

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT TIMES

*Drawing on the Carmelite tradition
to help us pray during a time of change*



FR. MATT BLAKE OCD

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INTRODUCTION

These four weekly talks were given by Fr Matt Blake in November 2020, during the second period of lockdown in the coronavirus pandemic. This is how he described their purpose when introducing the first talk:

Whatever is happening in our lives affects our prayer. There's this dramatic, or perhaps I should say traumatic change in our lives, a change in the whole way we live our lives: the fact that the churches are closed (they're open for private prayer, but not for Eucharist or liturgy); the fact that people's jobs are disrupted; people's lives and freedom to move around the place, freedom to visit friends and family and so much else. In an enormous variety of ways, people's lives are disrupted – not to mention those who are ill or suffering or grieving. And this dramatic change in our lives affects our prayer. For some people, this time of lockdown can be a very spiritual time, a time of prayer – more time for silence, more time for reading. It can be a very blessed time, or seem to be a very blessed time. But for many others it can be a time of great struggle and difficulty. We expect that when we have more time on our hands prayer will be easier, prayer will be more fruitful. Very often that is not the case. Very often, suddenly when a person finds they have time on their hands, they feel they can't pray. Something that people in hospital or who are sick have so often said to me over the years, "I can't pray." Of course, it is not that they are not praying, but it doesn't seem like the prayer they are used to. It is as if the normal foundations and support structures of prayer are taken away and something different is emerging that's confusing, that's bewildering. And so new challenges are faced. And with all of that in mind, I'll try to give these four talks over these four Mondays.

This audio transcript was made by a Secular Carmelite from recordings of the talks. With Fr Matt Blake's permission, it is being made available on the website of the English and Welsh Secular Carmelites for private use.

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT TIMES – Fr Matt Blake OCD
Carmelite Church, Kensington

First talk – Monday 9 November 2020 10 a.m. – St Teresa on Prayer

Audio transcript. Recording at: <https://youtu.be/I5Sn8fULaoo> (The talk begins 6 minutes and 57 seconds after the start of the recording).

Good morning everybody. You are all very welcome to the first of these talks and you are all very aware of the context of these talks: we are now in another period of lockdown. The purpose behind the talks is that these are very particular times for us – the fact there is nobody here in the church and I’m speaking in an empty church, although of course all of you who are listening are spiritually present. It’s a very particular time for us.

Whatever is happening in our lives affects our prayer. Our prayer can never be separated from everything else that is happening. There’s this dramatic, or perhaps I should say traumatic change in our lives, a change in the whole way we live our lives: the fact that the churches are closed (well, they’re open for private prayer, but not for Eucharist or liturgy); the fact that people’s jobs are disrupted; people’s lives and freedom to move around the place, freedom to visit friends and family and so much else. In an enormous variety of ways, people’s lives are disrupted – not to mention those who are ill or suffering or grieving. And this dramatic change in our lives affects our prayer. For some people, this time of lockdown can be a very spiritual time, a time of prayer – more time for silence, more time for reading. It can be a very blessed time, or seem to be a very blessed time. But for many others it can be a time of great struggle and difficulty. We expect that when we have more time on our hands prayer will be easier, prayer will be more fruitful. Very often that is not the case. Very often, suddenly when a person finds they have time on their hands, they feel they can’t pray. Something that people in hospital or who are sick have so often said to me over the years, “I can’t pray.” Of course, it is not that they are not praying, but it doesn’t seem like the prayer they are used to. It is as if the normal foundations and support structures of prayer are taken away and something different is emerging that’s confusing, that’s bewildering. And so new challenges are faced. And with all of that in mind, I’ll try to give these four talks over these four Mondays.

In the last series of talks I followed very specifically a part of St Teresa’s writings – the *Book of her Life*, Chapters 11-22 – her treatise on prayer. This time I’m going to be doing something rather different, I will draw from the wider Carmelite tradition and will pick and choose different things, there will be more variety in it rather than following just one thing. So I will pick out different things each week from different Carmelites, but I am going to begin with Teresa today. And what this talk consists of basically, I’m going to pick out three foundations of prayer from Teresa’s writings. I’m going to pick out three fundamentals that are essential to our right understanding of prayer, the purpose being a great reminder to us. I imagine all you have heard all of this before, but this acts as a reminder.

What is prayer really about? What is it that we set out to do? Whether it is you come here to the church at the times when it is open for private prayer with the Blessed Sacrament exposed, or in your own homes, in the churches wherever you are, wherever you may be. What is it that you are setting out to do? What is this reality that one steps into when one begins to pray? I'm just picking out three things from Teresa that might help us to see what prayer is. The first thing I'm going to pick out is how Teresa begins her *Interior Castle*. She begins with this wonderful paragraph about the human soul or we might prefer to use the person or the centre of the person or the most fundamental truth of who we are. I'm going to read her words, the first paragraph in which she says:

If we consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of diamonds or very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms just as in heaven there are many dwelling places, for in reflecting on it carefully sisters, we realise that the soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says he finds his delight. So then, what do you think that abode will be like where a King so powerful, so wise, so pure, so full of all good things takes his delight? I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of the soul and its marvellous capacity. Indeed, our intellects, however keen, can hardly comprehend it, just as they cannot comprehend God, for He Himself says that He created us in His own image and likeness.

What a wonderful description of the human being, of each one of us, and Teresa sets this as the starting point for prayer. Who am I? Remind ourselves of who we are. Have a right understanding of who I am. And this idea, made in the image and likeness of God is at the start of the Bible; it is the Bible's starting point, it's how the Bible speaks of us and God. This is who we are. This is our identity and what a wonderful expression of who we are. The beauty, the dignity, the preciousness, the capacity etc., of the human being. Therefore Teresa is saying to us when we start out in prayer, our starting point is this great reminder of who we are – our identity and our identity in relationship with God. We don't need to create a relationship with God, we don't need to work for it, we don't need to search for it – it's not something elusive, it's there – the very fact that we exist, that we're human, means that we are in relationship with God. We're made in His image and likeness, our interior, our true inner self; our soul is a paradise where God lives. She goes further than that – a paradise where God takes His delight, where He is delighted to be, where His joy is. God delights in us; we're a joy to Him. So that's the starting point. We don't have to search, we don't have to go someplace else, we don't have to make some radical changes – they come later. To begin we simply begin. And she'll go on to say that *the door of entry is prayer*. Prayer opens the door to this wonderful castle of crystal and diamond. So that's the starting point. We're created in His image and likeness.

The second fundamental I want to take from Teresa's writings. When she's reflecting upon prayer and no doubt the teaching that many people give about prayer and her own experience of prayer and the experience of many other people, she tells us – in the *Book of her Foundations*, Chapter 5 – many people think that prayer is all about

thinking and controlling our minds and having wonderful thoughts and reflections and meditations, saying all the right things, etc. She says that's fine for some people; some people might be able to do that. Many people say they can't, and she herself couldn't, but she said every human being is capable of love and therefore if every human being is capable of love, every human being is capable of prayer. Prayer is as fundamental to us as human beings as love is. All prayer is love, in prayer we speak the language of love, prayer is something that is instinctive, it's a part of being human, it's who we are as human beings. We're born with a tendency to prayer; we instinctively know what it is to pray. It's not a skill to be learned, it's not some goal to be arrived at or achieved. It's just who we are. It's as fundamental, as basic to us as love. In fact it is love, it is the greatest expression of love, it is a relationship of love with the one who loves us most, a love beyond limit, a love in which we can grow and mature. So prayer is fundamental to who we are.

