

## **“Mine are the heavens ... ”**

*Antony Lester, O.Carm.*

John of the Cross was born in 1542 in Fontiveros in Spain. His father died whilst he was an infant the family was left destitute. They travelled for years from place to place in search of work and settled in Medina del Campo when John was 9 years of age. The family was at the bottom of the heap in a status-conscious society. John was placed in an institute for deprived children and then as a teenager he worked in a hospice for people dying from syphilis.

At 21 he joined the Carmelites and eventually became involved in the movement for reform within the Order. He died when he was 49. John was a poet (he is the national poet of Spain - Spain's Shakespeare) and a mystic. Whilst his poems are great works in their own right they are also poems of encounter. They speak of a lover who has moved on and for whom we must seek, finding our way in the darkness:

*Where have you hidden Beloved, and left me groaning? You fled like a stag having wounded me; I went out in search of you, and you were gone.*

The one we seek is not someone we have never known. The reason we seek is because we have already known the touch of the Beloved. For John the whole world has known this touch. Just as a child shares the visible characteristics and inner traits of its parents, so it is with creation. Everything is "made through Christ and is clothed with his beauty and goodness" (Liturgy). Creation is on our side - "for us". We and our world are caught up in the awesome relationship which is the love life of the Trinity and which is continuously poured out.

In his book *The Impact of God*, Iain Matthew reminds us that John's poetry speaks of a waterfall the size of an ocean which is the Father surrendering to the Son, Son self-emptying to the Father, Spirit-water spilling out to create a universe; the cosmos comes to sip it, though all - heaven, people, hell - are already drenched with it! And this source is within us! Jesus tells the woman at the well, "the water I shall give will turn into a spring inside you, welling up to eternal life". Yet all this happens "by night" beyond the place where our senses can see.

Much religious language is helpful when things are going well - for times we would call times of blessing, times when we can see and God is close. John's language takes over when we find that our normal language can't cope. His is language for times of darkness, panic and chaos; language for the night.

This night, though, is not empty or fruitless because nowhere is empty; even hell itself is "drenched" with God's loving. The night is filled with the presence of the Beloved. It does not keep us out but rather invites us in to walk along roads that are unknown to us, trusting that we are held by the hand of one who knows the way and who loves us. And slowly as we walk we find that we are being set free. The night is not passive but hugely active, not an empty but a healing darkness - a darkness in which we are set free to love.

It is in this context that we can take a part of one of John's works for our silent reflection today. It comes not from his poetry but from *The Prayer of a soul taken with Love* and is the conclusion of that prayer:

*Mine are the heavens  
and mine is the earth.  
Mine are the nations,  
the just are mine and mine the sinners.  
The angels are mine,  
and the Mother of God, and all things are mine;  
and God himself is mine and for me,  
because Christ is mine and all for me.  
What do you ask, then, and seek, my soul?  
Yours is all of this, and all is for you.  
Do not engage yourself in something less,  
nor pay heed to the crumbs which fall from your Father's table.  
Go forth and exult in your Glory!  
Hide yourself in It and rejoice,  
and you will obtain the deepest desires of your heart.*