

Saint John of the Cross was a poet, and his writings include both poems and more systematic texts on the inner life as a journey toward, and within, the reality of God. His best-known works are *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (of which *The Dark Night of the Soul* is a section) and *The Living Flame of Love*. The phrase 'the dark night of the soul' is the sum total of most people's knowledge of John's work, and the phrase is usually misunderstood. It is often believed to be a pathological condition of the religious life, an illness, a kind of spiritual depression. But to see it this way is to misunderstand John of the Cross very seriously, for, in writing about the dark night, he is writing of the very nature of faith itself.

It was in Soho that the writings of John of the Cross began to make sense to me and to express much of what I was feeling and seeing. Here I was encountering people who were entering a kind of darkness in which they seemed to be lost, but through which in fact they would find themselves, a darkness that was a way of progress. People who had found no nourishment in conventional religion were encountering, sometimes with the aid of drugs, levels of reality of which they had been unaware. They were coming into contact with experiences that traditionally had been seen as 'mystical'.

Here too I was finding that my own life was undergoing a shift from the pseudo-certainties of youth to a more obscure and interior way, a way of faith that was at home with darkness, uncertainty, and humility in the face of mystery. And this is essentially what John of the Cross is writing about. His concern is with the transition from intellectual understanding (or failure to understand), to a deeper and more obscure level of knowing that, following early Eastern theologians, he calls 'unknowing' (*agnosia*). He claims that in order to make progress in knowing and loving God, and in attaining full humanity, we need to come to the end of our conventional 'certainties' and move beyond it to a new level of knowing. This new level is the way of faith, a way of knowledge through darkness. The purpose of the Christian life, and the aim of spiritual direction, is to help people enter the dark night of faith. Yet much conventional religion simply helps people to find a refuge from this darkness. It offers protection rather than encounter. Thus the mystical teaching of John of the Cross undermines, and challenges, forms of conventional religion that rely for their success on false certainties and rigid forms.

The way of faith, John insists, is necessarily obscure. We drive by

St John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross (1543–91), the Spanish mystic, has been a major influence on my life and understanding. On the surface this may seem very odd. What can a Carmelite friar living four hundred years ago have to contribute to life and work in the inner city at the end of the twentieth century? At a superficial level there would seem to be no connection.

night, only seeing a little of the way ahead. We make progress precisely by not understanding, by darkness. In Soho I was coming to see how important this truth is in pastoral work and in political struggle. We need to act on the basis of faith, on an insight that is nourished by darkness, a conviction that has its roots in silence, a vision that is not clear but is firmly based in that mysterious reality which is the darkness of God. If social and political action is not to decay into fanaticism, it needs those deep roots.

For John of the Cross, the dark night is not a negative and destructive experience: it is the experience of fire and light, of the living flame of the love of God, as experienced by finite beings. Faith blinds and dazzles the intellect; the sheer intensity of faith overwhelms it. And the darkness grows always deeper. For the dark night is not a phase, it is a symbol by which John speaks of the whole of reality. All our life and all our activity takes place in the context of this darkness.

The night comes upon us. We are never prepared for it, for the essence of the night is the sense of being out of control, of being bound and controlled by the mysterious working of the Spirit of God. Only later do we identify what has been going on and are able to express it. I believe that the effectiveness of our work for justice in the world is directly related to our encounter with this central core of darkness. For truthful and just action can grow only out of deep roots in truth and justice.

As I read the words of this Spanish mystic, so distant from my present life and experience, I am led into the darkness of which he speaks. I am helped to understand something of the mystery of God and of the way of faith and through this to help others who are beginning, or continuing, their own spiritual journey. For Christians who are seeking to enter into their own inner darkness and to work for justice in the light of faith, Saint John of the Cross remains a wise and perceptive guide.