

Signs of contemplation and the ‘night of the senses’

The difficulties which we encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer might cause us to wonder if it really is contemplation which we are receiving from God. Could it be that we are caught up in distractions of our own making, because of some infidelity or carelessness? Are we losing our faith and our fervour? It is here, more than anywhere else, that we need the sure guidance of the recognised masters of the spiritual life. Edith Stein, in her book, *The Science of the Cross*, writes:

‘John of the Cross writes for contemplatives whom he wants to take by the hand at a definite point on their way: at the cross-roads where most of them are perplexed and know not what to do, because in the way they have so far pursued they are suddenly confronted by insuperable obstacles. On the other hand the new way that opens before them leads through impenetrable darkness – who would be brave enough to enter on it? The two roads in question are those of meditation and contemplation. So far the hour of meditation has been devoted to exercising the powers of the soul, perhaps according to the Ignatian method: we have used our senses, our imagination, memory, understanding and will. But now these refuse to work; all efforts are in vain. The spiritual exercises, until then a source of interior joy, now become a torment, unbearably arid and ineffective. On the other hand, there is no inclination either to take interest in worldly things. The soul would like best to be quite still without moving, letting all its powers rest. But this seems sloth and waste of time. This, roughly, is the state of the soul which God wants to introduce into the dark night’(page 24).

John of the Cross offers three indications by which we can test our prayer to discern whether it is indeed the gift of contemplation that is causing the change, or whether what we are experiencing is the result of our infidelity. The first indication that we are, indeed, being drawn by God into contemplation, is that, no matter what we do, we can no longer meditate the way we used to.

‘The first sign is when we realise that we can no longer meditate or use our imagination to reason. There is no longer any pleasure in doing so, but only dryness’(*Ascent II*,13.2).

While we can see, we continue to walk by the light of common sense and reason. Now God is drawing us beyond the limits of imagination, memory and understanding. In this divine realm we are blind. God is asking us to let him guide us. Listen to John of the Cross:

‘However much the soul may try, it cannot purify itself by its own effort so effectively to be in the least prepared for the perfect union of love with God, unless God takes it into his hand and purifies it in that dark fire’(*Dark Night*, I.3.3).

‘When they have exercised themselves for some time in the way of virtue, been faithful to meditation and prayer and freed themselves from attachment and love for the things of this world, they have at last gained some spiritual strength in God. By this strength they are able to hold in check the desire for creatures and endure some hardships and dryness in prayer without longing for that better time when they felt more taste and enjoyment in spiritual practices ... Then God turns all this light into darkness, shuts the door and blocks up the source of the sweet waters of the spirit from which they had till then drunk whenever they wanted. Now he places them in darkness so that they do not know where to turn with their imagination and their thoughts’(*Dark Night*, I.8.3).

The second indication is that, while we no longer find pleasure in meditating, we also find no pleasure in focusing on anything else apart from God. The lack of pleasure in other things indicates that our dryness does not come from the infidelity of chasing after other pleasures.

‘The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. I am not affirming that the imagination will cease to come and go (even in deep recollection it usually wanders freely), but that the person is disinclined to fix it purposely upon extraneous things’(*Ascent II.13.3*).

John reassures us:

The fact that we are upset that we find little relish in prayer ‘is a sign that the dryness does not come from weakness or from being lukewarm; for it is the nature of being lukewarm not to care greatly for the things of God’(*Dark Night, I.9.3*).

The third and most important sign is the presence of a deep desire to be in loving, attentive communion with God. John writes:

‘The third and surest sign is that we take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest’(*Ascent II.13.4*).

Because God is drawing us into a communion that is beyond our natural powers of understanding, we must journey in faith. John of the Cross speaks of our senses being in darkness. He is referring not only to our senses, but to our imagination, memory and understanding which rely upon our senses. In her book, *The Science of the Cross* (pages 25-28), Edith Stein points out the rich symbolism in John’s describing the lack of pleasure in these sense faculties as a ‘night’. On the one hand, night envelops us and all things; it threatens to swallow us up; what it hides is still there but is indistinct, invisible, without form; it impedes movement and paralyses our faculties; it induces fear; it condemns us to solitude and is a foretaste of death. On the other hand, night softens and smooths what is hard, sharp or crude; it reveals subtle features which are lost in daylight; it drowns out the noises of the day; it quietens the spirit, freed from the busyness of the day and gives deep and gentle repose. So it is with the mystic night of infused contemplation which arises from within the soul.

An oft-quoted prayer of Saint Augustine gives expression to a deep human experience: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you’(*Confessions, 1,1*). We are created for joy, for the joy of complete communion with God, a joy experienced in the deepest part of our soul and radiating out to our mind and heart, our feelings and all of our senses. We are made to enjoy life and to enjoy it to the full (John 10:10). However, as we have already observed in the previous reflection, there are pleasures enjoyed by our senses which do not flow from this profound centre of communion. On the contrary they distract us from the deepest yearnings of our soul. Some pleasure comes from feelings which lack the purity and clarity that is there when our emotions are fully tuned to our deepest longings. Such pleasures are transitory. They fail to satisfy us because they distract us from our heart’s deepest longings. We can find it hard to resist giving in to them and they can continue to attract us even when we are in communion with the One for whom our heart longs. This is partly for the pleasure, however superficial, which they give us and partly because they distract us from the pain that is part of growing and the demands of the inner journey and of the truth that such a journey reveals.

