



The true spiritual person

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

Gospel: The Passion of the Lord (Mt 27:11-14, 45-49)

« Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. (...)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land[a] until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. »



1. Meditation of the week: „He emptied himself”

Jesus publicly entered Jerusalem and the crowds acclaimed him as their Messiah: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mt. 21:9). But the crowds are fickle and within days they’ll be shouting at Pilate: “Crucify him!” (Mt. 27:22). Jesus becomes the target of an outbreak of human violence

amid the screams and blows. The contrast is striking: in the face of violent hatred, he remains quiet and enters into silence.

• The silence that spoke volumes about Jesus

The Lamb is now surrounded by voracious wolves, those who want him dead out of



jealousy or greed. And Jesus doesn't defend himself. He chose to complete his journey on that terrible night in Gethsemane, and he won't take back the word he gave his Father: "not what I want but what you want" (Mt. 26:39). He'll remain the Christ who is meek and humble of heart when faced with people who don't understand. Beginning with Pilate, who was "greatly amazed" at this mysterious prisoner who was still in control of himself and didn't try to save his life. Silence is often something negative for us: an absence of words, an empty void close to nothingness, an absurd state. However, here it's loaded with meaning: this silence of Jesus in his Passion isn't a mark of fatalism ('oh, what's the use of answering, they've already decided my fate'); it's an act of communication beyond words: how can the Word of God in person say anything in such a climate of hatred and suspicion? **His word will be his action** – and a paradoxical action since it will be a passive one. As John of the Cross writes, **Jesus' greatest action will be his Passion**. He does his greatest work at the very moment when he seems most passive, on the cross. The silence of the Cross becomes a word that crosses time and history. He denounces all our idle chatter and empty words; so many useless and harmful speeches all about self-promotion, demeaning others, justifying ourselves, manipulating other people,... All the things that we also hear surrounding Jesus in his Passion. But Jesus is silent. He goes forward resolutely. He makes Pilate responsible for his word, and ourselves as well: "You say so." As the French say, 'Assume ce que tu dis' (Be responsible for what you say). From now on, Jesus won't say one more word to men. His last word will be a cry to his Father, with the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

• The breast that love has stricken very sore

John of the Cross, so in love with God, meditated deeply on the Passion of the Lord, especially when he himself shared in the Lord's

Passion during his nine months of imprisonment and interior darkness in the solitary confinement cell of Toledo's Carmelite convent. He sought to delve into the heart of Jesus and to express his mystery through a secular song of two peasant lovers, which he transposed a *lo divino*, that is, with a spiritual meaning. The Lord is like a little shepherd, who's in love with humanity—as if we were like a shepherdess. His drama is that **this love is not reciprocal**: she forgets him and the excess of love that he bears for her still tears his heart to pieces. It's a kind of masterly rereading of the Old Testament: "[she] went after her lovers, and forgot me" (Ho. 2:13), God says in speaking of unfaithful Israel. Then the Son comes to the foreign land of our humanity—accepting the risk of being wounded even more—and he finally decides, realizing that this is the only way to prove his love to his shepherdess and to attract her attention, to climb the tree of the cross in order to be exposed there, his heart torn not by the spear but by "his exceeding charity wherewith he loved us" (Ep. 2:4 Douay-Rheims 1899). Obviously, each of us must be able to identify with this beautiful, yet ungrateful shepherdess...



A shepherd-boy his grief is brooding o'er
Alone, uncomforted, disconsolate.

His thought is fix'd upon his heart's true mate;
His breast with love is stricken very sore.

He weeps not for some love-wound giv'n of yore,
For no such thing could pain and grieve him so,
E'en though it overcharg'd his heart with woe
He weeps because she thinks of him no more.

And so, because she thinks of him no more
- That shepherd-maid of his, so fair to see -
He lets his alien foes treat cruelly
The breast that love has stricken very sore.



'Woe,' cries the shepherd-boy, 'Woe be in store
For him that's come betwixt my love and me,
So that she wishes not to know or see
This breast that love has stricken very sore.'

