

The Spiritual Canticle of St. John of the Cross.

The Spiritual Canticle inspired by the Canticle of Canticles or Song of Songs is a dialogue of the loving exchange between Christ and the individual human person. The Song of Songs is used by St. John of the Cross in the great mystical tradition of the Church as exemplified by such writers as St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Bernard and also, of course, by St. Teresa herself in her short work called the "Meditations on the Song of Songs".

We will say nothing about the marvellous heights of lyrical poetry to which John attains in this poem; his art in this respect is well-known.

In his prose commentary on the poem St. John tries to give expression to the ineffable, although he does not think that such an effort can be in any way successful. The poem then tries to express his love for Christ through the medium of highly symbolic language. This is the only way he knows that can hint at the glories of communion with Christ in prayer. The poem flows from 'abundant mystical understanding'¹, in other words from an overflowing love for God. This love was tempered and forged in the darkness of his Toledan dungeon during his nine long months of imprisonment there.

The introduction to the commentary points to some basic tenets of Christian faith and spirituality - the brevity of life, the need for vigilance, the emptiness and vanity of so much of secular pursuits. And so there is engendered in the soul a resolution to amend its ways and to seek God in greater sincerity.

We are immediately introduced to the 'Deus Absconditus', the God who hides Himself from His creature. John's point is that God is necessarily hidden from us, we cannot reach Him in our human condition. Consequently we should be suspicious of any apparently deep communication that God makes of Himself. Neither should we be unduly upset by the absence of any such 'special awareness' and the consequent feeling of darkness. He alludes to the beginning of the Fourth Gospel where we are told that the Word is hidden in the bosom of the Father (John Ch. 1;18) That is where God is to

be sought. Here John is very close to the Evangelist who maintains that God the Father is known in the Son, can only be known through the revelation of the Son. "The only-begotten son, He has made Him known" . St. John of the Cross goes on to the divine indwelling in the soul, quoting St. Paul, "You are the temple of God" (2 Cor. Ch. 6:16) He writes, "It gives special happiness to understand that God is never absent". He was probably thinking of St. Teresa who talks so much about this presence of God within..

If one wonders why we are not more aware of the presence of the Lord within us John is quick to reply, "The reason is that He remains concealed and you do not conceal yourself in order to encounter and experience Him". Again John counsels us as he did in the 'Ascent' to seek God in faith and love . These are the blind man's, guides. Also as in the 'Ascent' he insists that we concentrate more on what we don't understand about God than on what we do understand. John is being true to the mystical tradition here such as we find it in Pseudo-Dionysius and the Greek Fathers with which he was familiar.

St. John is above all rigidly sincere. We cannot expect to get everything we want from God unless we belong to Him. For Him the litmus test is this - is the whole orientation of our heart towards God or not? An additional form of the test is posed by John, " Is the person content with nothing less than God?" . So straightaway we are given an appropriate warning to prick our consciences. John goes on to talk about the presence/absence theme that figures so largely in spiritual and mystical literature. We are dealing as we know, with an exchange of love a love that has its seasons, its winter and summer, its high noon and dark night. That famous sonnet speaking of human love has felt this too.

"How like a winter hath my absence been from thee
What old December's bareness everywhere."

The Lord often visits the soul but then as quickly withdraws leaving it desolate. Remember the "Imitation" - "When Jesus is with us, all is well and nothing is hard, but when Jesus is absent, everything is difficult." This whole first chapter of the Canticle is a cry of the heart, a cry in the desert for God. He is seen as the only object of one's searching, the only love that satisfies. St. John is obviously talking here about a very exalted condition of spiritual progress. The soul has been smitten by God's love and is incurable. She is like the starving man peering through the doors of a banqueting hall where the guests are dining lavishly,. She has come to the gates of the palace but is not allowed to set foot inside.

You have often heard the phrase 'love will find a way'. Love is ingenious at finding ways and means of communication when such is barred or prohibited. To quote the bard again when the lover overcame all obstacles,

"With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
For stony limits cannot keep love out" .

St. John is almost as explicit, "This is the trait of a lover. When she herself cannot converse with her loved one, she does so through the best means possible". (2:1) And so he turns to intermediaries to convey to God the soul's love and needs. It's just a way of saying as we do when writing to a friend, we might mention other people at the end, 'give them my love'. It's indirect but it's the best that can be done in the circumstances. This absence is felt in a threefold way and so John refers us to his customary theme that the mind knows God by faith, the will possesses him by love, and the memory rests in him through hope, the third theological virtue. This need for God is merely indicated by the soul just as Our Lady did at the marriage feast at Cana. This is the best way to pray, for God knows our needs and if we love Him He will grant our requests.