I just want to read a few lines from the beginning of Chapter 11 of Luke's gospel:

Now once he (Jesus) was in a certain place, praying. And when he had finished, one of his disciples said, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.' He said to them: 'say this when you pray. Father may your name be held holy, your kingdom come, give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us, and do not put us to the test.'

I just draw your attention here – this disciple asks Jesus, *teach us to pray*. John taught his disciples and every rabbi and guru did the same thing. But Jesus doesn't, and here Jesus does not teach them how to pray. Rather the response of Jesus is *when you pray, use these words*. In other words, you are already praying, but maybe these words will help you while you are praying. The very asking of the question to Jesus is a prayer; the very desire within this person to know how to pray is a prayer. We could put it like this; prayer consists not of the words that we use or the ritual that we enact or anything else that we do – these are all things we do while we pray. Prayer is something deeper, prayer is happening at a deeper level within. It is touching into that fundamental relationship with God that we have all got, that is basic to us as human beings. To come back to the language of love again, you can love somebody, but then you need to express that love. The expression is expressing something that already exists. The expression is always less than the reality, the expression is something that touches a little bit or helps us to get in touch with a deeper and fuller reality that exists and even if the expressing is not done, the reality still exists, so the reality of prayer is there. We're always praying. A human being is always in relationship with God, but that relationship, like all relationships, needs to be expressed.

So what that disciple was really saying to Jesus was, *I am in relationship with God, I am feeling and experiencing God's love. Can you help me to express this? Can you help me to put this into words?* That's what he's really asking. But of course he doesn't understand, but that's what he's really asking. He's acknowledging even in his very question that the love of God is there within him, that he has some sense of that love of God, he's expressing his need to be able to respond to that love. Because all

our prayer is a response to what God is saying to us. All our acts of love are a response to love that we have received. It doesn't go the other way, that I will do x y and z and then God will give me. No, God gives, I respond to what he gives. I wouldn't even think of asking or beginning unless God is already there. So it is very important for us in our prayer and in particular when our prayer is difficult, and over these weeks I will be particularly concentrating on when prayer is difficult. Because I'm aware in this time of lockdown and of challenge that prayer can be difficult. Just remember that the very fact that I want to pray, or am trying to pray, or feel the need to pray and whatever else that one may be feeling or experiencing, all of that is a response to what God is doing. God is making himself known, God is revealing his presence. We may not recognise it as that, we may not recognise what's happening in us as that, we may not see it in those terms, but that is the fundamental truth. Prayer is something that is happening, that is happening within. And God does not go away, God's love does not lessen, it cannot be compromised. So we're always responding to God's love and the ability to respond to that is right there within us – it's fundamental to who we are. The human being naturally wants to respond to love. When the person receives love or becomes aware that there's an instinct, a great need to respond – that's what prayer is.

The second fundamental from St Teresa – that all people are capable of love, therefore all people are capable of prayer, and its not only that we're capable of prayer, or capable of love, we are capable – and this is the third of the fundamentals that I am setting out – we are capable of growing in that love, growing in that prayer. Or, to put it the other way around, the very fact that we engage with it means that we are open to being changed by it. When we set out on the journey of prayer, the one thing we can be absolutely certain of is that this going to be change us, because the very nature of love, it cannot stay the same. Love can never be something static, love can never be something that is set, permanent, *this is it*. No, love is alive, it's like a volcano, a fire within, it is always living, changing, throwing out life, giving life. There's energy there. So we're going to be changed by this and changed in every way, in every dimension of our being. This is a journey of change, of growth, of purification, of transformation. Quite literally it is a journey into a new life, or the fullness of life, or into life as it really is. It is a journey into life, we become alive. We might think we are alive, but really, until we have grown in love, until our capacity to receive and give love has grown and matured, because love is fundamental to life, it is love that gives us life, we're not alive if we cannot love and love has to grow and mature and when it does we come into life, we begin to live. And of course that growth and change will at times be very challenging, difficult, painful. We don't like it, we resist it, we protest, we're confused, we don't understand etc. So much of this can be happening and it is happening now and often the events of our lives, whatever is happening in the world around us, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in in life, they are affecting us spiritually and often, though not always, the times of crisis going on around us can coincide with the times of real growth and change within. It's like when we get shaken – when our comfort and our complacency get shaken, the spiritual is set free, the spiritual is given another input. So for many people, this time of lockdown and crisis and change and uncertainty can be a time of real spiritual

challenge and spiritual growth. It may not always be recognised as that. It can be a time when we really have to face the fundamental questions of life. Who am I? What is really important? What is life really about? That's what prayer does and it is at times like this that real growth and change takes place. This can be, with God's help, a time of real growth and new life for us. But the challenge is to recognise this, the challenge is to know how to live this, help that encouragement, that reassurance. According to Teresa what we most need is courage and determination, the courage to face whatever is happening in our lives. The courage to see this is OK, God is in this, God is with me, he is within me. If I can respond to this in a loving way it leads to new life, it opens new doors.

So going back to the first two fundamentals, when things are really difficult, remember Father, Son and Spirit – God lives within – within me he takes his delight, it's a paradise. This hasn't changed, this hasn't diminished or gone away. God is with me every step of the way. To use words that Teresa so often used, *Jesus Christ is standing beside me all the time*. Whatever the situation or circumstances are, I can love; I can respond with love, in love, there's a loving response that can be made here. Whenever a person can respond in love to whatever is happening, to whatever the circumstances are, over these days and weeks, for all of us, whatever our circumstance are, there are opportunities to respond in love, whatever we welcome, we take these opportunities, we change, we grow, we are expanded, our horizons broaden, new breath, new life, comes into us. Have the courage to do that. Have courage. Courage is needed. The other quality Teresa said that is so needed – determination – just keep going, be true to what you believe in, be true to what you know is important. Do not be thrown off course by the events of life, the crises that emerge each day, the challenges that life throws up at us. Be determined. We have courage and determination, God will not fail us, God will not let us down, God will walk with us and beside us and he will do so particularly in the times of crisis, the times of change, because they are also the times of growth, of maturing, development. God is right here with us and just remember, over these days and weeks of lockdown, of Coronavirus, of uncertainty, of change, of bewilderment – whatever is happening to us, God is right with us. That's what Teresa would want us to know, to remember. God is with us and in the midst of all of this, God is doing something and doing something great, both in the world around us and in the lives and experience of each one of us – in the soul, in the heart, in the depths of each one of us. So have courage, Be determined, draw on the strength that is there, that is within us, that God has put there, that he is giving us.

For the next three Mondays I will draw on different parts and aspects of teachings from the Carmelite tradition to help us and to support us. At all times in our lives we need to draw from tradition, from the wisdom that has been handed down to us. Whatever our circumstances and situations may be, the deep riches of the Carmelite tradition always have something to say to us.

May God bless you, keep you all safe and give you His peace and healing. Amen

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT TIMES – Fr Matt Blake OCD
Carmelite Church, Kensington

Second talk – Monday 16th November 2020, 10am
St John of the Cross – Imprisonment Poems

Audio transcript. Recording at <https://youtu.be/gWPQxStfJ98> (Talk begins after 10 minutes 38 seconds)

This is the second of four talks in this period of lockdown, when the normal things in life that sustain us, that we're used to, we haven't got, and for many people this is a very difficult challenging time at every level, including the spiritual level. So over these talks entitled *Prayer in difficult times*, I am drawing from various things in the Carmelite tradition that might be helpful at this time. Last week it was St Teresa, and I looked at some fundamentals from her teaching, the foundations of a life of prayer. It's a reminder to us of what is important, what is most fundamental and at times of difficulty that's where we go, we go back to the fundamentals, to the foundations, to those anchors that sustain us, that served us well in the past. Go there.

