

## **John of the Cross**

**1542 – 1591**

*St John was canonized in 1726 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926.*

The message St John of the Cross writes is an important one for any on a spiritual journey, striving to know God more fully. His wisdom and maturity were beyond his years. This was recognised by St Teresa of Avila and she even commented that this annoyed her. He appears to have reached a state of holiness at a very young age. This emotional maturity sustained him through his imprisonment in exceedingly harsh conditions.

When we first come to know Christ, we experience joy and elation. In the decision to turn to faith, we enter our spiritual journey closer to God. John warns us however, that this journey is plagued also by darkness. Christians experience oscillating moments of witnessing God's radiance, and darkness, not feeling God's presence. As you mature as a Christian, your knowledge of God is never more than the sum total of these experiences. Further, on this spiritual journey, we fool ourselves by thinking that we can know or see God of this world. God is an infinite mystery – completely unknowable. God himself is the night.

The path to God is through Jesus Christ. The one seeking God must therefore share in Christ's crucifixion in order to experience the ultimate love of Christ's resurrection. It is in this self-annihilation that we experience the Dark Nights, the Night of the Senses and the Night of the Soul.

As God is not of this world, in our spiritual lives, we must learn to relinquish everything in order to receive God. This relinquishing is the first night. As you yield, you experience an absence of God. Yet, in fact you could not be closer to God, as God himself purges you of all that keeps you from knowing God Himself. Only in doing so, do we begin to comprehend the eternal presence of God, a new dawn in spiritual understanding, a mystical appreciation of what is to come.

However, even mystical knowledge must be cleared away. As humans cannot conceive of God, and mystical knowledge, "revelations of him which indicate that we are close to him" are human. These "exalted sentiments" are conceptual and of the senses and therefore hold us back from God. God is like the sun beaming through a window, but the windows are dirty. We must clean the windows in order to enjoy the full light of the sun.

This second night is far worse than the first. Having glimpsed the radiance of God, having felt God's warmth and presence, God seemingly completely withdraws. You seek God; you yearn for God, but God is 'hiding'. A spiritual 'hide-and-seek' causes complete dismay.

By focussing on the cross, the ultimate goal and symbol of God's dark love, you can survive the second night. Again, remembering that mystical knowledge is given and received, not sought after and learned, it is in this second night when God Himself chooses to bless the faithful. It is at this point that a mystical union can occur. God is the groom; you are the bride. However, all who seek do not ultimately find. This is the danger of the second Dark Night; we cannot know the will of God and God reveals Himself to those he chooses. One must remain steadfast in the second Dark Night or abandon hope of what you are seeking. What you seek is so pure, indeed an ecstasy, that to do so is without thought.

It is an ultimate surrender – a recognition that I myself am nothing and God is indeed The All. John urges us to remember, it is in this space that we are ever closer to God. God is at work in us to make us realise that what is of this world is not of His. "Trust and Obey" could easily be the motto, a comfort blanket, of the Dark Nights. You despair that God is far from you; yet in reality God is working in you.

Pope John Paul II, an ardent student of John of the cross, observed that the image of the dark night fittingly captures the suffering of our world: "... I refer to this specific world of suffering... Physical, moral and spiritual suffering, like sickness – like the plagues of hunger, like war, injustice, solitude, the lack of meaning in life, the very fragility of human existence, the sorrowful knowledge of sin, the seeming absence of God – are for the believer all purifying experiences which might be called the Night of Faith."

While the austerity and context of John's writings about the Dark Nights can seem remote from contemporary readership, he does without doubt speak directly to the Faithful who fear they have lost faith and to Christians who fear they have lost God. His message is indeed one of hope: when you are at your darkest moment in your relationship with God, God could not be nearer.