

07. Part III Space (pages 35-50)

I. The right kind of emptiness (pages 35-38)



‘If you are seeking God,
much more is your Beloved seeking you’(Flame 3.28).

‘Stranded and starving, somebody has to get packed up and sent off into the unknown to search for food, taking what water is left, hacking a way through the undergrowth, hoping somehow to forge a path to something somewhere.

But then comes the noise of a helicopter, and rescue approaching.

That changes everything. The one thing needed now is some space, so that what is coming can come’(page 35).

‘Making space for God in order to receive’ (Flame 2.27).

Make space to receive God’s gift which is nothing less than God’s Self.

1. One image used by John to describe our journey into full communion with God is that of climbing a mountain.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel. Climbing does require energy and discipline and a lot has to be left behind.

‘To come to savour all, seek to find savour in nothing.

To come to possess all, seek possession in nothing.

To come to be all, seek in all to be nothing.

To come to what you know not, you must go by a way that you know not.

To come to what you are not, you must go by a way where you are not.’

(Ascent I.13.11)

John insists that the goal of the climb is joy.

His focus is not on self-realisation (perfection),
but relationship (communion in love).

The energy comes from God, and we are to climb only in response to
and relying on God's grace.

We do not climb alone. The Triune God is with us.

‘John steps out with vigour because the Other’s love has wounded
him, and there can be now only one thing to care about’ (page 37).

2. He uses another image: unblocking a spring.

The spring is from God

and God wants it to well up within us,

but we have to co-operate with grace

to remove what is blocking it.

3. 'Another image is primary. We have seen it already in the symbol "flame". In this case, it is the flame that does the entering; and the essential activity belongs, not to us, but to the Other, to 'the Spirit of the Bridegroom'.

In the Living Flame the entry is unimpeded and incandescent. Previously, as John portrays the journey, the approach felt more aggressive - like fire burning into wood, first making it sputter and steam, blacken and crackle, until the wood itself becomes flame.'

He also uses the image of the flame that draws air into itself till the air is transformed into flame.

'The emphasis is not on our forging a way, but on our getting out of the way.'

‘Progress will be measured, less by ground covered, more by the amount of room God is given to manoeuvre’ (page 37).

‘space’, ‘emptiness’, are key words;
or, as John puts it, *nada*’ (page 37).

‘Empty hands, cupped to receive God’ (page 38).

‘The summit of the mountain is a huge space – ‘and on the mountain, nothing’ – because it holds a total Presence’ (page 38).

‘The crucial question is not “What must I achieve?”, but “What stands in his way?” (page 38).

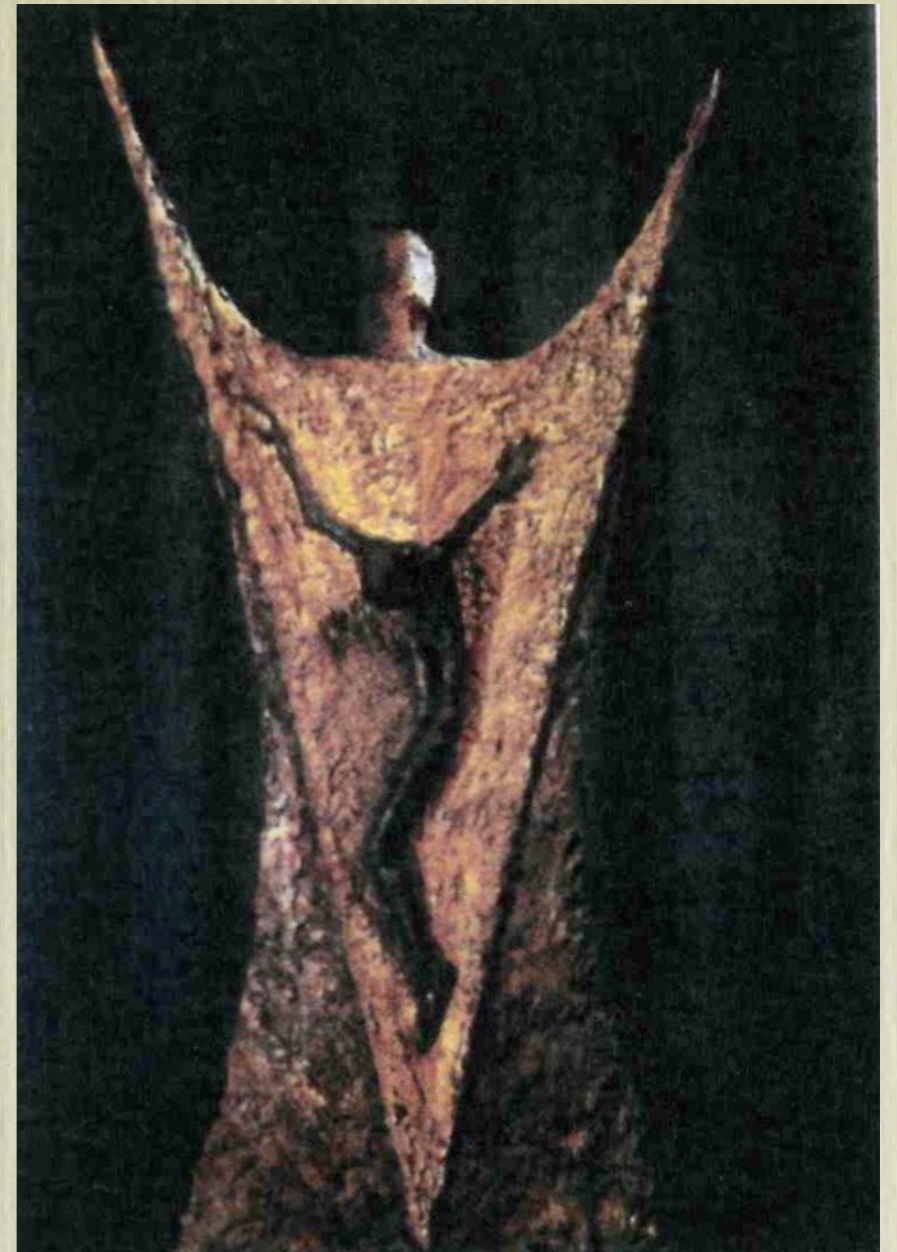
‘The pattern of John’s experience:
‘*todo*’, ‘everything’ the gift;
‘*nada*’, ‘nothing’, the space’ (page 116).

