

14.12.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury
St John of the Cross. Song of Songs 2:8-17. John 14:18-23.

Today's the feast of St John of the Cross, who died on this day in 1591. He was 39 when he died. At the age of 21 he had entered the Carmelite monastic order. He was ordained priest after successfully studying at Salamanca University. Soon after his ordination he met Teresa of Avila who also became a saint and agreed to work with her for the reform of the Carmelite Order. Together they worked to re-establish the Order rooted in poverty and prayer. It is not for nothing that both Teresa and John are remembered mainly for their spiritual writings.

John's activities aroused great opposition. At one stage of his life he was passed, house to house with no real stability. He fell foul of the Inquisition. The Inquisition looked askance at his poverty of life and spirit and questioned the orthodoxy of his mystical writings. It was at this stage of his career that John was imprisoned. And it was in prison that John wrote many of his poems and his treatise, 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. Into his short life, John packed an awareness of the divine that still bears fruit today.

In prison John had a very specific experience of God. John knew that what he was doing was the will of God and was done in righteousness. This had been verified by Teresa of Avila and had been seen in the impact John had on the Carmelite houses. In prison he had expected to experience the presence of God, upholding him and giving him courage and strength for the ordeals he must face. What John actually experienced was a God who had abandoned him. John's experience was an echo of the crucifixion of Jesus, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Even singing the praises of God became impossible. The dark night of the soul was *the* place where all illusions are stripped away and all one is left with is the word, 'God' and the gnawing sense that even that word does not make sense. John's response to this is instructive. He did not give up praying. He said his prayers even when God seemed, or was, absent. And so he learned that his first belief about his imprisonment that he would experience God as the encourager was actually an illusion. Rather, he would experience God as not and still hold onto his conviction that God is.

Now this is good news for us. It may not seem so, but it is. Many of us have experienced echoes of the dark night of the soul. When it appears that God is not close to us, when we feel utterly alone, when things become absolutely unbearable, then we are at the place when we might see God accurately, both not being and being. It is in this vulnerability that we can see God as being the one who has to be the one who does, ultimately, work with us, but only after our illusions have been dispelled. Then we might know truly and fully, with the God who has been absent before raising us up into resurrection. We need to learn that our lives are not going to be always filled with joy, that we are going to bear sorrow, and in that bearing we discover God, perhaps for the very first time.

John was a great thinker and a great writer of the spiritual life. He also wrote poems. I want to finish by reading one of his poems, entitled, 'Other verses with a divine meaning by the same author'. In these verses, John refers to the falcon and to quarry. These are analogies for God, for the divine.

Not without hope did I ascend
Upon an amorous quest to fly
And up I soared so high, so high,
I seized my quarry in the end'

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