

03. Experiencing communion with God  
in faith, hope and love





God has revealed the way to enjoy divine communion: it is through union with Jesus.

It is to Jesus that we are to look.

## What does John of the Cross teach us?

‘The pattern of John’s experience:

‘*todo*’, ‘everything’ the gift;

‘*nada*’, ‘nothing’, ‘the space’ (Iain Matthew p. 116).

‘This is the meaning of the ‘*nada*’, ‘nothing’:

a space shaped for Christ’ (Iain Matthew p. 124).



‘The *nada* is Jesus’ emptiness. The darkness that can eat into human life, with its threat of isolation and appearance of chaos, has taken on Christ’s contours. It has become a space for his Father to fill’ (Iain Matthew p. 132).

Advent reminds us to make space for God by making space for Jesus.

In communion with God through communion with Jesus

Religious experiences deepen our communion with God insofar as they draw us, not to themselves, but to Jesus: his person, his face, his heart, his revelation, his 'Body'.

'Religious experiences ... are all excellent, if they point to Christ; they can be real motives for love, if they do not glue us to themselves but impel us to Christ, his word, his community' (Iain Matthew p. 125).



Matthew 11:28-29



‘We have seen his glory,  
the glory as of a father’s only son,  
full of the gift of truth’ (John 1:14).

‘On the cross, the heart of Jesus  
became a massive space for the  
fire of the Spirit to burn – free  
to blaze out, “more intense than  
all the fires in the world” (Flame  
2.2), in resurrection’ (Iain Matthew,  
131).



‘From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.’

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.’  
(Romans 5:5)





- ‘No one has ever seen God. It is God’s only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known.’  
(John 1:18)
- ‘I am in the Father and you are in me and I am in you’ (John 14:20).
- ‘I pray that they will be one as we are one, with me in them and you in me’ (John 17:21).

## Experiencing God (Iain Matthew page 95).

‘When John of the Cross seeks “an experience of God”, he does not mean “feeling” as opposed to “not feeling”; he means “reality” as opposed to “mere theory”.

He is not looking for a shot in the arm to brighten a dreary day; he is looking for a person with whom he is content to be, even if the day stays dreary ...

His search is not for a feeling of encounter, but for encounter ...

He wants, not just perfection, but nothing less than union.’

1. God is always beyond.

God sustains everything, but is not fully grasped by anything.

God remains absolute mystery.

2. Yet we need to encounter God!

‘Together these account for most of the deviations in human living –

trying to fill the need with something else,

or trivialising God so that I can grasp God’ (Iain Matthew p. 97).

‘A feeling of dryness does not prove God’s absence.

A feeling of holy warmth does not prove God’s presence.

The reality of God is, simply, deeper’ (Iain Matthew p. 97).

‘Some think that when they cannot understand God, or sense or feel God, that God is further away. The truth is more the opposite: it is when you understand God less clearly that you are drawing closer to God ... You do well at times, whether life or faith is smooth or hard, to hold God as hidden, and so to cry out to God “Where have you hidden, Beloved?” (John of the Cross, SC I.12).

‘Believing, hoping, loving are the only means for union with a transcendent God’ (Iain Matthew p. 98)

‘Believe, trust, love, and you are receiving the gift. These form the meeting place; they *are* the encounter’ (Iain Matthew p.94).

‘Live only in dark and genuine faith, and sure hope, and unmitigated love ... Be joyful and trust in God’ (John of the Cross, Letter Oct 12 1589).

‘Live in faith and hope, even though it be in darkness, since it is in this darkness that God is supporting you. Cast your care on God, since God cares for you. God will not forget you’ (John of the Cross, Letter June 20, 1590).

‘Because the role of faith, hope and love is to withdraw you from what is less than God, consequently, they unite you to God’ (John of the Cross, Night II.21.11).

‘God is close. Our response has to be at root a receiving, and that receiving cannot but put us in contact with God... Believe, hope, love, and you are receiving God’ (Iain Matthew p. 101).

‘Where God is a God who reveals and gives, to believe and to love is to encounter God’ (Iain Matthew p. 102).

‘Faith, hope, love translate commitment – above all God’s to us’ (Iain Matthew p. 103).

Faith

Be - **lieve**

Be in **love**

Choose to place yourself in the **love** God offers you.

‘The more faith you have, the more you are united with God.’

(John of the Cross, Ascent II.9.1)

‘Faith is the theological gift, which lifts a person into God’s own life. It comes from God and leads to God ... By faith we know with the Son’s knowing’ (Iain Matthew p. 101).

‘In faith the Spirit communicates, not words, but personally, the Word’ (Iain Matthew p. 103).

‘Like the pillar of cloud in the wilderness, faith illumines. Faith gives light’ (John of the Cross, Ascent II.3.5).



Like the jars of Gideon (Judges 7:20), faith contains the light of God.  
When we die the jar is smashed and the light blazes forth.

‘O fount like crystal  
If only, on your silvered-over face,  
you would suddenly form they eyes I so long for,  
which I bear sketched deep within my heart.’(SC Stanza 12).