Then climbs he slowly, when much time is o'er,
Into a tree, with fair arms wide outspread.
And, clinging to that tree, forthwith is dead,
For lo! his breast was stricken very sore.
(Poem called El Pastorcico, transl. by E. Allison Peers)

• To be a true friend of Jesus

John of the Cross understands that Jesus' Passion of Love isn't an accident but is the key to reading the existence of the Lord. The whole life of Jesus intensifies in a maximum intensity that will reveal the fullness of his love for us. This necessarily has consequences for our spiritual life.

As we saw in the second week, John of the Cross clearly states that **the way to holiness is a way of interior imitation of Jesus**. It's a path of love that takes us to the very limits of our capacity to give our lives. But it involves living, like Jesus, a form of passion and resurrection. So John of the Cross shows that the darkneses of our life, its trials, are not absurd things, but can be lived as a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ. In particular, the night of our sensitivity, as well as that of our spirit, are communions in the life of Jesus because he himself experienced them. Even though Jesus is holy and a stranger to sin, in a sense he did not allow his sensitivity to lead him on; even Jesus himself—and this is a very bold theological statement by John of the Cross—experienced a spiritual night with a sense of abandonment that his cry to the Father reveals. Therefore, **Jesus has already experienced for us and with us all the trials that mark our spiritual life**. If we want to be His disciples, we must imitate Him to the very end out of love, because it's in times of difficulty that true friends are found. **Do we really want to be Jesus' friends?** Or do

we just want to be his friend when it makes us happy and people compliment us? True friendship means loving the friend and not loving ourselves through the experience of friendship. Are we seeking the Lord or are we seeking ourselves in him? ...

« A person makes progress only by imitating Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father but through him, as he states himself in St. John (Jn. 14:6). Elsewhere he says: I am the door; anyone who enters by me shall be saved (Jn. 10:9). Accordingly, I would not consider any spirituality worthwhile that wants to walk in sweetness and ease and run from the imitation of Christ.

Because I have said that Christ is the way and that this way is a death to our natural selves in the sensory and spiritual parts of the soul, I would like to demonstrate how this death is patterned on Christ's, for he is our model and light.

First, during his life he certainly died spiritually to the sensitive part, and at his death he died naturally. He proclaimed during his life that he had no place whereon to lay his head (Mt. 8:20). And at his death he had less.

Second, at the moment of his death, he was certainly annihilated in his soul, without any consolation or relief, since the Father had left him that way in innermost aridity in the lower part. He was thereby compelled to cry out: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Mt. 27:46). This was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that he had suffered in his life.

And by it he accomplished the most marvelous work of his whole life, surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles that he had ever performed on earth or in heaven. That is, he brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace. The Lord achieved this, as I say, at the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things: in his reputation before people, since in watching him die they mocked him instead of esteeming



him; in his human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from his Father, for he was forsaken by his Father at that time, annihilated and reduced to nothing, so as to pay the debt fully and bring people to union with God.

David says of him: *Ad nihilum redactus sum et nescivi [I was stupid and ignorant] (Ps. 73:22), that those who are truly spiritual might understand the mystery of the door and way (which is Christ) leading to union with God, and that they might realize that their union with God and the greatness of the work they accomplish will be measured by their annihilation of themselves for God in the sensory and spiritual parts of their souls. When they are reduced to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between their souls and God will be an accomplished fact. This union is the most noble and sublime state attainable in this life.*

The journey, then, does not consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual feelings, but in the living death of the cross, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior.

I will not enlarge on this, though I would like to continue discussing the matter because from my observations Christ is little known by those who consider themselves his friends. For we see them going about seeking in him their own consolations and satisfactions, loving themselves very much, but not loving him very much by seeking his bitter trials and deaths. » (The Ascent of Mount Carmel II.7.8-12)

• In order to ascend, we must descend!

