

Dear Friend

Today we celebrate St John of the Cross, who is perhaps most famous for his book entitled, "The Dark Night of the Soul". This is often misconstrued as referring to a period of spiritual darkness and alienation from God, whereas John sees this as the process by which the soul is set free from worldly attachments and being held in captivity by the physical senses and their incessant demands, in order to attain a Divine union of the soul with God.

"The Dark Night" refers to the pain involved in this process of transformation through purging. The spiritual ecstasy which is the end result of attaining this mystical union far outweighs whatever the soul has had to endure.

John, who was born on 24th June 1542, became a Carmelite and was encouraged by his contemporary, Theresa of Avila, to pursue his course of reforming the order which he regarded as being too lax and comfortable. His programme of austerity was not always welcomed, and John was taken prisoner and held captive in a tiny cell in the Carmelite monastery at Toledo. He managed to escape and was nursed back to health by Theresa's nuns. Eventually there was a formal schism in the order. John died on this day, 14th December, 1591.

His legacy remains to this day as a challenge to the Church, and especially the Church in affluent parts of the world, to embrace the path of self-denial and a commitment to holiness. To become freer from the distractions that are all around us and demand our attention. We cannot become completely detached from the world, but we can try not to become overly attached - to hold lightly to our material possessions, and not allow our physical appetites to control us. Easier said than done, of course!

We are given this wonderful world with all its gifts and beauty for us to enjoy and appreciate, and indeed, to look after. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the human race is that we have allowed ourselves to be so taken up with the material things of this life, that we have lost touch altogether with our souls. The writings of St John of the Cross remind us that we are created for immortality, and that whatever we have to suffer in this life, does not compare with the joys of eternity, an eternity we can taste even as we live out our time here on earth. May we all be willing to enter "The Dark Night of the Soul" for the sake of the glory that is to come.

With much love and prayer

Simon