

Daily Meditation 08-24-22

John of the Cross on the Sacredness of Creation, Part II

Good morning.

We continue our journeying with John of the Cross who was in so many ways a creation-centered mystic. When he was a novice master, he would take the young novices out into nature and just have them wander through nature on their own for an hour or so. And he got criticized for that: Why aren't they studying books? Why aren't they reading the Bible? And he was just fully aware that nature is revelation too, and has so much to teach us.

So, in this poem that we're dealing with, this powerful and memorable poem, he was talking about his Beloved being the mountain, being the lonely wooded valleys and the strange islands and resounding rivers. He also talks about the whistling of love-stirring breezes. A tranquil night, not a dark night, but a tranquil night in which the spirit is elevated to the divine light, and is quiet. He talks about the rising dawn, the break of day, when one's eyes are open to an unexpected light.

Now he often in his poetry refers to the breezes, the whistling air; he talks about the whistling of love-stirring breezes. We have to understand again that in Spain was a hot country, even in John's day, much hotter today, thanks to climate change. But they had no fans, electric fans, they had no air conditioning. And so you can imagine how blessed, what a blessed gift, the breezes were. So I think that he's very sensitive to breezes and I suspect most people were in that country at that time.

But he gives the breezes an adjective: love-stirring breezes, the whistling of love-stirring breezes. So he says the love-stirring breezes can be understood as the attributes and graces of the Beloved, by which means "this union assails the soul and lovingly touches it in its substance; this is the most exalted delight of all the soul here enjoys."

And in these communications of the bridegroom and the bride: the bride is the soul, the bridegroom is divinity; two things are experienced: knowledge and a feeling of delight. And it is whistling because sound comes along with it. Because the delight of hearing, he says, is more spiritual than that even of feeling.

So all of this is wrapped up in just a few words for John of the Cross; he's talking about many deep things and experiences at the same time. Poets do this. That's their gift. That's their job.

He also talks about silent music and sounding solitude. Now both of those phrases, of course, are paradoxical: silent music. When is music silent? He says silent music is when the soul becomes aware of wisdom's wonderful harmony. And the soul is a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concepts and melodies of the world.

Creatures are the entrance for this harmonious symphony of sublime music. Remember how Hildegard of Bingen said that all of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation in honor and celebration of creation, and that's something very close to what John is saying.

As far as sounding solitude goes, he says this is almost identical to the silent music. But again, it is how each individual creature receives the glory of divinity, the glory of creation, and praises and gives thanks in its own way... in its own way. He says each one possesses God's gifts differently. Each one sings his or her praises differently, and all of them together form a symphony of love. Just like music.

So all this is an affirmation of the sacredness of nature on John's part. And again, on our part, I think it requires of us today to turn into poetry our experiences of the grand liturgy of the universe. The universe is so vast, and so amazing and filled with grace. John experienced that in his world, and our world is a bigger world now.

But notice how this teaching culminates: he quotes from the book of Wisdom: "The Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world and all faiths give testimony to God."

So this is kind of an ultimate statement on the sacredness of nature. And finally, we find the supper that refreshes and deepens love, supper affords lovers refreshment and satisfaction and love, he says, and, of course, implicit in that too, is the Lord's Supper, the last Supper, the Eucharist, too, is this kind of refreshing and deepening of love, a giving of things. For what? For creation. That is what, as Thomas Aquinas said, the Sabbath is all about: it is a thank-you, a day of Thank You for creation. Thank you.

Thank you, John of the Cross for this wonderful creation-centered poetry.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.