



Straight to the heart

Lent 2020 - Online Retreat with St. John of the Cross

Gospel: Conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4)

“[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” [...] The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” [...] Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” [...] The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” [...]

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [...] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...”



1. Meditation of the week: a way of interiority

We have contemplated the Transfigured Lord on Mt. Tabor and then followed him, understanding that it is by walking after him that we will safely reach the purpose of our journey, Mount Carmel. But the road is long. Jesus is tired and we begin to feel thirsty. Like the people in the desert, we are tempted to complain to Christ: “Give us water to drink!”

(Exod. 17:2) Fortunately, we stop at a spring in Samaria.

• The search for a source

We can easily find ourselves on the same quest as this anonymous woman who comes to fetch water at midday. This woman who has



had multiple love affairs is in search of dignity, while probably also feeling disenchanted by life and the contempt of men. We too can sometimes be disappointed by life, tempted by fatalism, while still secretly waiting for an event that will change our lives. This event is the encounter with Jesus.

Jesus stands before this woman, and thus before us, in a state of dependence: "Give me a drink" -- a clever way to remove all the religious and cultural prejudices that would have made this encounter between a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman impossible. But **Jesus crosses borders and lowers himself to reach us**; He makes us surrender any resistance which is marked by fear or contempt for the other. He makes us able to give to him. Surprisingly: I am able to give something to Jesus! "Give me a drink." But where can I find something to give him? Where is this source from which the Lord could drink? Saint John of the Cross comes to our aid here with his magnificent poem, Song of the soul that rejoices in knowing God through faith (translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, ocd). He knows where this hidden source is:

For I know well the spring
that flows and runs,
although it is night.

That eternal spring is hidden,
for I know well where it has its rise,
although it is night

John composed this poem while he was in prison in Toledo; the only noise he heard while the city slept was the flow of the Tagus River, which flowed at the foot of the Carmelite convent. In the night, he perceived a sign of life through this continuous flow. It was a tenuous reminder of God's hidden presence, within the ordeal of complete failure. John discerns this source particularly as being in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as revealed at the end of the same poem:

This living spring that I long for,
I see in this bread of life,
although it is night.

In the Ascent of Mount Carmel, John directs our search for the source to within ourselves. The Eucharist received in communion takes us to the depths of our hearts... Therein lies the spring we are looking for...

• Our interior, more than feelings

We see in the gospel how Jesus went about awakening this woman's spiritual desire. He uses a real teaching method based on interiority: physical thirst allows him to evoke the secret thirst of the Samaritan woman, her search for a sure and reliable love which gives her dignity and respect. This woman will thus make an in-depth discovery of herself, thanks to the Lord, because she agrees to look at herself in truth. Likewise in the spiritual life, God educates and guides us so that we seek Him not outside of ourselves, but inside. **The spiritual path is a way of interiorization which leads us to the depths of our being**: it is there that we meet God in truth at the same time that we find ourselves. The depth of the heart is thus both the place of our greatest intimacy, the sanctuary of our conscience, but also the space where God abides. So the closer I am to God in me, the more I become truly myself.

It is therefore very much an interior adventure, and St. John of the Cross magnificently reveals the divine method of instruction by which the Lord gradually draws us towards our heart, by inviting us to get rid of outward appearances. **On the path of prayer, if God often gives sensible graces at the beginning, these will gradually disappear.** This can be troubling, prompting us to react negatively: either we tell ourselves that prayer no longer brings any pleasure and that it is better to stop, or we think that we are not advancing in the Christian life since we no



longer feel anything. The first thought manifests a form of withdrawal and we need to ask ourselves: do we pray to please ourselves or to meet the Lord and love our neighbor better? If it is to love God and our neighbor, we must not stop at our pleasure. The second thought is an error in judgment: our spiritual maturity does not depend on what we “feel” in prayer. On the contrary, John of the Cross affirms that God purposely does not give us as much sensitive grace anymore: it is so that we grow up and become adults in the faith. A spiritual baby is entitled to multiple sensible consolations. An adult will find a deeper consolation, being somewhat wary of the little he or she feels or does not feel.
The important thing is to live prayer at the level of faith and not only in feeling.

- **God’s method of leading us to the center**

“This is God’s method to bring a soul step by step to the innermost good (...) God instructs people and makes them spiritual. He begins by communicating spirituality to them, in accord with their littleness or small capacity, through elements that are exterior, palpable, and accommodated to sense.” (Ascent II.17.4-5)

God meets us where we are but leads us further. Let’s make a comparison with wine: how can someone who cannot tell the difference between a table wine and a high quality wine appreciate a Grand Cru? You have to educate your palate little by little (cf. Living Flame of Love 1.5). Analogously, in the spiritual life, God educates our sensitivity by reforming it, by converting it. Our sensitive self must go through an experience of distance and emptiness so that a deeper and spiritual sensitivity awakens in us. Once this deeper sensitivity is awakened, we will no longer taste the graces of God in the same way. We will no longer pray in the same way: prayer will become simpler and stripped of reasoning and feelings.