There are many impurities in these desires, and until they are purified they are a distraction from, and an obstacle to, the communion with God to which grace is drawing us. Unpurified desires weary, disturb, darken and defile the soul ‘like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace’(Isaiah 57:20-21). They afflict the soul and keep it bound. Jesus invites us: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest’(Matthew 11:28).

John of the Cross makes it clear that unpurified desires are a problem only when they are voluntarily entertained. We should not be worried about feelings and desires that are part of our nature and that happen without our wanting them. There is no need for these to disturb us:

‘I am not writing here of natural desires which are not voluntary, and of thoughts that do not go beyond the first movements, and other temptations to which the soul is not consenting; for these do not produce in the soul any of the evils which we have mentioned. For, although when we experience them we may think that the passion and disturbance which they are producing are defiling us and holding us bound, it is not the case’(*Ascent* I.12.56).

In earlier reflections we looked at many of the things we can do to discipline our senses, feelings and emotions. Here we wish to look again at what happens when God offers us the first experiences of contemplative prayer. The fact is that ultimately *we* cannot purify our senses, feelings and emotions. Only God’s love can do that, so now we must hand everything over to God and focus on responding as humbly and faithfully as we can to whatever discipline God is gracing us to undertake. We are to learn to look to God and to wait on him.

In offering us the sublime gift of contemplative prayer, God is offering us what our deepest spirit ultimately desires. What used to give pleasure to our unpurified senses, imagination and emotions gives pleasure no longer. Our feelings may rebel, but God is granting us an immense favour. He is offering himself to us. We should not be surprised that whatever is not God loses its appeal. Even in prayer we can no longer arouse feelings of devotion at will. Thinking about the mysteries of faith, something that used to give us consolation now leaves us dry and distracted. We can no longer achieve a sense of quiet communion with God the way we used to. This is because God is weaning us off such attractive, but not yet fully purified, pleasures. He is drawing us beyond the limits that we can attain by our own efforts. God wants to take us where our hearts wish to be but where we cannot go while we are in control.

The lack of feeling in our prayer can be painful, but we are learning an important lesson about our limitations. We are learning humility and reliance on God. We are learning to live by faith. Any experience of pleasure is now recognised as a sheer gift of grace. However, for the most part we will not experience any pleasure at all. This is because something very precious is happening in the depths of our being and God does not want us to be distracted from it. If we are unused to living at this depth, we will miss the more surface feelings and this will be quite painful.

Depending on how much we need to be purified and how much courage we have to allow this purifying to take place, God may keep us in this arid place for a long time. We can be sure, however, that in his graciousness, God will never push us beyond our strength to endure:

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’(1Corinthians 10:13).

Each person’s experience here will be different. Some of us will experience more consolation. This may be because we are already so humble and unattached that we readily surrender to love. On the other hand, it may be because we have not the courage to go through the purifying fire of love, and so God meets us on the surface where we are used to meeting him. He ceases to attract us to the depths which we are afraid to explore.

If we are to enter into full communion with God we have to be weaned off surface feelings of consolation, and we have to surrender our reason and live by faith, however painful and bewildering this process may be. We will be encouraged to continue along this path if we recognise that it is precisely God’s love that is taking us into the deep and dark recesses of our soul where our senses may feel nothing and our understanding is unable to guide us. Since the

soul cannot see God, it must long for God in the darkness. What is happening is expressed well by Father Marie-Eugène in his book *I am a daughter of the church*:

‘This secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which is contemplation, liberates the spirit from its subjection to the senses, and calms the senses themselves little by little in this night, thus permitting the soul to have free and peaceful commerce with God, who communicates himself to it through the gifts of the Holy Spirit’(page 66).

One of the main graces of this time is the growing in true humility through knowing ourselves as we really are. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

‘The soul sees itself so dry and miserable, that the idea never even occurs to it that it is making better progress than others, as it believed itself to be doing before’(Night I.12).

‘Softened and humbled by hardship and other trials, it becomes meek with respect to God and to itself as well as to others. Now it is no longer angry with itself and disturbed because of its own faults, nor with others because of theirs; it is no longer displeased with God because he does not quickly make it holy. These times of dryness, therefore, cause the soul to journey in all purity in the love of God, since it is no longer influenced as previously in its actions by the pleasure and enjoyment of the actions themselves, but only by a desire to please God.’

(Night I.13).

We are surrendering ourselves in love in contemplative prayer, but since God is not an object of unmediated human experience, God remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Contemplative loving, therefore, occurs in the ‘darkness’ of faith. Faith enlightens, but it is a light which the intellect cannot receive. When we accept to be guided by faith, we are united to God and guided along the way inspired by him, though our intellect cannot see the path. God is leading us on the way of love. Learning to rely solely on faith can be quite painful as we grieve for the kinds of meditations that we previously had and the pleasure which they brought us. However, if we surrender ourselves to God, we will experience an even deeper and richer delight.