St. John realises of course that it's not enough just to pine for God - we must do something about it. So what he suggests now is eminently practical. Good works are needed. There is a hint of St. James here. Yes, we must seek God in real earnest. "Seek the Lord while he is still to be found," you remember that Lenten text in Isaiah. The individual must apply himself to the practice of virtue and engage in the spiritual exercises of both the active and the contemplative life.

We see here that St. John insists that we be faithful to our meditation and the prayer of the Church and also in the apostolate of service to others. We recall the woman in the gospel who searches her house and sweeps diligently until she finds the lost coin. This is simply the 'cost of discipleship' that we must fully accept. We are really told to get moving, it is not a time for rest. We remember how St. Teresa in the 'Way of Perfection' tells us to work hard at cultivating the virtues, especially charity, detachment and humility. John is only repeating here the advice he gave us in the 'Ascent', - to deny ourselves as Jesus has asked us to do. This is what following Christ means, John is being true to his religious title 'of the cross'¹. Our inveterate enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil will conspire to try and divert us from the true course. Great determination will be needed to embark upon and stay the course. St. Teresa, writing in her 'Life' about setting out on the ways of prayer

underlines the need for courage.

"I say courage because there are so many things that the devil puts in the minds of beginners to prevent them in fact from setting out on this path."

The secret in resisting the enemy lies in prayer and the cross of Jesus. John quotes St. Paul's words to the Ephesians. "Put on the armour of God that you may be able to resist the wiles of the devil ". This quotation is also found, of course, in the Rule of St. Albert for us Carmelites.

We can take the next two stanzas of the poem together, i.e. 4 and 5. They are a lovely meditation on God's creative activity. Here we have examples of the lyrical nature-poetry of St. John. Having looked inwards on our own selves we now turn to view God's handiwork in the beauties of creation. This exercise should lead us onwards to contemplate the creator of it all. This is St. John's natural theology, taking his cue from St. Paul to the Romans: "Ever since the world was created by God, His everlasting power and deity - however invisible - have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made" (Rom. 1:20) God has created all things by His word of wisdom, as Scripture, especially St. John the Evangelist describes for us, "In Him all things were made".

"Through these woods and groves he passed, clothing every place with loveliest reflection of his face."

And John comments, "All of these He did through His own Wisdom, the Word, by whom He created them."

This theme has been developed by early Christian theology, and John would seem to be indebted to St. Augustine. In his Confessions, referring to his last conversation with his mother St. Monica at Ostia on the Tiber, Augustine wrote, "And so we came to our own souls and went beyond them to come at last to that region of richness unending where you feed Israel forever with the food of truth: and there life is that wisdom by which all things are made."

In our own day Teilhard de Chardin is something of a latter-day St. John who can sing his Hymn of the Universe to Christ who is the luminous point of the world. The poetic heart of John glories in the woods and thickets, the groves and meadows decked with flowers and all displaying a thousand graces. We might compare favourably with this, these lines from the well loved English poet Keats,

"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon these boughs,
But in embalmed darkness guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows,
The grass, the thicket and the fruit-tree wild."

Having contemplated the glories of Creation, St. John now takes up his theme again. Now he would ask us to go beyond and transcend these works of creation, beautiful though they be, and reach out to the author of such splendours. This is exactly what St. Augustine did also. There follows a very daring prayer to the Lord begging Him for His very presence and the vision of Himself. In utter abandon John cries out to God, "Now wholly surrender Yourself". He is not satisfied with the mere tokens of God's presence in creation in spite of their attractiveness. He accuses the Lord of only "having him on". "You have communicated by means of others" he says, "as if joking with me". Is'nt he really saying here that the Lord is the ultimate tease. Apart from anything else these exchanges show us the intimacy of John's dialogue with the Lord.

There is however an additional and higher source or stimulus for knowing God accorded us by our fellow human beings. With these John would also include the angelic natures. For St. John then, God reveals himself to us in various ways and in different degrees of intensity. Creation reveals the face of God to us and spurs us on to love Him. But John has obviously a deep appreciation of how God uses other people to instruct and teach us about Himself. That is why he would want us to remember how grateful we should be to our parents and our first teachers in the ways of God as well as to our current teachers, the Pope, bishops, priests and theologians. We're reminded here of St. Paul's words, "Faith comes through hearing". The knowledge of God imparted to him by others strikes him keenly, especially what he learned about his favourite truth, the Incarnation of the Word. This awareness of God sparks off something deeper which he calls "A touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity" which is inexpressible and reduces one to stammering like a child. This is the famous "un no se que balbuciendo".

Here again we have the elusive, indefinable, unknowing aspect of God's love. We understand clearly that everything yet remains to be understood.