Today I want to turn to St John of the Cross and to look at a very specific experience in his life, his experience of his imprisonment, possibly, we can't say, but possibly the most difficult, the most challenging experience of his life. I'm not going to go into the background of why he was imprisoned. What I want to focus upon is – what sustained John through this? The source I am going to look at are the poems that he came out of prison with. We know quite a bit about John's experience of imprisonment and we know that it was a time of great suffering for him physically, psychologically, and spiritually – there's no doubt about that. John was tested, in fact he even described to a witness that God was testing him there. We might be inclined to think that, Oh well, God is there with him – he's praying all the time; therefore God will be giving him all kinds of spiritual support and consolation. The evidence is no. The evidence is that in the prison John went through a deep, dark spiritual trial as he was tried and tested at every dimension of his person.

So in this experience of imprisonment, this very difficult experience – what sustained John there? For spiritual support he had very little. He did have the Divine Office, the breviary, with him, so he was able to pray the psalms, but he had very little light, so how he could have read, we don't know, but most likely he prayed what he could remember by heart, because in the cell he was in there was little light to read by, maybe only for a short time each day. We know he did not have the Bible. He might for a time have had one or two other spiritual books. He may have had the *Imitation of Christ* at least for some of his time there, but not for all of it. What would have affected him very much would have been the loss of the Eucharist. He was not allowed to celebrate mass, or attend mass, or receive the Eucharist, so he had nine months totally deprived of the Eucharist and he had no contact with anybody else, so

he was deprived of a Christian community or any kind of human support. He was in isolation at every level.

In prison he composes, first of all in his head, these wonderful poems. And later in his imprisonment, when there's a jailer who's a little more favourable, John works up the courage and asks him for a pen and some paper, so that he could do a little writing and the jailer kindly gives him those. So when he escapes from prison, he comes out with these pages with four poems written on them. These poems give us an insight into the spiritual life of John over those months, because they're an insight into his prayer and what was going on deepest within him, how he saw the experience he was living and what sustained him through the experience.

We have four poems and the first one is based on the Psalm, *By the rivers of Babylon*. The very fact that he would use this famous psalm as the basis for one of his meditations, his poems, shows us a number of things. He had the Divine Office; therefore he would have had the daily psalms. People have been turning to the psalms down through the centuries at difficult times. The psalms are the prayer book of the Bible, but maybe they could be called the prayer book of people in difficult times. I have said to people a number of times throughout these lockdowns, *pray the psalms*. Each day in the readings given for mass there's a psalm there, and we often skip over the psalm, we just read it and get on with the gospel and the other readings. Just spend a little time each day with the psalm. There's a treasury of prayer there of human experience. It's getting us in touch with generation upon generation of people of prayer, their struggles and their difficulties, because every dimension of human life is found in the psalms. And with this particular psalm – you can see why John would identify with it – he's in exile, just as the people of Israel were in exile. His 'rivers of Babylon' would have been his cell in Toledo and of course the river is flowing around there – the Tagus – which he would have been able to hear from his cell.

The question at the heart of that psalm is how do we sing the song of the Lord on alien soil? How do we pray when we are no longer in our prayer place, our temple, our Jerusalem, when we no longer have our liturgies, our communities, our festivals and everything that we're familiar with? When everything that we thought – this is where God is, this is what God wants of us, this is how we live our spiritual lives – when all of that is taken away. We're on alien soil; our captors are asking us for a song. This is not how it should be. Can we sing, can we pray? How do we pray here? That's the question which no doubt went through people's minds – can I pray? And in John's case, how do I celebrate Christmas with nobody, on my own, no mass, no prayers, no songs? At Easter he would have been in prison, through Lent, Easter time, Pentecost, the Feast of *Corpus Christi* – all the feasts right up to the middle of August when he escaped prison. He was in prison from the beginning of Advent to the middle of August, so all those festivals of Christianity which were so important to John were now missing, but the prayer then goes on to putting one's trust in God. And it's interesting how John changes the end of the psalm – the psalm in the Bible has them banging the children of their enemies against a rock; now it's the rock of Jesus Christ and the poem ends with a strong reliance on Jesus Christ. That's where he ends it, not

with revenge, not with anger, not with hatred, but with love and with trust in Jesus Christ. So that's the first beautiful prayer, psalm that he comes out of prison with, telling us so much about his inner life, his exile and his discovery – yes, we can sing God's song, yes, I can pray here – and the foundation of that prayer is total trust in Jesus Christ, he's the rock we can rely on. When everything else is taken away we've got Jesus Christ.

Now for the second poem. This is again based on scripture and is based on the beginning of John's gospel *In the beginning was the Word*. This is a wonderful romance on the incarnation, as it is called. We can imagine John in his cell day after day after day and it is John's response to the most fundamental question of all. Who are we? Who is God? What's the purpose of life, of reality, of this world, of creation, of everything? It is John telling the story from the perspective of God. It begins at the beginning with Creation, with the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit, the life of God – then, creation, the creating of the heavens, of the earth and everything and the story up to the incarnation – God and humanity becoming one. It's John answering the most fundamental of all questions: Who are we? What is life all about? When you're in prison, you're confined like this and you believe you're going to die and John did, John believed this was really the end, although he would in the end escape. There was psychological warfare being waged against him, a whispering going on behind his door – *he's going to die*. John goes to *In the beginning was the Word*. John loved that passage of John's gospel, the Prologue. Witnesses tell us he knew it by heart and remember that in prison, he would have had to. These poems were written first and foremost for himself, to sustain himself. At this stage he would have had no idea that he would have the opportunity to share these poems with others or that years later he would have the opportunity to teach and to use these poems as the basis of his teaching and write commentaries on some of them, etc., he would have had no idea of that. So here he writes this beautiful poem on creation, the incarnation, all coming up to Mary saying *yes*, not just for herself, but on behalf of all of humanity, all of creation – the bride of Christ. The incarnation is the great marriage feast, the marriage of Jesus and his bride, which is the creation, the heavenly and earthly world. It ends with the child crying in the manger and humanity celebrating the joy of God – two things so alien to each other. In other words, God has taken on human pain and suffering. Humanity is given by God, God's joy. Humanity is invited in to God's celebration. What a lovely thought in the context of imprisonment. In that darkness of imprisonment, in the pain he is suffering, God takes this, he takes this pain and he gives me his joy, invites me into his celebration, this great marriage feast. It's a fulfilment of those other words in the gospels *come to me all who are laboured and overburdened, I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, I am gentle of heart*. John doesn't use these words here, but it's the same idea. God takes our burdens, our suffering – that's what happened in the manger. God takes our human pain, lifts it from us. God lifts this pain from John in his prison and gives him, invites him into, allows him to share in, the celebration – the joy of God. So that's where that poem brings us to.

The third poem – *La Fonte, The Fountain, The Spring* – the source of everything – a wonderful poem. What is it really about? What this tells us in the context of John's imprisonment is how John had to live there. He had to live by faith. This is a celebration of faith. We could describe it as an ode to faith; it exalts, lifts up – *look at how wonderful faith is* – and it is night. The refrain of the poem is over and over again, *it is night, although it is night*, night, night, all the time, darkness – faith for John is always night, it's darkness – but it enables us. It's because of this darkness – and John of course was physically living in darkness, there's very little physical light that gets into his little cell, he said; he was experiencing darkness at a physical level – but there's an interior spiritual darkness and there's a psychological darkness which he is struggling with. But now this darkness is enabling him to see more, it is taking him to that place of deep trust. He can know this darkness, this faith, enables him, enables all of us, to know this source, this fountain, this spring, this source of all life which is the Father, the Son and the Spirit. In the previous poem he told the great story of the Father, Son and Spirit and the Son becoming one with humanity in the incarnation. Now he is telling something even deeper, the wonder that we can *know* this, not just intellectually know it, but know it in our hearts, know it in faith, know it so strongly that we so can totally rely on it. For John this is fact – we can know God, completely know Him, know this source, go right to it, have this water, have this source of life.

