



### Profundus: seeking God in the dark night of the Soul Pt III

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is the third and final in my series of homilies for this year's Serenata Night Prayers in January. My theme has been 'Profundus: seeking God in the dark night of the Soul'. Last time I explored the concept of Profundus, that deep place of yearning for the distant light. Tonight, I want to ponder the idea of the dark night of the Soul.

The term 'dark night of the Soul' derives from the title of a poem written by the C16 Spanish mystic, San Juan de la Cruz (St John of the Cross) which in Spanish was 'Noche Oscura (canciones del alma)'. John of the Cross had been imprisoned in a tiny two by three metre cell with a tiny slit high up to let in a small amount of light; in this cell he wrote his 'Spiritual canticles' on paper smuggled into him by a guard. This famous poem, however, he wrote after his escape from the prison. He had been kept nine months in shadowy solitary confinement, it would not have been surprising that, in his reflections, he might have felt despair, but the inspiring thing for us is that, whatever despair he may transiently have felt, he never lost sight of the distant light at the top of his profundus, the deep well of his circumstance. So that when he did finally escape, he wrote:

<i>En la noche dichosa,</i>	That sweet night; a secret,
<i>En secreto, que nadie me veía</i>	Nobody saw me;
<i>Ni yo miraba cosa,</i>	I did not see a thing.
<i>Sin otra luz y guía</i>	No other light, no other guide
<i>Sino la que en corazón ardía.</i>	Than the one burning in my heart.

<i>Aquesta me guiaba</i>	The light led the way
<i>Mas cierto que la luz del mediodía</i>	More clearly than the risen sun
<i>A donde me esperaba</i>	To where he was waiting for me
<i>Quien yo bien me sabía,</i>	- The one I knew so intimately-
<i>En parte donde nadie parecía.</i>	In a place where no one could find us

He had been imprisoned by a rival religious order that condemned his interpretation of the call of Jesus. His treatment by these rival friars, which included frequent beatings, drove him closer not further from God. During his

nine months of captivity, it would be the Song of Solomon which gave him both hope and understanding.

Our reading tonight, Song of Solomon chapter 5, has sometimes itself been referred to as Solomon's 'dark night of the soul'. Listen again to some of that reading:

I opened for my beloved,  
But my beloved had left; he was gone.  
My heart sank at his departure.  
I looked for him but did not find him.  
I called him but he did not answer. [v6]

In the entire Song of Solomon, there is a choreography of spiritual dancing between the bride and the beloved. In this choreography, the progressive chapters lead to a dance of ever deeper meaning. Melody Hwang has described it this way:

Just when she was getting comfortable again, the Beloved comes knocking on (her) door, challenging her to another level of faith. How many times do we experience the same thing in our spiritual journey? God is always challenging us to go deeper and higher, and just when we think we've 'made it' He knocks again.

This continues throughout the book until, in the final chapter, the bride finally awakens fully to Christ the groom:

Under the apple tree I awakened you  
There your mother was in labour with you;  
There she who bore you was in labour.  
Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
As a seal upon your arm,  
For love is strong as death. [8:5b-6a]

Solomon had his dark night of the soul when he might have lost direct sight of the beloved; while he never lost faith, he also knew he had to delve deeper into the divine. St John of the Cross took heart from this journeying of which Solomon wrote and so himself never lost faith through his own dark night of the soul.

We each may have had dark nights of the soul; as I have related over these homilies, the past year has been one when I have very much felt deep in the profundus of despair, where words have often failed me. But through all of this, I

took comfort in two things. First, I could seek shelter; as it said in our psalm tonight:

Lead me to a rock higher than I [61:2]

This one line containing two strong messages. First, that there is a rock higher than I which may protect me; but second, that none of us was ever promised that there might not be times when we might need to beg for such protection.

These two deep meanings to that one line surely offer us profound hope even in the face of depression. But that is only the first thing from which I have taken comfort in these past months. For there is a second, namely that the rock is merely a place of refuge in the journey of life; it is not a destination; for the destination is only reached when I seek union with God – or as John of the Cross would put it. that

... night, that joined lover with the Beloved,  
Lover transformed in the Beloved.

Perhaps this is why St John of the Cross has offered such consolation over the centuries; for he spoke not of the dark night as a trap of despair, but as

That sweet night; a secret,  
Nobody saw me;  
I did not see a thing.  
No other light, no other guide  
Than the one burning in my heart.

Faith in the beloved helped him endure and took him to union with the beloved.

Mirabai Starr, a recent translator of John of the Cross' 'Dark night of the soul' has related how this work spoke to an emptiness in her life:

Eventually the juice drained out of my spiritual practices and the fireworks faded. By the time I reached my thirties, nothing remained but a quiet connection to emptiness. Out of that core of stillness, the seed planted long ago by John germinated and pushed up toward the light ... the deeper I stepped into the landscape of the text, the more powerful was the inexplicable sadness to which I woke each morning, and yet the more profound the stillness that seemed to spread itself inside me. [pxix]

This then took her to a new way of considering darkness in her life. Starr wrote:

This darkness of the soul you have come upon and cannot seem to come out of is (God's) final and greatest gift to you. Because it is only in this vast emptiness that he can enter, as your Beloved, and fill you. Where the darkness is nothing but unutterable radiance. [p3]

And, speaking directly of John's experience, she wrote:

After his miraculous escape from prison, John fell into a state of profound ecstasy. He had travelled through perfect darkness and emerged to find the living God waiting for him in the depths of his own heart. [p6]

Depression of spirit, the dark night of the soul that feels like it will never end is a heavier burden than any physical weight could ever be. The experience of it by each of us is unique and not readily receptive to easy remedies. I cannot speak into that dark night of the soul which you or anyone else might be experiencing other than to share the hope offered by John in these words:

No other light, no other guide  
Than the one burning in my heart.  
The light led the way  
More clearly than the risen sun  
To where he was waiting for me

God, the Beloved, waits for us, no matter what dark night may be upon us. We will later sing the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' and we will sing these words:

Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of thy peace.  
Breathe through the heats of our desire  
Thy coolness and thy balm  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire  
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still small voice of calm.

As we now come to a time of quiet reflection as Anthony Hunt plays the organ, may any dark night of our soul help us see the beauty of God's peace, and hear his 'still small voice of calm.