It is difficult for us in our sinful and imperfect state to follow the ardour of a St. Teresa or a St. John in the intensity of their faith and love. At this point John expresses his keen desire for the dissolution of natural life in order to taste eternal life. He is merely echoing St. Paul to the Philippians. "I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ which is much better". And yet aren't ordinary Christians meant to meditate on these words too when they hear them read at Sunday Mass, so they are not just, for Carmelite Sisters. St. Teresa also talks a lot on this theme. For instance in Mansion 5 she says, "From the very unhappiness caused by worldly things arises the ever so painful desire to leave the world." The refrain of one of her poems runs, "I die because I do not die" . St. John's language is extremely strong and bold. These touches of God, he says, "so impregnate the soul with the knowledge and love of God that she can truthfully say she conceives" .

Here we are dealing with the pain and anxiety of unfulfilled longings. This is of course also part of the purification process with which the Ascent and the Dark Night are concerned.

We are now coming to the end of this first section of the Canticle which records the longings of the soul for God's love - Psalm 62 - expresses very well this kind of yearning.

"O God my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water."

This longing for God is typical of all those who have sought God sincerely in the Church down the ages. Our own St. Therese is of course a shining example of this and of the whole Carmelite spirit. We only have to read that burning letter to her sister Marie. But let me give you a far older example in these words from the Sermons of St. Columbanus. "I beseech you most loving Saviour, show Yourself to us who seek You, so that knowing You we may love You as warmly in return; may I love You alone, desire You alone, contemplate You alone by day and night and keep You always in our thoughts" (Ser. 12).

St. John now refers to the Beloved as the 'light of his eyes' indicating the progressive growth in intimacy. We are reminded of the words of Scripture -

"Learn O Israel where knowledge is, where strength, where understanding, where life ... where is light of the eyes and peace" . The longing is intense as we go on to see in the next section. St. John tells us that God gives a 'certain spiritual feeling of His presence to this loving soul'. She seeks Him more covetously than the adventurers who in John's day sailed off from Spain to find gold in the new world. And in a way isn't this exactly what John himself is doing and what he asks of us. He has set out like an adventurer to find the treasure of God's love, something he has told us many times is worth more than all the gold in the world. This is really what it is all about. This is the beginning and end of the spiritual journey. Our Carmelite saints want us to set out in search of the Holy Grail, but unlike any of these mythical objects, vague and indefinable, they know what it is they are seeking - it is God himself revealed in the face of Jesus. We have an illustration, a metaphor or analogy for this quest in human experience itself and that is why St. John describes the spiritual life as a love-affair with the Lord. Perhaps nowhere in all human literature has this pilgrimage been described so well as in Dante's 'Divine Comedy` and Dante was also a great Christian poet. The story unfolds from the first meeting with Beatrice in the streets of Florence until he is led by her in*»the very presence of God. He has gone through purgation and hell, the dark night and with her as guide he meets Mary the mother of the Lord. And in the eyes of Beatrice he sees reflected the face of Christ who leads him to the Trinity. It is a wonderful story of human and divine love. In modern spiritual writers we often find moving and inspiring accounts of breakthrough to vision and salvation. The popular writer Carlo Carretto, follower of Charles De Foulcauld, , in his Book "In search of the Beyond" tells us that at one time when he was in doubt about his salvation, Christ appeared to him one Friday at midday and washed him in his blood for the three hours he hung there until he expired. And then he understood that he was to stop worrying about questions of justice, and instead believe deeply that the scales had come down overflowing on the side of love.

St. John of the Cross has committed himself completely to this same pilgrimage in order to encounter the living God and see the vision of His glory. In the soul's entreaty to behold the beauty of God's face, he is reminded of the story of Moses, who was told, 'You shall not see Me and live]' John sees an apt illustration of this text in the mythical basilisk whose look alone was sufficient to kill. Of course it's highly unlikely that you will ever come across a basilisk, even if you

had any desire to see one. The nearest you can get to it is one of those fire-breathing monsters on childrens programmes on television.' St. John has now described for us the first part of the soul's journey to God. He now turns our attention to the need for Faith as he ends this section. Faith will also, like Beatrice, guide us along the next part of the journey. Desire for God increases in intensity and the soul is drawn to God like a piece of steel to a magnet. John addresses faith in the beautiful words, 'O crystalline fount', and here we have a play on the name of Christ himself, and yes, you've guessed it, the power of faith is sketched on the understanding, just as the gift of love is sketched on the will of the soul. What faith reveals to us of God, even though true and certain remains incomplete in this life. For the perfection of faith we need the 'light of glory' which is given us in the vision of God..