

## 23. The experience of spiritual darkness

In the early stages of passive prayer, God draws us into a communion that is beyond the reach of the imagination, memory or thoughts. Though we are in communion with God in the depth of our soul, our consciousness insofar as it depends upon the senses can no longer guide us. John of the Cross speaks of the confusion and sense of deprivation as a kind of darkness. To trust the gift of prayer being offered us we have to learn to let go the pleasure we experience through holy thoughts and feelings of closeness. We have to learn the discipline of trusting that the communion being experienced in our will is what really matters, and that we are praying in order to be in communion with God not to feel close to God. In this darkness we learn to focus on God's action within, without being distracted by our senses, by our memory and imagination, or by the mind searching for understanding. We come to a certain harmony in which our bodies and our senses submit to our longing to be in communion with God in the way willed by God.

With the deepening of contemplation in what Teresa speaks of as the Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Union, the inflowing of God is experienced, and with it a deep peace and a profound joy. But often the tide of love *seems* to ebb. God, who has touched our soul in such an intimate way, *seems* to withdraw and to be absent. We have seen that this is in order to stretch the soul by desire, making us capable of more love. It also purifies us of all attachments, making our love more pure. This is a painful experience. It is as though we are in darkness in the very centre of our soul. We long to see the one who has drawn us into love but we cannot. No longer is it our senses and the faculties that depend upon them that are being purified; now it is the core of our ego. God is calling us and we are being drawn into a prayer that relies solely on faith. The light with which God illumines the soul cannot be registered by any of our faculties. They are plunged into darkness. We are journeying in the darkness of faith. Divine warmth and fragrance are not registered in the normal way, for the flowing in of love coming from God draws us beyond ourselves into communion with God in the inmost dwelling places of the soul. The attraction and the union occur in a darkness that John of the Cross speaks of as the 'night of the spirit'.

In a letter composed in 1890, Therese of Lisieux wrote:

Jesus took me by the hand, and He made me enter a subterranean passage ... where I see nothing but a half-veiled light, the light which was diffused by the lowered eyes of my Fiancé's face! My Fiancé says nothing to me, and I say nothing to Him either except that I love Him more than myself.

Six years later she wrote:

If at times you seem to hide yourself, it is you yourself who come to help me search for you.

And she continues the same theme just months before her death in 1897:

If you leave me deprived of your caresses, I will not cease to smile. In peace, I will wait for your return, and never stop praying my canticles of love.

This darkness brings its own special suffering. First and foremost is the suffering caused by the profound but passing touch of God's love. This passing is a cause of pain – the pain of longing for the union to be granted again (see *Interior Castle* V.2.9). Teresa writes:

It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God, a spark leapt forth and so struck the soul that the flaming fire was felt by it (*Interior Castle* VI.2.4).

The spark, however, was not enough to set the soul on fire – hence the pain of longing:

The soul is left so full of longings to enjoy completely the One who grants these wonderful favours that it lives in a great, though delightful, torment ... Everything it sees wearies it. When it is alone it finds some relief ... yet when it does not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing (*Interior Castle* VI.6.1).

A little further on she writes:

The soul feels a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides it company, not being the One it loves. The soul sees that it is like a person hanging, who cannot support himself on any earthly thing; nor can it ascend into heaven. On fire with this thirst, it cannot get to the water; and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away. Nor does the soul desire that it be taken away save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman. Yet no one gives such water to the soul (*Interior Castle* VI.11.5).

God *seems* silent, hidden, absent. This is so that, with our heart thus pierced and hurt by desire, we may finally open up to God with a greater capacity for receiving the communion that God is offering us.