And then the poem goes further, and again, in the context that John is in – I mentioned earlier that he does not have the Eucharist for these nine months and the Eucharist was so important for John. John really lived the Eucharist and we're told by those who knew him that one of the feasts John most liked in the entire year was the feast of *Corpus Christi*, the feast of the Eucharist, so to be deprived of the Eucharist was very painful for John. And the poem goes on *I can see all of this in the little bit of bread in my hand*, written at a time when he can't put the little bit of bread in his hand, when he can't receive the Eucharist.

This poem has sometimes been described as John's spiritual communion. When John could not receive communion himself, he enters ever more deeply into the mystery of that same Eucharist. Rather than being deprived of the Eucharist, the very deprivation of the Eucharist takes him ever more deeply into the mystery. Because he recognises and sees that because of faith, because of this wonderful gift that faith is, he is not actually deprived of the Eucharist, he is not deprived of this source of life that is in the little bit of bread that sits in his hand, he is not deprived of that. Faith shows him, faith is a proof to him that he is not denied it, that he has got it, that God is giving it to him, completely and totally. That's what faith is. And so in faith now he can see that though he is deprived of something he so loves, that is so important to sustain him, God is providing him, providing for him in another very mysterious way, but it is always in darkness, therefore John doesn't have any feeling of this. He's not living some kind of spiritual high here; he's in the deepest of his dark night. It is only faith can tell him that God is giving him everything he is deprived of.

Now for the fourth of the poems, the most important of them. He comes out with 31 stanzas of what is now his *Spiritual Canticle*. We now have 40 stanzas; nine more would be added in subsequent years. But he comes out with 31 of these stanzas, which in our modern editions are stanzas 1-32 except for stanza 11, which was put in at the end. The order was different, it was Canticle R, but we don't need to go into that. The canticle is John's most wonderful poem from every perspective. It's the poem that takes us on this whole spiritual journey. But it is written in prison – it is the fruit of his time in prison – he gave birth to the canticle in prison. The canticle begins – the very first words of it – *where are you hidden? – Donde estas escondido? – where are you hidden?* God is hidden. The one that he loves is hidden. His soul, the bride, is wounded. *You have wounded me* – the wound of love. So the canticle begins with that great desire for what has been lost, something that he has known that's now lost, that's the beginning of the canticle. We can see that at different levels we can understand it in different ways, but the opening tells us that something has been lost – he has been wounded by love, he has known love and now there's a wound left, there's a sense of loss – *like the stag, you have fled*. But in that loss there is energy, there is life. It's not a loss that weakens and impoverishes the person, though the person will be feeling weak and impoverished. The person is feeling this loss, but in reality there's an energy, there's a life there, there's an explosion of life at the beginning of the canticle. Out she goes to search. She's going to search. She's going to search for the one that loves her, to search for God, to search for the one she has known who has wounded her, who has wounded her with love. So we find John in this time of imprisonment, right in the midst of all that loss.

In all four poems we see there is loss, there is pain, but that very point of pain and loss is also a giving birth. It is a beginning; it is a beginning of something. There is a conviction that God doesn't fade, rather that God is discovered in a new way. There are new depths to be discovered. The very beginning of the Canticle sets the scene for us – out of that loss something is going to grow – a whole journey of spiritual growth and transformation.

I want to mention briefly another poem, not written in prison, but probably not very long after leaving the prison and that is the *Dark Night*. In the early stanzas John very definitely speaks about escape at night from prison. That journey of escape becomes the imagery for the poem. We can see there in the poem how the prison experience helped John's teaching to develop, that the real imprisonment is not physical, it's not at the hands of people. The real imprisonment is the imprisonment of sinfulness, the imprisonment of our own self-centredness, the imprisonment of what John's calls the *appetites*, the imprisonment of everything that is an obstacle to love, everything that compromises our freedom. Because ultimately what John's prison poems tell us is that the spirit, that deepest power and energy within the person, cannot be imprisoned. The spirit cannot be imprisoned, the spirit can give new life wherever one is. So John's escape from imprisonment, John's decision to escape, was a decision to enter into new life. Going out at night, being set free, going to meet the one that she knew loved her to a place that is also familiar. What it tells us of course – and it shows us the development of John's thinking in prison – is that he takes a decision and plans it and

escapes – that in the midst of all of this pain and suffering great things happened, but John is not staying there. When John has the opportunity, he escapes, but he doesn't escape back to where he was before. What the poem the *Dark Night* shows us is that he escapes forward to something new, to something much deeper. The work that began in prison was the beginning of a new life, a new way of being, a new way of relating.

So, if we take up these poems that John brought out of prison and the *Dark Night* which he wrote just afterwards and spend time with them, and let them speak to our situations – the Babylon that we're in, the darkness that we're in, the pain and the suffering that each of us encounters in one way or other – that same spirit is with us. What we see in John is that it was not enough to have these experiences, to come to know these at some level within himself; there was the need to express them, that's where the creativity comes from. These beautiful poems that were composed in his head, that he brought out of the prison with him, that he then needed to put in writing, they were precious because the escape was so risky. It was impossible to bring anything with him but he brought them with him, they were his soul, and from the beginning, he shared them with others. That need to create, that need to express at this time of difficulties that we're living in, John shows us the need that we have to be creative, to express ourselves, to find new ways of being creative and expressing ourselves – whatever that may be for each one of us and new ways of sharing, of reaching out, because that's what John did. In the prison cell he couldn't reach out to anybody, but the desire to reach out seems to have increased and increased, because the minute he came out of prison, John really wants to share this, really wants to make it known and it becomes the basis of his teaching. John didn't just survive imprisonment; John lived the experience of imprisonment. Imprisonment became for him a dying and a rising, a dying to an old way of life, a rising to a new way of life.

So let our prayer for each other today be that we may grow, that our time of imprisonment – whatever it may be, of darkness, of lockdown – may like John's, be a time of new life and that we may find ways of expressing that and of sharing that and supporting each other with it. May God bless you all and we pray for you all at this time, particularly bless and heal all who are sick and who are suffering.

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT TIMES – Fr Matt Blake OCD
Carmelite Church, Kensington

Third talk – Monday 23rd November 2020, 10am – St Edith Stein
The Prayer of Esther and the *Introduction* to “The Science of the Cross”

Audio transcript. Recording at <https://youtu.be/zg9OrczK28c> (Begins after 3 minutes, 45 seconds)

In this third of the series of four talks, I will be drawing from various aspects of the Carmelite tradition, asking the tradition to help us at this time. What can the Carmelite tradition say to us? What can this richness of teaching and experience that has been handed down to us, what can it say to us? How can it help us in these times, how can it give us pointers that we too, not only may survive and get through this, but more, how can we grow through this, how can this be transformed into a positive, life-giving experience for us? Something that of itself is negative – so much loss, so much that we cannot do, so much that we normally have that has been taken from us – and yet we see that these can be the very moments of growth, of purification, of change. This can be the time for going deeper and today I want to draw a few points from Edith Stein. I really want to take three things from her life, from her experience that she’s handed to us.

