. 6:5. 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength' John picks out the word strength there, and says everything he would ever want to teach is contained in that command. And the great struggle that we have is that so many things dissipate our strength, the soul is not able to love with all her strength, because of her appetites, her attachments, false understandings and all sorts of things. But now the person has to let go of all that so she can love with all her strength, all her strength can be put into love. That's the transformation that has taken place, she can love Him now with all her strength in the pure love of God, desiring to love Him perfectly. Spiritual Canticle 28:5 'All this energy 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 toward God; and the affections, senses, desires, appetites, hope, joy, and all the energy from the first instant incline toward God, although, as I say, the soul may not advert to the fact that she is working for Him'. The person is doing all this but might have no consciousness that she's doing it; might think that she's not doing anything any differently from what she's ever been doing, or might think she's doing things worse than ever, but it doesn't mean the the person is conscious of it.

It's in the mind, but the deeper love that's there is always inclined towards love, love is always the first response. But the person will have almost no awareness or advertence to that, because it's coming from the deepest place within. It's not some conscious decision that's taken in the person's mind, but rather it's a very deep instinct that she's been transformed by love in the deepest place within, and therefore the loving response is always the response.

And John goes on to say how that love is the most precious thing in the whole world, and as he says at the beginning of The Living Flame, love is more precious than anything the person may ever have done in their lives, no matter how great those achievements are, one little drop of this love is more important, does more good, because it is the power of God's love, it's way beyond whatever any human being could ever do or would ever achieve. But a person would have no sense of that, they're simply being themselves.

You see an illustration of this in Matthew's Gospel, 25: 31-46, the Last Judgment scene, that great scene where those who have served the Lord, those on the right side, say Lord when did we see you? They were simply doing it without adverting to the fact that they were doing it, they were doing it for Christ, it is just what they were doing. They are being completely themselves. That I suppose can be difficult for people to grasp intellectually, in fact the closer the person is to God, the less sense of God the person has; because the person is simply being their true selves. The closer a person comes to God the more true they are to themselves.

Life in union with God is the life we are created for. It's not something that we're unfamiliar with, or have to make some special effort, it is what comes most naturally when we are set free from everything that distorts, hinders, and limits it. Set free from all obstacles the person has the freedom to be herself; to live the life that she's created for, and that's why there's no advertence to it, the person doesn't have the sense of it. God is here living something special, and there's the humility of the person; the closer the person comes to God, the more human the person is. And perhaps one sees that most in the last five stanzas of the Canticle. In the last five stanzas there is what John describes as an anticipation, something of the heavenly world is shining, but at the same time the person is at their most human, their feet are on the ground. The closer the human being gets to God the more human they become because we're created in the image and likeness of God. And there he tells us we understand the secrets of God and humanity, greater understanding of who God is and of what it means to be human, and particularly of Jesus Christ. Entering into the mystery of Jesus Christ which gets bigger and bigger as God gets bigger and bigger.

Jesus Christ is this great mine, Canticle 37:4, we can never fully know Him, we're always finding new recesses and new treasures. The greatest of the mysteries is the mystery of the Cross, which one wants to be brought deeply into, because there is the deepest mystery of Jesus Christ. The bride wants to know her Bridegroom, wants to know her Bridegroom in every way, and particularly wants to know the secrets and depths of the Cross and all the other mysteries of her Bridegroom. And so there at the end of the Canticle we're given a flavour of this new life in Jesus Christ. Life in union with Jesus Christ. Life of the one who has truly become the person she's created to be.