Over and above this pain of unfulfilled longing, there are other causes for suffering that can accompany the deepening of contemplative prayer. Teresa names the following in her *Interior Castle* (VI.1). People may accuse us of posing to be holy, and we may wonder if they might be right. Others may praise us, when we know that all is gift, and that the only proper response is gratitude to God and not praise of ourselves. Teresa assures us that we have to learn to take both blame and praise lightly, and quickly turn from both to God. We can find ourselves being misunderstood by a spiritual director, who may be incapable of giving us wise help. We can be disturbed by thoughts that we are being deceived and are deceiving others. Our reason may assure us that this is not the case, but reason is powerless to help us against such thoughts. Teresa's advice is clear:

If the Lord has granted you the touch of this love, you should thank him very much. You do not have to fear deception. Your only fear is that you might prove ungrateful for so generous a gift. So strive to better your entire life, and to serve (*Interior Castle* VI.2.5).

Our sins are probably our greatest source of pain. Teresa writes:

Suffering over one's sins increases the more one receives from God ... God's favours are like the waves of a large river in that they come and go; but the memory these souls have of their sins clings like thick mire. It always seems that these sins are alive in the memory, and this is a heavy cross (*Interior Castle* VI.7.1,2).

God is now working in the soul for its final purging from all imperfection till all that remains is love. When all resistance to love is conquered, when the soul has fully surrendered to love, then and only then there is experienced the peace of being fully in God's love. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

The dark night is a certain flowing in of God into the human creature, which purges it of the ignorance and imperfections belonging to its very nature. God teaches it in a strange, secret way, educating it to perfect love. He does this himself; all the creature can do is be lovingly attentive, listening, receptive, allowing itself to be enlightened without understanding how (*Dark Night* II.5.1).

There is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow which of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight. The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is the soul's weakness and imperfection at the time, its inadequate preparation, and the qualities it possesses which are contrary to this light. Because of these the soul has to suffer when the divine light shines upon it (*Dark Night* II.9.11).

With Prayer of Union comes a need for a psychological revolution in which we have to learn to surrender all control to God to be guided by God in the depths of the soul. We must learn to receive and obey rather than determine our own activity. We are so used to being active, even in our searching for God and in our commitment to prayer. In this enforced passivity it will seem to us that God has abandoned us and left us in darkness. We are being purified till there is no longing in us except to be with God and to do God's will. God is digging out the deep roots of sin, and purifying us in order to re-create us in the pure fire of divine love.

Teresa knows how gentle we must be with a person suffering the pain of this purifying love: 'Oh, Jesus, how sad it is to see a soul thus forsaken' (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.12). This suffering makes the soul more tender, more compassionate to others, more open to love. We learn to identify with Jesus in his cry: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mark 15:34)

Our experience at this time is one of light and darkness. The measure of each depends on our need for purification and on the courage with which we open ourselves to God's purifying love. John of the Cross writes:

The soul never remains in the same state for long, but is continually up and down. This is because we cannot be in the state of perfection ... without knowing God and ourself. And so we are given a taste of one – that is exaltation, and then of the other – that is humiliation (*Dark Night*, II.18.4).

How are we to sustain the pain of this 'strange solitude' (*Interior Castle* VI.11.5), the pain of longing and the pain of knowing our own sinfulness? We must first of all remember that the pain is brought about by the flame of love coming from the brazier of the heart of God (*Interior Castle* VI.2.4). Nothing stands between us and the one we love. The journey, though at times painful, is a journey into the

arms of one who has promised himself to us. Whatever sufferings we have, ‘the soul knows they are great favours’ (*Interior Castle* VI.1.15). ‘The soul feels that the pain is precious’ (*Interior Castle* VI.11.6): ‘The wound satisfies the soul much more than the delightful and painless absorption of the Prayer of Quiet’ (*Interior Castle* VI.2.2).

The only one who can remove the pain is ‘the true comforter who consoles and strengthens the soul’ (*Interior Castle* VI.11.9). When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night he was told that he had to be ‘born from above’. This was not something which he could achieve. He was to allow God’s Spirit to engender this new life in him (John chapter 3). This is the Spirit poured out from the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. We have to learn resignation. We have to learn to surrender our will to the will of God. More than resignation and submission, we are actively to cooperate with grace, to want only what God wants. All asceticism now is to respect the divine initiative. We need to learn to cooperate energetically with grace. John of the Cross writes:

It is a great grace from God when God so darkens and impoverishes the soul that the senses cannot deceive it. And that it may not go astray it has nothing to do but to walk in the beaten path of the law of God and of the Church, living solely by faith, dim and true, in certain hope and perfect charity, looking for all its blessings in heaven; living here as a pilgrim, a beggar, an exile, an orphan, desolate, possessing nothing and looking for everything from God (*Letter to Dona Juana Pedraca*).