Before I can do that I need to give a certain context, I need to say a little bit about Edith Stein, about her life, both for the benefit of those listening who are not that familiar with Edith, but also and more importantly, what I want to say about her needs to be put into its context, because we all live in a context – one can’t just pluck teaching out as if it is divorced from its context. Edith Stein lived a very particular life at a very particular time in history. Her dates, 1891-1942, German, of Jewish background, she defines her entire life as a search for truth – this highly intelligent intellectual woman of study, philosopher, woman who dedicated her life to research and study. The moment of greatest change for her would be her conversion. She was about thirty years of age, by now a well-established doctor of philosophy, well known, who has for quite a few years considered herself an atheist. Her conversion comes about – there are many things leading up to it, we can go through her life and find so many seeds sown that this is inevitable, but in her view it’s not inevitable – something has to dramatically change and what dramatically changes her is her encounter with St Teresa of Avila. When a book of Teresa’s – her *Life* – falls into Edith’s hands, that changes her life forever. There’s something very important that we need to bear in mind – that meeting with Teresa through that book. It wasn’t just that Teresa gives her another piece of teaching or another understanding of something – of course she’s doing that. What Edith experiences with Teresa is a personal encounter, an identification with her – these two women understood each other. There might be more than three hundred years of history between them but a completely different cultural context – Edith is at this stage an atheist, Teresa, was writing from her

convent, she's an established teacher of prayer, and she's writing this book – dead for more than three hundred years – yet there is a real meeting here, much more than something just intellectual. About five years before this, Edith was writing her doctorate on *Empathy* – it's a very interesting subject to have chosen. Little did she think that an encounter – a real empathy – five years later would change her life forever.

Empathy is a very important word for our understanding of Edith and our understanding of her spiritual message and what I want to share with you this morning. This woman knew how to relate – from someone who had done her doctorate on empathy – dealing in how we as human beings relate to each other, she is now going to see how a relationship is going to so totally change her. So she is completely changed by this encounter with Teresa, having read her book that was much more than something purely intellectual. The empathy between these two women is such that Edith immediately wants what Teresa has, that is, to be a Christian, to be a Catholic, to be a Carmelite. From this day forwards it will be the direction of Edith's life, this is what all her energy, her life, her creativity are going to go into. Up to the day of her death in Auschwitz nothing is going to take her off this road. This is the context, the background, as I now come to make three points about Edith that perhaps might help us at these times.

The first point I want to make is from something that Edith wrote about personal prayer. By the time she's writing the article I'm going to quote from, Edith was a Carmelite nun, though not very long a Carmelite. She has been asked to write an article on the history and the spirit of Carmel – what does it mean to be a Carmelite? What is this Carmel thing all about? And Edith now is getting to the point of explaining the essential aspect of her life – the time spent in personal prayer. This time of personal prayer she calls *the supporting ground of our lives*. Here's what she says, *No human eye can see what God does in the soul during the hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace and all of life's other hours are our thanks for them.* That's a wonderful description and we can just hold that – and I speak at a time when we cannot meet for the Liturgies, we cannot meet for Mass – but we can meet for private prayer – and it's great to see so many people coming to this church every day for the hours when we have the church open for private prayer. Those times are precious – that is something Edith is emphasising – this is the foundation stone of our lives. Time alone with God – and nobody can take that from us – whether it be one minute or five minutes or two hours, as Edith is speaking about in the Carmelite life, whatever length of time it may be, or however often it may be – this is precious time, it's the foundation stone of our lives. But the way she describes it – it is not what *I* do during this time that matters – she said no human eye can see what *God* does in the soul during the hours of inner prayer, it is what *God* does in the soul and no human eye can see that. The person praying cannot see it – the many, many people around our world that are benefitting from this prayer cannot see it – but she said that what God is doing, is *grace upon grace*. Grace is that word we use for the pure gift of God. It's more than just a gift of God, grace is something of God himself that he gives to

us, something of God's gift of himself, something of his life, to be alone in quiet in prayer is to be receiving from God, pure grace, the gift of himself.

But this is not time that's isolated from the rest of one's life, rather – and this is the startling statement that she makes – *all of life's other hours are our thanks for them*. So the other twenty-two hours in the day are our thanks to God for what he does in these two hours, or whatever length of time it may be for us. What a way to see our day, to see our lives. She goes on to say a little bit more about this – *letting no opportunity go for serving others in love*. We let no opportunity go to serve others in love because of what God gives during the time of private prayer. The grace that God gives – that's the motive for charity – everything that one does, the smallest little thing, the most mundane everyday action, is a prayer, is a prayer of praise and thanks to God for what God does, secretly, hidden, during those precious times of private prayer.

So let's just remember that today. Whatever opportunity we have to spend a little time with the Lord, that is pure grace, pure gift of God. We cannot see the great good that God is doing in us during this time and that every other thing we do, every other minute that we live, be our thanksgiving to God for that gift. Let us lose no opportunity to love, let us do even the smallest little thing with great attention, with joy, with thanksgiving, because of the great thing that God is doing in us. It makes every detail of life valuable, precious, no matter how mundane, empty or futile it might seem to us. It is precious and valuable because of that.

The second point – I want to ask Edith a little more specifically – what about when things are really difficult? Of course Edith lived through the First World War and dies in the middle of the second. She has lived through some very, very difficult times in her life. Towards the end of 1938, when war is now inevitable and the persecution of Jews is inevitable, Edith turns to a person in Scripture, to Queen Esther. What we see now, here in this, is a wonderful example of how one prays the scripture. Edith identifies personally with Esther. Let us look at a letter of Edith's, written at the end of October 1938 – remember the context – in about a week or so there will be the *Kristallnacht*, when Jewish businesses were attacked – in two months from now Edith will have to leave Germany to go to Holland for her own safety. In the context of this letter she is writing about her family and the difficulties they are faced with at the moment – how are they going to emigrate? What are they going to do? What future have they? and she expresses her great worry for them and what can she do? *And – she said – I also trust in the Lord's having accepted my life for all of them. I keep having to think of Queen Esther, who was taken from among her people, precisely that she might represent them before the king. I'm a very poor and powerless little Esther, but the King who chose me is infinitely great and merciful. That is such a great comfort.*

You remember the story of Queen Esther, a beautiful biblical book – it's fiction, it's a parable, it's not historical. It describes this queen who is married to a foreign king and in this great kingdom there's now a decree to persecute the Jews. The whole

future of the Jews is at stake and Esther is called upon to do something, to help, to intercede with her husband on behalf of her people. Edith identifies with this queen, who finds herself separated from her people, but in a position in which she can really help them through her prayers. That's how Edith deals with her own self with the situation she finds herself in. It is a great suffering for her to be cut off from her people at this time of great danger, of suffering, of threat. But she comes to see it, through Esther, as God's providence. God has deliberately chosen her and there are particular aspects in which she identifies with Esther, one of them being that Esther had this sense of being chosen by God specifically for this. Edith comes to see herself as chosen by God specifically for this. So she is chosen by God for this purpose, this is God's choice. The position she finds herself in is God's choice. In addition to this, just like Queen Esther, she experiences and lives personally the vulnerability of her people, she personally takes on their pain and vulnerability. She's a *very poor and powerless* Queen Esther – however her words have power – she recognises the power of her words. Esther's words of prayer changed the king, so also she recognises that her words can change the King, her prayer can do real good.

