

Third Talk

FATHER, I PUT MY LIFE IN YOUR HANDS

In our last talk we looked at the possibility of picking up the pieces of life when meaning seems to evaporate, when trusted patterns break down. Now I will share a little bit with you of the person of St. John of the Cross. I do so in the hope that we may be able to take heart from the example of someone who walked this path, someone other than Jesus. John speaks to people who feel unable to change and I know that there are moments in my life when I feel trapped like that. Very often we feel ourselves caught, knowing there is something more, something that is pulling us forward. For John, that is always a call to reach out to God.

John's life was moulded by two things: by pain and by love. When I look at the people who have made the great transition on the journey of life, I discover that pain and love keep crossing paths the whole time. It happens in the whole dynamic of human growth. These are two strong elements. So I would ask you to hold that in your consciousness as we keep on this reflection. John also stood at the threshold of life at its raw edge, as so many poor people do. As I said in my last talk, he assures us that what is beyond is not chaos but God's Spirit drawing new life forth from us. John shows us that love changes people: you and I have enough experience of life to realise that. So at the outset of this reflection, I pray that God's love may help us to trust and to be brave.

As I said, John was exposed to life's open wound and he was formed by that exposure - by love and by pain. His father, a rich cloth merchant, fell in love with an orphan girl, Catherina. He married her and was disinherited because she was beneath his social status. From then on, life was a struggle for the young couple. After a few years John's father fell sick and died, leaving his wife with three children. The widow moved from place to place, looking for some form of livelihood to support her and her children. So John's childhood was a highly destabilised one. He grew up at the precarious edge of a very status-conscious society. We begin to see something in his social milieu of the rumblings of power in society. Where there is ranking, there is power. It was the poverty he had experienced, however, that was made fruitful by the tenderness and strength of his mother, who was determined to make something of her young family. At a very early age John was put into an institution for poor children. When he reached his teens, he was transferred to work in a hospice for people dying from sexually transmitted diseases. There again in the hospital he saw their pain of life. He also experienced the care of life. So love and pain, care and suffering, exist

side by side. In him was slowly being born a feeling for the pain of people, having experienced pain himself.

At the age of twenty-one John sought to enter a Carmelite friary. He hoped through that to deepen and also to universalise the love that he was beginning to feel for humanity. He wanted to make that love grow out from him, because that is what religious life is supposed to do to us. Religious life deepens our love and our capacity to love. At the same time it makes our love more selfless and much more expansive. But he found that the Carmelite friary did not satisfy the longing that was inside him. Because the friary was in a very academic setting, he came up against the oneness that is part of university living. Very soon he began wondering if he were wasting his time. The religious life was not fulfilling any of his needs. So many of us and of our Brothers have gone through a similar experience and have asked ourselves if religious life was meant for us.

It was under these circumstances that John began to realise that the dissatisfaction he was feeling was really a call to reach out to God. This restlessness often arises not from the external circumstances of life but from our inner questioning of ourselves. So when he tried to see what he could do to deepen his commitment, he met St. Teresa of Avila. He found in her a woman of fire, of commitment and of real passion, a person driven by the Spirit. Teresa took him under her wing and helped to form him. Under her guidance he found that warmth and that commitment that were so necessary in his spiritual formation. Then she invited him to help in the reform of the Order. That is something that we ourselves are trying to do at present, when we speak of restructuring. New wineskins and new wine are what we are talking about. The restructuring of the heart and that of the outer structures need to take place at the same time.

All the friars did not welcome this reform of the Carmelites. Some of them caught hold of John, took him off to a lonely friary and put him in a cell - quite a common procedure for recalcitrant monks in those days. There in the darkness of solitary confinement, John was punished and left in a half-starved state. His greatest suffering, however, was mental because from the conversation of the friars outside his cell - which he was meant to overhear - he gathered that Teresa believed he had betrayed her. The information that had been fed to her, according to the friars, was that John was in hiding: he had run away and abandoned the reform of the Order. That hurt him far more than the worst physical pain - that someone who trusted him should feel betrayed. So he felt, as did Jesus in the Garden. When someone one loves and trusts betrays one, that betrayal has pain and love intertwined. Now all that he believed in was in ruins. So from the darkness of his cell and the far more intense darkness clouding his soul, John speaks of discovering the love of God

through staying faithful to prayer to Jesus, the Son of God. He puts it in this beautiful image: *"It is like someone sitting down in a dark room and after a while he begins to realise that there is someone else in the room. You thought you were alone but as your eyes become accustomed to the dark, you discover someone else sitting there."*