‘A spring of water, welling up, a fountain spreading out into a sunlit pond which reflects the bright sky on its surface’ (**silvered-over face**)’ (Iain Matthew p. 105).

Image is of a gold vase that is silver-plated.

The propositions of faith = the silver. They give us God (the gold).

# Hope

‘The more hope you have, the greater your union with God.’

(John of the Cross, Ascent III.7.2).

‘My God, you will not take from me what you once gave me in your only Son Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I long for. So I shall rejoice: you will not delay, if I do not fail to hope.’

(John of the Cross, Sayings 26).

## Ascent Book III, 6.3

‘The build-up of anxiety or worry  
which problems and crises can cause a person  
in no way helps to bring about a better situation;  
rather, it normally makes matters worse,  
and harms the person ...

It is obviously never any help getting anxious ...

To bear it all with calm, peace, tranquility,  
not only opens you to many blessings;  
it also helps you, in these difficulties themselves,  
to come to a better decision  
and to apply a remedy that will actually do some good.’

‘Hope releases the soul’s fluidity not just “from” but “for” – for what is really meant to fill it. And that is God.

John knows only two realities: the present, and eternity.

Hope pulls memory off the suction pads of yesterday and tomorrow, and cups it upwards in the present.

The “sacrament of the present moment” it is called.

Eternity is bearing down, like an inverted triangle, upon one point in time only: now.

Iain Matthew p. 107 continued

Worry is not just a pain; it is a tragedy,  
because it absorbs in something less  
what is meant for something greater.  
Hope means easing the mind  
of what inflames it or frightens it,  
and cupping it upwards to the God who alone can fill it.'

‘When John speaks of the mother of Jesus, it is in this connection. She moved freely, refusing to let herself be paralysed by past or future. In her mountain climb, she renounced the need for pre-planned handholds, opting instead to surrender to the guidance, the hand, of Another. Her hope set her free to be possessed fully in each present moment by the Holy Spirit.

As with faith, so with hope, John can emphasise a letting-go, in this case of past and future, only because he is convinced that God is hovering, pressing, to come in and fill the gap.’

## Love

‘Other experiences do not unite you to God. Only love does this.’

(John of the Cross, Ascent III.30.4).

‘Love is God’s gift by which we choose God and want what God wants. The Spirit of God is loving us and putting us in the current of love between the Son and the Father. We love with the Spirit’s loving’ (Iain Matthew p. 101).

‘You should realise that the value of your good works, fasting, alms, penances, prayers etc. does not depend so much on their quantity or quality, but on the love of God which you bring to them’ (John of the Cross Ascent Book 3.27.5).

‘John defines love as aligning our will perfectly to God’s.

But in practice that means not aligning it to anything else.’

(Iain Matthew page 99).

This has the benefit of our not being dependent on anything less than God.



‘Love heals history, where the Spirit has power to turn every wound, even the wounds of sin, into “wounds of love”.

‘Love decodes the meaning of the world, which John reads as “a limitless sea of love, engulfing him”. He knows from inside that love is life-blood: “A person who has no love is dead” (SC II.II)

‘Love is God’s activity: “our” love is like a kite, hanging in the wind of God’s love for us. This activity of God is called the Holy Spirit.’

‘The Holy Spirit is the Flame, the principal agent, the principal lover. Love is first God’s gift of God’s Self ... Our love is the offspring of this outpouring : Love is our Spirit-given “Yes” to an inpouring God.’

‘Give me an experience of God.’ Turn to God present within you, and love God. You may not feel God’s presence, but want God, value God, give yourself to God, say yes to God, adore God. Love God and you are experiencing God.’

‘The “Yes” of love centres me, unites me to God who is my centre.’

Love creates likeness ‘like fire turning everything to fire.’

‘You looked with love upon me  
and deep within your eyes imprinted grace;  
this mercy set me free,  
held in your love’s embrace,  
to lift my eyes adoring to your face’ (SC Stanza 32).

‘That is John’s vision: a God, constantly gazing at the universe,  
personally meeting the eyes of each person in the universe,  
with a look that “cleanses, makes beautiful, enriches and enlightens”.

God’s love is creative: it elicits and forms –

“taking you and placing you in God’s Self, making you like God”.

Our love is a Yes to that.’

‘A little of this pure love is more precious to God, more precious for us, and of more benefit to the Church, even though it seems to be doing nothing, than all other words put together ... Since (in the Song of Songs) God adjures them not to wake the bride from this love, who would dare to do so and escape reprimand? It is for this goal of love that we were created.’(SC 29.2-3).

We choose to believe and so to hope,  
trusting because of the dying and rising of Jesus.  
Our merciful actions encourage others to believe  
and to hope.

‘Love never stops caring

Love acts always in a kind way.

Love does not act out of jealousy or envy.

Love does not boast; or behave arrogantly.

Love does not behave indecently

or insist on its own way.

Love does not give way to irritation;

or brood over wrongs.

Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing,

but rejoices in the truth.

Love has space enough to hold and to bear

everything and everyone.

Love **believes** all things, **hopes** all things,

and endures whatever comes.

Love does not come to an end’ (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).