“In the measure that souls approach spirit in their dealings with God, they divest and

empty themselves of the ways of the senses, of discursive and imaginative meditation. (...) There is a frequently quoted spiritual axiom that runs: *Gustato spiritu, desipit omnis caro* (Once the taste and savor of the spirit is experienced, everything carnal is insipid). The ways of the flesh afford neither profit nor delight.” (Ascent II.17.5)

Someone who has tasted [the famed Bordeaux wine] Saint-Emilion will no longer appreciate the table wine he requested before this great wine ... Those who improve their relationship with God will experience less of a need to feel things in prayer. The distancing of our sensitivity in the spiritual life therefore gives us more freedom to move forward. We no longer make the quality of our prayer life depend on our feelings. It is not a question of rejecting feeling but of giving it its right place. **We know in faith that God acts when we give Him time, and this is enough.** It is a sign that we have grown in our spiritual life. If we imagine ourselves as a cross-section of a tree, we will say with John of the Cross that we no longer live at the level of the “bark” of our sensitivity (the most exterior part) but rather at the most interior level of the spirit, approaching the depth of our heart where God dwells.

- **The means of meditation to worship in spirit and in truth**

To advance on this path of interiority, one must choose the appropriate means. John of the Cross says that it is normal at the beginning of the spiritual life to make use of reliable places that help us reach the Lord. But we must be careful that we do not attach more importance to the places themselves than to the presence of the Lord himself. It is important to choose environments conducive to our prayer life and not for our visual pleasure.





“Even though it is better to pray in a place that is more respectable, one should, in spite of this, choose the place that hinders least the elevation of sense and spirit to God. This is the interpretation we should give to Christ’s reply to the query of the Samaritan woman about the place best suited for prayer — the temple or the mountains. His answer was that true prayer is annexed neither to the temple nor to the mountain, but that the adorers who please the Father are those who adore him in spirit and truth [Jn. 4:20-24].

“Churches and quiet places are dedicated and suitable for prayer (...) Nevertheless, in a matter of communion with God as interior as this, that place should be chosen that least occupies and attracts the senses. (...) To give us an example, our Savior chose for his prayer solitary places, those that raised the soul to God and were undistracting to the senses (such as mountains that are elevated above the earth and usually barren of objects that would provide recreation for the senses) [Mt. 14:23]

“To remind us of this, the Apostle said: Behold your bodies are living temples of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within you [1 Cor. 3:16]. This thought brings to mind the affirmation of Christ that we quoted: The true adorers should adore in spirit and truth [Jn. 4:24]” (Ascent III.39.2, III.40.1)

So let’s strive this week to intensify our spiritual thirst for God and to seek Him not just within four square walls but in the center of ourselves. And there, in our hearts, let us worship Him in spirit and in truth.

fr. Jean-Alexandre of the Lamb, ocd
(Avon convent)

2. Three spiritual practices for this week

1. What image speaks to me most about my spiritual thirst?
2. I take the time to look at the place where I usually pray: Is the space conducive to prayer and recollection? Would I be prepared to change it?
3. How much importance do I give to ‘feelings’ in my prayer?
How can I grow in faith?



3. Pray each day of the week

Monday, March 16: God's good pleasure

"But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." (Lk. 4:30)

"In his life [Jesus Christ] had no other gratification, nor desired any other, than the fulfillment of his Father's will, which he called his meat and food." (Ascent I.13, citing John 4:34)

What is the inner impulse that guides me to act and move forward?
Is it my pleasure or the desire to please God?



Tuesday, March 17: The sweetness of Jesus' words

"And now with all our heart we follow you; we fear you and seek your presence." Dan. 3:41

"And the Samaritan woman forgot the water and the water jar for the sweetness of God's words." (Living Flame of Love 1.6, citing John 4:28)

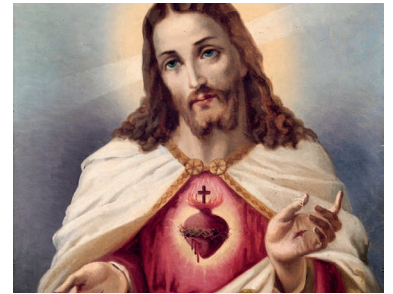
I rekindle in my memory a significant moment in my prayer life and
I take advantage of it to refocus on the love of Jesus.

Wednesday, March 18: the remembrance of God

"But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life..." (Deut. 4:9)

"Strive always to keep God present and to preserve within yourself the purity he teaches you." (Sayings of Light and Love, 142)

How do I watch over my heart, over the thoughts that dwell in it?
I awaken the memory of God in me.



Thursday, March 19: the faith of Saint Joseph

"For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith." (Rom. 4:13)

"...only faith, hope and charity can unite the soul with God in this life." (Ascent II.6.1)

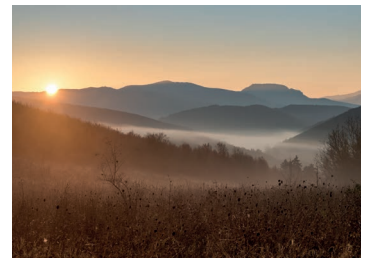
With the help of St. Joseph, I make an act of faith in God
in a concrete situation today.

Friday, March 20: true love of God

"... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30)

"The soul that walks in love neither tires others nor grows tired." (Sayings, 97)

Has the love of God become for me a daily strength, a vital energy?



Saturday, March 21: my way of loving God

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hos. 6:6)

"Should a soul become bound to the delight of sensory devotion, it will never succeed in passing on to the strength of spiritual delight..." (Ascent III.40.2)

What is my way of loving God in my prayer life?
How could I make greater progress?