‘This is the meaning of the ‘*nada*’, ‘nothing’:
a space shaped for Christ’ (page 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’ (page 132).



2. Blockages (pages 39-45)

‘*Ascent* is more of a treatise on Christian growth’ (page 20).

‘The *Ascent* divides into three books, showing just how unavailable we can be, then suggesting how we might cleave an opening’ (page 39).

‘John is proposing a way to break through the circle of our mediocrity.’
(page 39)

‘Where God is pressing in upon us, the point of contention is our attitude rather than the things we have’ (page 39).

‘For John created beauty is beautiful – people, art, nature. What concerns him is not so much the person or things being loved, as the loving heart’ (page 40).

‘We are not talking here about giving up things, because that does not strip the soul if one’s affective drive remains set on them. We are talking about stripping away the craving for gratification in those things. That is what leaves the person free and empty in their regard, even though one still owns them. Because it is not the things of this world that take up space in the person or do one harm ... No, it is the will and the hunger for them that dwells inside’ (Ascent I.3.4).

‘The person has only one will, and if this gets caught up in a particular thing, it will not be free, complete, single, or pure – yet that is what is needed if God is to transform it’ (Ascent I.II.6).

‘When people, things, events are loved *within* God, there is harmony. When they get set alongside God – set in a balance with God – a process is begun in which affectivity groans under the violence it is inflicting on itself’ (page 40).

‘When desire is out of order, it increasingly causes fatigue, anxiety, confusion, a sense of guilt, and finally an inability to do anything about it. It is a picture of addiction where your dependence is killing you’ (page 41).

‘Establish your freedom by saying ‘no’.

No, I don’t need this, I need You!’ (page 42).

‘It is denying, not the thing or the person, but one’s dependence on the thing or the person, so clearing a space for genuine communion’ (page 43).

- A bird held by a thread.

‘The issue is affirming a greater love, and transcending one’s cravings for the sake of that love’ (page 43).

‘Step free from your longings and you will discover what your heart really longs for. What makes you think your longings are God's longings?’ (Sayings, 15; quoted page 34).

‘To live at the level of “sense” is to be hostage to one’s own needs.’
(page 44)

‘To live at the level of “spirit” is to live as a person among persons – fit for communion, for the love which can hold the Other, and be held, on open palms’ (pages 44-45).

‘To make space for the gift of the Other’ (page 45).

God is offering himself to me, and I must not allow myself to be absorbed in and distracted by anything that directs me away from opening my heart to God's Spirit.

My longing is to be a person in communion with the persons of the Trinity. This is love, not the false security of isolating myself in meeting my own more demanding and superficial needs.

3. Some kind of remedy (page 46-50).

‘Essentially the message here runs: choose the person of Christ, and get used to making him, not your feelings, your ultimate basis for action’ (page 46).

‘To bring peace to passion and lay it to rest ...

endeavour always to be inclined

not to what is easier, but to what is harder ...

not to what is more, but to what is less ...

not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing ...

longing to enter in utter nakedness, and emptiness, and poverty

into Christ’ (Ascent I, 13.5-6).

‘Endeavour always to be *inclined*

not to what is easier, but to what is harder ...

not to what is more, but to what is less ...

not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing ...

1. Context is on behaving in an appropriate and measured way

‘It will often be ‘appropriate’ to do what is easier’ (page 46).

2. John is offering this as interim advice en route to inner freedom.

3. John wants us to see the value of being inclined in this way,
and to acquire the facility for making such choices where appropriate.

John is not telling us to ‘always do’, but to be always ‘able to do’ (page 47).

Begin with a 'yes' (a Yes to making space for Christ to live in me).

'The 'no' is an affirmation of a greater love, a constant longing for Christ.'

(page 48)

'We are being invited to look again at our activities, including their burdensome side, and to commit ourselves to them afresh each day, for God. It is simple. It transfers us to the level of spirit, and opens a space for the gift' (page 48).

Do I really want to be free? Do I want to, but only partly?

'The whole enterprise is a response' (page 49).

'Step free!' 'I can't!' Then try to let a different love set you free' (page 50).

John of the Cross: Sayings 16 - Prayer of the soul in love

‘Who can free himself from his meanness and limitations,
if You do not lift him to yourself, my God, in purity of love?
How will a person brought to birth
and nurtured in a world of small horizons, rise up to you, Lord,
if You do not raise him by your hand – the hand that made him?

You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me
in your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire.

So I shall rejoice: you will not delay,
if I do not fail to hope’.

- I have to learn to say: "I don't need this, I need God!" The Yes I say to God is in the context of saying No to my separate self. Only God can enable me to do this, but the spring will not force through the debris, nor the flame drag the log into its consuming embrace.

In the final paragraph of his Ascent of Mount Carmel Book I, John wrote:

‘In self dispossession the heart is at rest. It wants nothing. Because it is grounded on Jesus not on itself. It does not matter whether it feels elated or dejected.’