Teresa writes:

There is no remedy for the tempest but to await the mercy of God (*Interior Castle* VI.1.10).

The best way to endure these afflictions of the spirit is to engage in external works of charity and to hope in the mercy of God (*Interior Castle* VI.1.13).

God sustains us by the virtue of hope, so that we continue to tend towards a communion with God that we know by faith but that we do not yet possess in the full measure of love’s longing. Our spirit groans because we seem not to be going forward, but we continue to long and to trust in the One who loves us and whom we love. Beyond the storms and the darkness we are to keep our gaze fixed on God, who we know by faith is drawing us into the intimacy of divine love.

Teresa recognises that sometimes the darkness is such that we feel abandoned by God, including having no sense of the presence of Jesus. If this is so, we must accept it. At the same time she firmly resisted the teaching of those who said that because God is spirit we have to deliberately leave behind the humanity of Jesus if we wish to draw closer to the transcendent God.

If we lose our guide, the good Jesus, we will be unable to find our way (*Interior Castle* VI.7.6).

Jesus suffered. Should we expect to be with him and not suffer? Even though we seem to be in darkness, we are walking with the one who is the light of the world: ‘If you walk with me, you will not walk in darkness’ (John 8:12). Jesus experienced a profound sense of being abandoned by his Father. It may well be the same for us, but we can be confident that in the darkness Jesus is drawing us

to himself and so into communion with his Father: 'If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself'(John 12:32). Suffering with Jesus is purifying.

There are certain fruits that grace the person who remains faithful to the prayer of faith. The last cords holding us back from flight to God are broken. The last deflections of the will under the impulse of desire cease. Nothing now holds us back from a complete surrender to love. John of the Cross writes:

You remain in this condition until your spirit is humbled, softened and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love that God, in his mercy, desires to grant (*Dark Night* II.7.3).

Oh spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted. Think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity. However well your actions may have succeeded you did not work so completely, perfectly and securely – owing to their impurity and awkwardness – as you do now that God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet (*Dark Night* II.16.7).

The experience of the 'night of the spirit' leads to a profound humility. John of the Cross writes:

The first and chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery. Besides the fact that all the favours God imparts to the soul are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the dryness and emptiness of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced, and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue, make the soul recognise its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity ... Now that the soul is clothed in the garments of labour, dryness and desolation, and that its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent virtue of self-knowledge. It considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does nor can do anything (*Dark Night* I.12.2).

We are experiencing the triumph of divine Wisdom, for the transformed soul, united to God in undistracted love, radiates the divine light to those with faith to discern and so is a powerful instrument in bringing about the kingdom of God in the world.

In the midst of these aridities, God frequently communicates to the soul, when it least expects, spiritual sweetness, a very pure love, and a spiritual knowledge which is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all that the soul previously sought. Yet in the beginning one will not think so because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it (*Dark Night* I.13.10).

Our faith assures us that the darkness which we are experiencing is the consequence of our being drawn by God into more intimate communion. During the period that both Teresa and John liken to a betrothal, the work of the

purifying darkness is completed and there is a special quality to the experience of delight which at times overwhelms the soul: the soul knows that perfect union has been promised. John of the Cross assures us:

In that sweet draught of God, wherein the soul is immersed in God, it wholly surrenders itself most willingly and with great sweetness to Him, desiring to be wholly His and never again to have anything in itself that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms the soul into Himself, God makes it to be wholly His and empties it of all that it possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore the soul is indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to its will, but also according to what it does, even as God has given Himself freely to the soul. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up the one to the other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal (*Spiritual Canticle 27*).