Around the Congregation the Brothers ask me when will we be free from all the suffering we are now undergoing from the issue of child abuse. They feel that we have already suffered enough from it. In reply I keep telling them that the suffering will end when we accept it. When we really accept it with all its ramifications and all its horror; when we accept all the pain that it has caused us and the truth of it all, without any denial and allow God to take over: only then will it go. Already we have covered a good bit of the journey but we still have some way to go. Like John, we too only discover rejection when we have grown accustomed to the dark. Somehow, when I view that image for myself, a lot of my fear goes, knowing that it is in the dark of my own life that I will discover the hidden flower, the rose of life. It was in this darkness that John discovered God's unpaid for love for him: *"I loved you with an everlasting love."* Try as much as you want, nothing can take that love away. I may not recognise it but it is still there - the love of a God, who gives himself to the poor and the broken. That pattern will disclose all that John has to say.

Brothers, John of the Cross is someone we know only through the written word. But there was one of us who walked that path. We spoke to him, touched him and heard him. He was Colm Keating. I am not going to speak about his life because this is his home. This is where the story of his life unfolds and there are men present here who were very close to him. We believe only when there is no reason to believe, when everything that we held dear is taken away. Everything else is tokenism. We know what Colm Keating went through at the end of his life. Like Jesus, to die in a situation where there is no light except the conviction deep down that one has been loved and in that conviction to be able to say, *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"* - as Jesus did, and as Colm did: that is to make the ultimate sacrifice. I remember the time when Colm became superior general. At the time it was obvious what was going to happen. When we had a break just before the straw vote, I remember saying to him, "Colm, the writing is on the wall!" He replied, "Philip, nothing in life can prepare you adequately for moments like this." (These words came back to haunt me on a later occasion!) He would often say, "There is no magic wand for this". True! There is no magic wand for what you do in life. You lay down the path as you walk, and walk you must. It is a cold, deep reality and Colm lived that call.

Finally, Brothers, the only thing that will make us remain true to this relationship we have developed with God is our prayer. Edmund Rice had this wonderful advice, "*Be intent on prayer*." "I have often tried to get into the mind of Edmund as to why he used the word *intent*. There is something very deliberate in his choice of this word. Brothers, you are going into prayer now for a half-hour. I am asking you during these days of retreat to spend 5-6 hours in prayer each day. It is a chance you have at this time to pray and you may find the time long. But remember if you run out of steam, stay there quietly. You are only half the conversation. Listen for God. As you go off now, I would ask you to take with you the whole mind of Jesus, exemplified in the passage that follows. It is from Luke 22: 39-46. Try and enter into the mind of Jesus, who realises that he is going to die. Nothing is going to save him. He knows they are coming to take him away. He is at that moment when everything is to be taken away from him and he is going to die. It is the moment when he will be left naked before his enemies. What was Jesus thinking of at that moment? What prepared Jesus to be able to say, Yes, at that moment?

Look at your own life. What has prepared you up to now so that you may be ready to say : Not my will but yours be done! This is the ultimate prayer. What has moulded you and brought you to this moment?

Think of the times in your own life when you have been at moments like this and you have been faithful. What made you faithful? Do not worry about the other part of it. Be like God. God does not worry about your infidelity, so look at your faithfulness, your fidelity. God knows human nature and we are moving to the fullness of human nature. What makes you faithful?

Whom do you live with who mirrors the faithfulness that strengthens you? Everything you are doing is to bring you to that moment of trying to say to God as meaningfully as possible, "Your will, not mine be done!"

Later, when you come together in your small groups, share what happened to you when you were praying. Share your feelings, not ideas. If you were uncomfortable, then share what was causing your discomfort? If your feeling was of joy, why was that? Try to stay at that level while you are sharing, because that is the level of your body and of your heart and of your feelings. In this way you will discover the real God within you.

"He then left to make his way as usual to the Mount of Olives, with the disciples following. When he reached the place he said to them, 'Pray not to be put to the test.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw away, and knelt down and prayed. 'Father', he said, 'If you are willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.' Then an angel appeared to him, coming from heaven to give him strength. In his anguish he prayed even more earnestly,

and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. When he rose from prayer he went to the disciples and found them sleeping from sheer grief. And he said to them, 'Why are you asleep? Get up and pray not to be put to the test.' "

The person of Jesus calls us through pain to a union of love that will allow God free access into our lives.

Look at your own life. What has moulded you?

Recount times you have been faithful. Do you know others who have been led to love through pain?