So, the “true spiritual person” discovers that the way to God is through an annihilation of his egoistic self (and not his humanity!). Our ‘old man’ must pass through death so that the ‘new man’ may live (Cf. Ro. 6:6). The annihilation of our egoistic self opens up access to the whole of God. “To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing” (Ascent I.13.11). And then we discover **that our holiness won’t consist in the accumulation of heroic deeds but in the willingness to live what is asked of us with as much love as possible.** We thought that in order to reach the Lord we had to climb ever higher towards the summit of Carmel; and we understand that **it’s, in fact, a question of descending ever lower, to join Jesus in his loving humiliation.** However, the second reading of Passion Sunday told us: “He emptied himself (...) he humbled himself” (Phil. 2:5-11). It is by joining Jesus in his “kenosis”, his annihilation, that we finally will be lifted up and exalted like him by the Father. But it’s God who will do the uplifting, not us! To the extent that we are obedient children, just like Christ is, we will participate in his glorification. “Whoever humbles himself will be exalted!” (Mt. 23:12). Jesus was the first. Numerous saints followed him and are waiting for us to join them. So, having “this mind among [ourselves], which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5) let’s enter with love into his Passion so that, in friendship, we may unite with him in his Resurrection. Blessed Holy Week to all of you!

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Three spiritual practices for this week

1. I’m choosing a moment during my week to spend some time in silence with Jesus.
2. I’m praying with the poem El Pastorcico, identifying with the shepherdess.
3. How far am I willing to go to experience true friendship with the Son of God? Do I desire to be a “true spiritual person”?



Holy Monday, April 6: the way of the Servant

« Here is my servant, whom I uphold » (Is 42,1)

« Who will not be perplexed (...) Christ is born in a humble state, lives in poverty, and dies in misery; and not only did he fail to reign temporally upon the earth, but he was subject to a lowly people until he died » (Ascent 19,7)

What image of Jesus usually comes up in my prayer? That of the servant, the miracle-worker, the gracious speaker, ...?



« Le Christ lavant les pieds des apôtres »
vitrail à l'église Saint-Étienne-du-Mont



Holy Tuesday, April 7: seeking the hidden God

« Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me » (Jn 13, 33)

« Oh, then, soul, most beautiful among all creatures, so anxious to know the dwelling place of your Beloved so you may go in search of him and be united with him, now we are telling you that you yourself are his dwelling and his secret inner room and hiding place. » (The Spiritual Canticle 1.7)

The glorious face of Jesus will hide behind the disfigured face of the Suffering Servant. I'm searching for the presence of God in the suffering people I encounter, as well as in my deepest center.

Holy Wednesday, April 8: the Passover within

« The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. » (Mt 26, 18)

« A shepherd-boy his grief is brooding o'er
Alone, uncomforted, disconsolate.
His thought is fix'd upon his heart's true mate;
His breast with love is stricken very sore. » (El Pastorcico, Stanza 1)

Is my innermost dwelling place prepared for the Lord
to keep his Passover within me?



Holy Thursday, April 9: the fountain of the Eucharist

« Take, eat; this is my body. » (Mt 26, 26)

« The eternal fount is hidden in living bread,
That we with life eternal may be fed,
Although 'tis night. »

(Song of the soul that rejoices to know God by faith, stanza 9)

I choose to live in faith on this Holy Thursday when I will not be able to physically attend the liturgy. I give thanks for this incredible gift of the Eucharist, with the help, for example, of the celebrations broadcast on the internet.

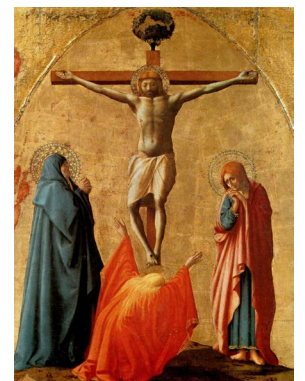


Good Friday, April 10: the death of love

« Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. » (Jn 19, 30)

« Then climbs he slowly, when much time is o'er,
Into a tree, with fair arms wide outspread.
And, clinging to that tree, forthwith is dead,
For lo! his breast was stricken very sore. »
(El Pastorcico, stanza 5)

From the deepest part of my being, for one long, unhurried moment, I welcome this love of Jesus who died for me and I give thanks for the salvation of the whole world.



« Crucifixion » Masaccio, 1426



Holy Saturday, April 11: the silent love of Mary

« *Jesus' mother stood beside his cross.* » (Jn 19, 25)

« The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son,
and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence,
and in silence must it be heard by the soul. »
(Sayings of Light and Love 100)

With the Virgin Mary, I keep watch in faith and I prepare to let myself be overwhelmed by the great joy of our God who resurrects the dead.