Let's read from the prayer of Esther, because I think it is worth reading this prayer and it can be a prayer for all of us at this time. *Queen Esther took refuge with the Lord in the mortal peril that had overtaken her. She besought the Lord God of Israel in these words: "My Lord, our king, the holy one, come to my help for I am alone and have no helper but you and am about to take my life in my hands. I have been taught from my earliest years in the bosom of my family that you, Lord, chose Israel out of all the nations and our ancestors out of all the people of old times to be your heritage for ever and that you have treated them as you promised. Remember Lord, reveal yourself in the time of our distress. As for me, give me courage, king of Gods and Master of all power, put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion, change his feelings into hatred for our enemies, that the latter and all like them may be brought to their end. As for ourselves, save us by your hand and come to my help, for I am alone and have no one but You, Lord.*

We can just imagine all the times that Edith prayed that prayer in the last years of her life. Over and over again she prayed it, not only did she pray it, she made it her own, she made it her personal prayer. This is who she is; this is who she identifies herself with. So when we see ourselves in situations of difficulty, pick up Esther, take up that prayer, identify with that woman of prayer and like Edith, believe in the power of prayer. Both Esther and Edith felt their isolation, their weakness and their vulnerability, but they trusted in the power of prayer. There was no one else but the Lord they could trust in and that trust in the Lord proved so powerful.

The third point I want to make is from the last months of Edith's life. Edith has been reading St John of the Cross for quite a few years and knew his writings very well. Towards the end of her life she's asked to do a project. It's the fourth centenary – 1942 – of the birth of St John of the Cross, born in 1542. The Carmelites in Germany asked Edith, as the greatest expert on St John of the Cross, if she would write a short summary of John's writings for them, so she produced *The Science of the Cross*. The

book is much more than a just little course on the teaching St John of the Cross. It has been described as Edith's final retreat – she's writing this right up to the time when she's arrested and taken to Auschwitz. It is something that sustained her over those last months when her death was becoming more and more inevitable and the possibility of any kind of safety or rescue was becoming more and more remote. She picks up the writings of St John of the Cross and throws herself into them.

What I want to look at is the approach that Edith takes. I will look at a little bit from her Preface and her Introduction where she tells us what this approach is. She opens this short preface: *In the following pages an attempt will be made to grasp John of the Cross in the unity of his being as it expresses itself in his life and in his works, from a viewpoint that will enable us to see this unity.* What's she getting at? Here is somebody who understands John of the Cross – she could have written a book explaining him, she knew him so well, but that's not what she's going to do. This is not about intellectually explaining to us the teachings of St John of the Cross. She's going to do something else; she wants to ask the question – what's beneath this teaching? She's going to look at his life and at his teaching to find that *unity of his being*. She's going to look more deeply and there's a great lesson there. We turn to John of the Cross at a time like this – last week I took a few things from John of the Cross – what might he be saying to us now? She goes much further than that, she looks not only at what John is telling us, but looks more deeply into it. Where is what he's telling us coming from? Who really is he? What is his life and work all about? All the problems and challenges she is facing are an inspiration for her to look more deeply. She's going to ask the deep questions, but she's doing something else and this is even more fascinating.

In the next paragraph she's going to combine this – this looking at John's being, the unity of his being, and interpreting it – by what the author – that's herself – believes she has gained from a lifelong effort to grasp the laws of spiritual being as life. So she's going to search for and discover the unity of John's being – his very inner core – and she's going dialogue with this, looking at who she is herself and her own lifelong effort to grasp these truths – what she calls the laws of spiritual being and life. So she's bringing her own experience, her own learning, her own wisdom into this.

So note now the approach she's taking to John of the Cross' writings at this time of great danger and impending death and crisis that she is facing and those for whom she's writing are facing. She's writing for a Carmelite order on the verge of annihilation – she knows that. It's not enough just to turn to John of the Cross at some superficial level or go back over the teaching that we already know – that's not enough. We've got to dive much more deeply into it, we've got to go right to the very core of who he is and what's he is about and what moved him and motivated him – but that's not enough. We've got to look deeply into ourselves, what has life taught me? What have I learned over these years? What's the fruit of my search for the answers to the very same questions that we're asking John of the Cross? So this is going to be a dialogue between John of the Cross' teaching and her own experience

and she said each person must do that. We need to bring our own experience, what have we learned. What wisdom have we acquired over the years?

What's going to be the unity of John's being? I'll finish with this point. It's what Edith spells out in the introduction and the entire work is going to be about that – it is what she calls *the science of the Cross* – that's in essence who John of the Cross is. That's what his life and teaching is – *the science of the Cross*. She said that science is not some theory or some structure that something is built on. She defines what it is – *we're dealing with a well-recognised truth, a living, real and effective truth*. It's living, it's real and it's effective and Edith knows this from her own experience. This is not some theory, not some set of teachings, but it has a power. She goes further – *this truth is living, real and effective truth, it is buried in the soul, she said, like a seed that takes root and grows there*. So this science of the Cross, this unity of John's being, this wisdom that she's searching for, is not out there somewhere, but is hidden deep in each one of us, within herself and in all those who she's writing for and it must take root and grow in the depths of a person's being. Then she goes on – *making a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits and by shining outwardly it is recognised in its very doing and omitting*. So this science of the Cross, this wisdom, when it is allowed to grow within, deeply impresses itself upon the person and determines every action, what the person does and omits and the truth shines outwardly, she said, in what the person does and does not do. Who is this person? How do they live? When Edith looks at John of the Cross, this is what she sees shining out, this science of the Cross, and she looks around at the world around her, those whom she's writing for, Christians everywhere and she asks the question *why is this not happening?*

First of all, she said, where it is happening – what happens? The person is still able to feel deep genuine joy and deep genuine faith, so the person is alive, there is no rigidity – this person is alive – to stay alive, to be alive. When this is not happening, there is a numbness of feeling which is often now present in religious circles. She said many believers are depressed, and there is a lesson here for all of us. I think nowadays many believers are depressed – not being able to come to church, being cut off from so much of life depresses them. Here is Edith's answer to that – they're depressed because the facts of salvation history do not at all – or no longer – impress them as they ought and they lack the strong influence in their lives that they should exert. The facts of salvation history – the scriptures, the life of Jesus Christ, particularly the Cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the truths of our faith – do not impress upon them as they should, or they no longer do, and they do not exert the influence over their lives that they should. That's the lesson, that's the key point that Edith wants to make here. In other words, that science of the Cross, that wisdom, is not what decides what the person does and omits, how the person lives, what attitudes the person has. The facts of salvation history, the fact that Jesus lived and died for us the fact that he is with us, etc. – when these no longer make an impact, the person becomes sterile, numb, rigid, they lack the ability to feel, they lack that essence of life. That's Edith's lesson in these months in the midst of the Second World War. With great danger and oppression and questions and everything else – go back to the

Scriptures, go back to prayer, let the message of Jesus Christ really impact upon your life.

These are a few points from Edith Stein, things that helped her, sustained her, strengthened her at times of greatest difficulty. She shows us the value of our times at prayer, even when we think those times at prayer are empty and meaningless, when we struggle to spend the time in prayer, it's valuable – just do it. Go back to the Scriptures, identify with figures in Scripture – she gave us the example of Esther. Read John of the Cross and the tradition again, but more deeply, search out its depths and let us really question and challenge who we are and how we're living and what kind of people we are in these times of challenge and difficulty.

Let us pray for each other and God bless you.

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT TIMES – Fr Matt Blake OCD
Carmelite Church, Kensington

Fourth talk – Monday 30th November 2020, 10am
Fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ

Audio transcript. Recording at <https://youtu.be/NUbxFET0x7o> (Begins after 11 minutes, 28 seconds)

This is the fourth and final one of these talks on prayer, and prayer during this time of lockdown. What can we draw from the Carmelite tradition that might help us during this particularly difficult and challenging time in our lives, as individuals, as humanity, as a community, as people, as human race?

