

## The Impact of God : Entry (pages 1-18)



# John of the Cross 1542-1591



Luther, Saxony 1483-1546

(1517 95 Theses)

Ignatius, Loyola 1491-1556

Teresa, Avila 1515-1582

## Iain Matthew page 1

‘John of the Cross speaks to people who feel unable to change. We may have sensed in our lives a call to freedom, to wholeness, to more than what we are now. John felt this as a call to reach out for God. But within us an unvoiced fear can make change impossible. It is the fear that when we reach, we may not find ... If I give myself, will God fill me with his life?’

Our being hesitates to say ‘yes’ to a one-way track that may end only in wasteland. This is the undermining fear, and while we may not opt for a different track, we may never fully choose this one.’

‘Here John of the Cross has something helpful to say. Poet, pastor, mystic, John is first a witness to the impact of God in his life. He has taken the risk of surrender, and can speak with the authority of one who has been there. He testifies to a God who, precisely, is pressing in to meet, to change, and to fill us in our deepest need.’

‘John’s language is moulded to echo this impact. He wrote strongly in verse, and only weakly in prose. He wrote in the idiom of bride and bridegroom – the least inadequate image for the way he understands his God to be.’

‘John testifies to a God who is pressing in to meet me, to change me, to fill me where my need is deepest.’

Our aim in this retreat (following Iain Matthew)

1. 'To sound John's soul, and to recover there his witness to a self-bestowing God. Love changes people, and John's witness to God's love may help us to trust and to be brave' (page 1).
2. 'When darkness is invading, when trusted patterns have broken down, when loss, failure, stress, and sin, remind us of the threat of chaos, John assures us that the darkness bears the Spirit of God, who broods over the waters of death and has power to work a resurrection' (pages 1-2).

- Faced with darkness we are tempted to give up.
- The Spirit of God is brooding over the chaos / darkness and has the power to command: 'Let there be light!'



- 'Light shines in the darkness'.



## Our aims continued

3. 'John's experience of impact and of darkness is in itself no guarantee that our own lives are open to the divine. Only if John's words speak to us of Jesus would it claim to be valid for all. In sounding John's soul it is Christ we are seeking' (page 3).

John's experience of the impact of God is a sharing in Jesus' experience of this impact. We are not journeying alone. We are journeying with Jesus. We are invited to share in Jesus' communion with God.

John's experience of darkness is a sharing in Jesus' darkness.



- John teaches us that we are not alone in this journey.
- It is Jesus' longing that we share his journey.
- We are called to share in Jesus' communion with God.





## Gregory the Great c.600



‘Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary continued seeking him when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love.’

## Gregory the Great c.600

‘While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: ‘Mary’ ... as if to say: ‘Now recognise the one who recognises you’ ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him.’



## 2. Echoing the Impact (pages 5-12)

- John died aged 49 (1542-1591). Witnesses speak of his joyful serenity and gentleness
- John's father was disinherited for marrying below his status
- John's mother, with Francisco (12), and baby, John always searching for work.
- John in an institute for disadvantaged children, then in adolescence worked in a hospice
  - Aged 21 (1563) left nursing to join the Carmelites

- John did his studies in Salamanca and was ordained aged 25 (1567)
- John was thinking of leaving the Carmelites for a more solitary, rigorous life. Teresa of Avila (aged 52) persuaded him to stay and help reform the Order.
- 1572-1574 John was chaplain to the convent in Avila

- December 1577 to September 1578 (aged 35) in monastery cell-prison in Toledo: (isolation, malnutrition, flogging, putrid clothing, lice)
- likened his experience to Jonah: death and rising
- In the darkness John sensed the presence of another (of Jesus)

‘John’s writing emerges out of his experience, and at the point of his greatest weakness’(page 5).

‘In his darkness there was disclosed to him Christ’s desire to love him’.  
He discovered a God who ‘gives himself to the poor’(page 12).

- In the prison cell John composed the Spiritual Canticle (completed 1582)

Where have you hidden Beloved?

Why have you wounded my soul?

I went out to the wilderness calling for you  
but you were gone.

Oh shepherds keeping your watch in the hills,  
if by chance you meet with my Love  
tell Him I suffer in my lonely grief  
and I soon will die.

But I have searched for my Love in the mountains,  
I have searched among the meadows and the fields.  
He has poured out a thousand graces in them  
so my heart might be healed.

Yet my heart is not healed



### 3. Picking up the echo (pages 13-18)

- ‘God carries each person along a different road, so that you will scarcely find two people following the same route in even half of their journey to God’(Flame 3.59).
- ‘God treats us with order, gentleness, and in a way that suits the soul’(Ascent II.17.3)
- ‘Where words are born of love, it is better to leave them open, so that each person can benefit from them in their own way and at their own spiritual level – this, rather than tying the verses down to a meaning that not everyone could relish’(Canticle 2nd ed, 34.4).
- Others found him convincing. He was sensitive, flexible, and spoke from experience, ‘with authority’.

- ‘His word came from experience. This experience gave him access to others at their point of need’(page 13).
- ‘John’s greatest gift is not so much to tell us what to do, nor to pinpoint our place on the map, but to draw back the curtains and disclose the whole journey as real’(page 16).
- ‘John has a word for us which is relevant and sensitive. But it is also urgent. If his writing is on fire at his end, the flame of his own experience, it catches fire again at our end, as he sees our potential’(page 17).
- ‘John’s aim is not to extract yet more effort, but to open the path to what will genuinely meet the need’(page 17).



- ‘His word is not so much “perfection”, as if it were only about me becoming myself. He prefers to call it “union” – “union with God”, the “union of love”(page 17).

It is for this union that we are created.

It is for this union that we long.

‘What excludes us from John’s writing is not our being too low down some scale of perfection. For John the point of departure is a sense of need, a recognition that our life will not be complete till God is at its centre’(page 18).

‘We are excluded, not by where we are, but by an unwillingness to go farther. We are welcomed in when we wish to seek, to change, to be changed. We can hear John’s answer if we can share his question: “Beloved, where have you hidden?”(page 18)

- Jesus' first words in John's Gospel are addressed to two disciples: 'What are you looking for?' When they asked 'Where do you live?' he replied "Come and see".

The goal is not self-realisation but union and it is all-demanding and all-embracing.

## The Spiritual Canticle (John Michael Talbot)

Where have you hidden Beloved?

Why have you wounded my soul?

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but you were gone.

Oh shepherds keeping your watch in the hills,  
if by chance you meet with my Love  
tell Him I suffer in my lonely grief  
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