In my first talk, I drew from St Teresa of Avila and looked at some of the fundamentals about her life of prayer in her writings. In the second talk, I looked how St John of the Cross lived through a particularly difficult experience in his life – being in prison -and what we can learn about his prayer in prison from the poetry that he came out of prison with. These poems give us an insight into something of his interior life during those very difficult nine months. Then, in my last talk, I looked at Edith Stein and drew a few reflections from her – what prayer was for Edith Stein – her identification with the Bible, and particularly with Queen Esther. And then, her walking with, journeying with the writings of John of the Cross in the last months of her life which resulted in her great book *The Science of the Cross*. So these were various glimpses of the wisdom of the Carmelite tradition that might help us.

Today what I'd like to do is ask a question – if we could have Teresa here and John here with us – and if we could pose to them a question *what's the most important thing you'd advise us to do now?* My guess is this – because we find this repeated again and again in the writings of both these great Carmelite figures – and that is, *to fix one's eyes upon Jesus Christ*. I think that's what they would say to us. When things are really difficult, when we are struggling, when we're at our lowest, when there's darkness all around us, when there is threat, insecurity and uncertainty – everything we're living through at present – they would say *don't look at yourselves, or the situation you're in – fix your eyes on Jesus Christ*. Or, as Teresa tells us, in her Interior Castle – *what can we expect in life, what greater gift could God give us but a life like the life He gave his son, Jesus Christ?* Over and over again she tells us, when we're afflicted or worried or in difficulties – *go and sit with Jesus, go and sit with him in Gospel passages and Gospel situations. Just be there with him and keep him company because he is always keeping us company*. St John of the Cross tells us that, among many other things, Jesus is this vast mine that we can always turn to and draw out more wisdom. There are always more new recesses and treasures to be found, he tells us, in Jesus.

So let us this morning mine a little of the wisdom of Jesus and I want to turn to one particular passage of John's gospel, and that is the Last Supper. At the last supper, Jesus knows that all his enemies are lined up against him. He knows the next twenty-four hours are going to be hours of suffering and death. He is in the most difficult situation of his life – facing the greatest crisis. What does he do? Knowing also that his disciples are going to be very much challenged by this, that this is going to be very difficult for them, what advice does he give them? John's gospel gives us an extensive discourse that Jesus gives at the last supper. I want to pick certain things from it that might be pointers for us at this time that might help us in our particular situation – whether our difficulties are the COVID19 pandemic or our difficulties are so many other problems that we face in life – everybody listening to this talk is going to have their own particular issues and difficulties.

So, Jesus at the last supper – it begins with Jesus washing his disciples' feet. This is definitely a moment to *fix one's eyes upon Jesus* – that's where it comes in John's gospel, that's its purpose – *look at what he is doing!* It's written with astonishment – *what is he doing, what does this mean?* This gesture is there to wake us up – what's happening? And we're told in very simple words what is happening. Jesus loves his own in the world, we are told, and now he wants to show how perfect this love is. He wants to demonstrate, to communicate the perfection of love that he has reached.

What we see in the teaching of both Teresa and John is that when they come to speak about the most advanced, developed or more mature dimension of prayer, they speak about love. They speak about these people who are living holy lives, mature spiritual lives, that they have a very developed, advanced love of neighbour. Love for their enemies, love for those who persecute them. They respond to every situation with love. To quote the famous words of John of the Cross – *where there is no love, put love, and you will draw love out.* So wherever one finds oneself, just put love there, just respond with love. Jesus of course, as we all know, is fully human in every way, therefore he lives a human spiritual life and what we're being shown here in Jesus is that fullness of spiritual maturity, of human spiritual maturity, this very developed, advanced love of neighbour. He wants to show us how perfect this love is. *I have given you an example that you may copy* – the example of course is everything that he has lived in his life. We can only copy it if we observe it, if we fix our eyes on it, if we spend a long time meditating upon it. It has to be absorbed into us. So he has given us this example.

Jesus now goes on to give his long speech. The first thing I want to pick from it is almost the first thing he says in it – *love one another. A new commandment I give you, love one another.* In what sense is it a new commandment? It's not new at all, yet it is always new because now it is coming from this profound experience of the love of Jesus. *Love one another because I have loved you first. Love one another because you have seen how perfect my love is.* And this in the context of Jesus' impending death, in the context of betrayal – Judas has just walked out to betray him – just love. That's how you respond to the situation – love one another, just keep doing that – that is the example I give you and the message I pass on to you.

The next thing I will pick out – *trust – trust in God*, he said *and trust in me*. That can be challenging when things are difficult – when there is darkness, worry and pain, when things do not go as we expect them to go, when we are facing great insecurities and uncertainties. Trust – trust in God, trust in Jesus – *I won't let you down*. To trust, of course, is to live by faith and St John of the Cross is all the time telling us this. The whole Christian life, the whole way to God, is a journey of faith, a dark night, he said. But it is this very darkness, this very faith that enables us to relate to God, that enables us to enter into such an intimate relationship with God. He's always there, he's always with us, and the deeper the darkness the more that he is present, because the deeper the darkness, the brighter his light is shining. So it is in these very times of difficulty that we trust more than ever, and that is what Jesus is going to demonstrate on his way to the cross – the extent of his trust in the Lord. So trust, there is no reason not to trust, and at times like this, trust can be tested, but trust is what we most rely upon.

Next I want to pick out is one of the most profound statements of the whole gospel – *I am the way, the Truth and the life*. What a statement. *I am* is God revealing himself to Moses, that most sacred of words, that most sacred of moments, when Moses comes face to face with God. At times like this we are coming face to face with God, with the truth of God, the reality of God, the presence of God. He is simply here in front of us. Just remember that when things are really difficult. *I am*. The mystery of God is right here. We are always face to face with the mystery God, wherever we are. Whatever life situation we may be in, we are always face to face with the mystery of God. Here, he shows us three dimensions of it – a way, a journey, a road, a need, reminding us very much of Teresa's way – *Camino* – a way of perfection. Prayer is a way, the following of Jesus is a journey – he *is* the journey – we don't have to go somewhere and find him at the end of it. He is the very road, the very journey – he walks beside us, with us, it's his journey, it's his road, he is the way. The truth, that's what we come face to face with. This whole speech of Jesus, an episode of the last supper, is humanity coming face to face with truth and of course John's gospel will put it so well. The following day when Jesus confronts Pilate – truth – their discussion about truth – *what is truth?* Pilate asks. The truth of course is Jesus himself, standing there.

We come face to face with truth whenever we pray, whenever we are face to face with God, the truth about ourselves, the truth about God. And as we know from both Teresa and John of the Cross, the spiritual journey, the spiritual road is always going to be a journey of self-knowledge. The more we learn about ourselves, the more we face the truth of who we are, the more we come to know God. We come to know ourselves that we may know God. In deepening our knowledge of self, we deepen our knowledge of God. Truth – *the truth will set you free* – Jesus said, *you will know the truth*. These are his words of reassurance.

And thirdly – *life*. He *is* the life – life has come into the world, we are told in John's gospel. Jesus is on his way to death, but he is actually the life, he is life itself. Life itself is on his way to death. He's the life, he's the light of the world, he has come that

we may have life and have it to the full. Jesus approaching his own death is speaking the language of life, he is bearing witness to life, he is proclaiming life, he is living, he's not dying. So it's a very powerful statement, and for us – even for those of us who are very ill, those of us who are facing death – it is really life that we are facing, it is life that is with us, speaking to us and beckoning us. God is a God of the living, Jesus tells us, not of the dead. Jesus always speaks a language of life, because he is life. So *fix your eyes upon Jesus*.

Then he says something else to his disciples that is very important to us as we are reflecting on prayer and what prayer might be. He gives them a new form of prayer – *Pray in my name. Whatever you ask for in my name I will do*. He's not giving them some extra power, or some special powers. It's another way of saying, trust me, but it's also saying I am entering into a new relationship with you through all that is happening here. You can now speak to me in a new way, hear me in a new way, I communicate with you in a new way. There's something Teresa tells us in the Seventh Dwelling Place in the Interior Castle – *the Lord now communicates in a new way*. He has a way of communicating with us that is so beyond our understanding. John of the Cross tells us that in the deepest of the dark night that God can make himself known in the most profound darkness. He has a way of giving us his knowledge, assuring us of his presence, of his love, in a way that is so totally beyond our understanding. So pray in his name, ask in his name. In other words, we are asking, we are voicing, the very prayer of Jesus himself. The very prayer of Jesus is our prayer, our prayer is his prayer.

Then, *keep my commandments*, he said. What does he mean by that? Again, it is something that both Teresa and John of the Cross speak about extensively, as being what real human holiness is about, that the will of God and my will are one, that the will be united with God. What God wants I want, what I want is what God wants. That is what freedom means, that is what maturity means, that is what it means to live in truth, that's what it is to love with God's love, to be united in love. Keeping his commandments is not about following instructions, it is about being of one mind and heart, being of one spirit with Jesus, thinking as Jesus thinks, seeing things as he sees, acting as he would act, loving as he loves. We are following his example here, because he is setting an example for us. When times are difficult, this is how we think, how we see things. So, *keep my commandments*.

I'm not leaving you alone, he said, *I'm sending you the Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete* – various words that he uses for the Third Person of the Trinity – a new way of relating with God. Whenever we face difficulties in life, the Spirit has a way of coming into our lives. The Spirit has a way of revealing the presence and truth of God to us in a new way. Jesus reassures us that we've got the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit is with us. In the *Living Flame*, John shows us that the Holy Spirit is the Living Flame, and this is how the Holy Spirit works in a person's life. The Holy Spirit is the light of our lives, it is the fire that's burning within us, the Spirit is the fire that changes and transforms us, the Spirit is the fire that fills us with this light that we can give out

light, it's the Spirit that enables us to do real good. So that flame, that Spirit, is with us. That's what he assures us. We're never alone because we have got the Spirit.

Then Jesus tells us – *my peace I give you, my own peace*, he said, *a peace that the world cannot give*. Let us pause for a moment with this word *peace* and try to understand what it really means. So many people and so many of the saints – Teresa and John of the Cross tell us in different ways – go through great difficulties, yet somehow, there's a peace that is always there within. Peace may not even be the right word, but the difficulty is we've gone beyond the boundaries of words here. It's a very different kind of peace Jesus is telling us. It's the peace that enables Jesus to wash his disciples' feet, it's the peace that enables Jesus to speak to them in such loving terms and to pay absolutely no attention to his own crisis and his own difficulties. It's a peace that enables him to reach out in love, because, he said, it is a peace that the world out there cannot take away. Which also means, of course, that the world out there cannot give this peace either, or take it, or compromise it, or disturb it, or in any way affect it. The world out there can be in chaos and can be threatening us, our lives can be in danger – whatever – but deep within there is something that cannot be touched, that cannot be disturbed. Only he can give us this peace, we can't get it ourselves, we can't acquire it ourselves, we cannot make it happen, we can't increase it or decrease it. It is his gift, this peace, the peace that is within and we've all got it, it's there within us. It is that something that enables us to get through the day, no matter how difficult it is, it's that reassurance that it's OK, it's all right, we'll get through this. So it's a peace that nothing can take away and no one other than Jesus Christ can give it to us.

But St John of the Cross tells us that there comes a time – a very late stage in the journey of spiritual growth and transformation – when God has to, even for a short time take away this peace, because, he says, we can even become attached to the peace. But it's only for a while, and it's only for those at a very advanced stage. They have a sense that the peace is taken away – it is only, he said, so that they will trust even more deeply. Teresa tells us something very similar in the sixth Dwelling Place of the Interior Castle, that there are moments when God withdraws this, but it is only for the person's good. But for the most part that peace is always there, it's a gift, even the withdrawing of it shows us that it is gift, a gift that only he can give. So he tells his disciples, I'm giving you my peace, I'm giving you what enables me to do what I'm doing, I'm giving you what enables me to say *yes* to the father and to go to the Cross as I am, I'm giving that to you. That's what the peace is.

Then we get a lovely image of the vine and the branches. *Cut off from me you can do nothing*. So the one most important thing – do not get cut off from him – cut off from him we can do nothing. But of course, being a branch of this vine, there are great things that can be done. So this image of the vine, the wine, the grace of God are the images in scripture of God's goodness, of God's generosity.

Just one other thing that I'll pick out, and that is that Jesus speaks extensively about the world and the world as being – at least at first reading – the enemy. The world

can't give you this, I'm going to show you how the world is wrong, the spirit will show you the truth about the world – . But what he's really doing is showing us that our relationship with the world is being changed. There will be a new relationship with the world, because the world is God's creation, it is not the enemy but it is what shows us the beauty and the greatness of God. So the world that appears now to be enemy, is not enemy, but is being transformed, because we are being transformed and when we are transformed, the world is transformed. Jesus is dying and rising to save the world, not just us, but everything. So something truly great is taking place here.

Finally – pick up Chapter 17 of John's Gospel and read it, pray it and sit with it, over and over again. St John of the Cross did this. We are told by people who knew John that it's one of the passages of the gospels that he knew by heart, that he sang it, he recited it over and over again on his long journeys. He lived with it and he shows us in the *Spiritual Canticle* that the entire spiritual life is a fulfilment of what Jesus prayed for in that prayer. Let that be our prayer. Let's just take one phrase from it, one thing that Jesus asks for in that prayer, and that is that we be *consecrated in truth*. We've already heard a little earlier that Jesus is the truth. But what does it mean to be consecrated in truth? Whenever something is consecrated, it is set apart, it is given a very specific role or function, it is taken out from everything else. To be *consecrated in truth* is in a sense to be put into the truth, to become truth, to be protected in truth, to live truth. Jesus himself of course, is consecrated in truth, that's what he bears witness to.

So just take this prayer, Chapter 17 of John's Gospel, and like John of the Cross let us make it our own prayer, because by making it our own prayer, we are making Jesus' prayer our own. We are entering into the relationship between Jesus and the Father, because in this prayer Jesus doesn't say to us – this is how you pray, or, say these words – *he* simply opens the door to us, lets us into the relationship between him and the Father.

At the beginning of the last supper, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, inviting us to observe him – *look at what he is doing!* – now at the end of the discourse he is inviting us into his prayer, the relationship between him and the Father and again inviting us to observe – to *fix our eyes upon Jesus*. This is his prayer, this is his relationship with the Father, this is what he wants for us, this is where he wants us to be, this is the love that he wants there to be within us. So let us *fix our eyes upon Jesus*. That is the advice – we find that phrase in both Teresa and John over and over again – not only do we find them saying this, we find them showing us that this is how they lived, this is what they did, and did so more and more deeply when times were difficult. And the difficult times drew them ever more deeply into the mystery of Jesus Christ and into the mystery of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

So let us at this time trust in Jesus Christ. Let us trust that like Teresa, he walks beside us all the time, that the real life that we live is the life that he lives in us.

