

## The Power and Message of the Cross 2: The Crucifix of St John of the Cross



John of the Cross was born in 1542 and became a Carmelite Friar in 1563. Some years later he met St Teresa of Avila, the great mystic and fellow Carmelite. Teresa instantly recognised John's extraordinary spiritual depth and appointed him as spiritual director to her and the 130 nuns at her convent in Avila.



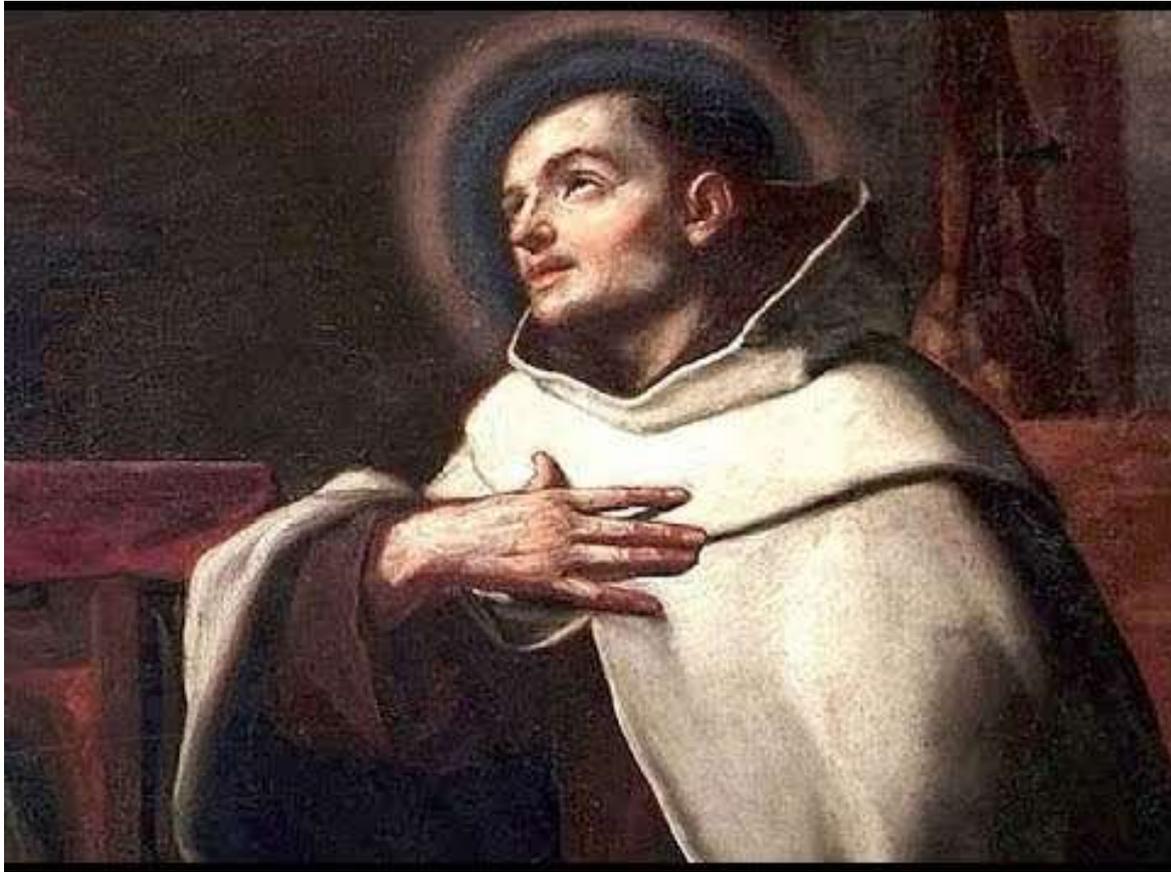
It was while he was here that one day, while he was praying in the convent chapel, John received a powerful vision of Jesus on the cross. It was as if he was seeing Jesus from above, as God the Father in heaven might see him, and he understood the anguish of a father's heart and how costly Jesus' death was to the Godhead. This image was to stay with John throughout his life and was to give him strength in the sufferings that were to come his way and was to shape his spirituality and whole way of life.



Under the influence of St Teresa of Avila, John dedicated himself to the reform of his religious order, returning it to its gospel simplicity and zeal. Like most reformers John was unpopular among those he wanted to reform. In 1577 a group of his Carmelite brothers arrested him and took him to their monastery in Toledo where they imprisoned him in a tiny airless cell only 6 feet by 10 feet. They starved him removed him from his cell only to bring him into the refectory where they made him kneel while they ate. They gave him nothing to eat, rather they whipped him and humiliated him. All he had done wrong was to take his Order back to their original gospel values at a time when their life had become very lax and unspiritual.

While he was holed up in that tiny room, John hardly ever saw anyone and had no one to talk to. Through this very particular suffering, he turned to God as his only companion and developed a very intense spiritual life. John began to compose the most

beautiful and sublime poems in which he talks about the life of intimate union with God. John's poetry is universally acknowledged to be among the greatest works in the Spanish language. His poems are also the high point of the Catholic spiritual tradition and in them John speaks of his life of intimate union with God deepened and developed through his ill-treatment and suffering. In that terrible place John experienced the cross in his own life in the most intense and powerful way and the cross he bore changed his



life for ever.

In his writings John speaks of us humans as having a great, deep cavern of unfulfilled longing within us. The cavern is infinitely deep and because it is infinitely deep, that longing can only be filled by God, who is infinite. Some people say that we have a God-shaped hole inside us that only God can fill. It is because of this deep unfulfilled longing that most of us are restless, unsatisfied, always looking for something more to gratify us. John diagnosed this dissatisfaction in this way: he said we try to fill that infinite longing with finite things that give us pleasure but don't last - food, money, sex, drugs, power, honour, ambition, retail therapy, the latest fashions, dozens of pairs of shoes. This can lead to addictions as we try more and more of these unsatisfying goods looking for a fulfilment that they can never deliver.

Isolated, starved, rejected by his confreres and denied human company, John had none of these transient pleasures to satisfy his own deep longing. He had nowhere to turn but to God and through a process of gradually purging his will, his desire for pleasures of the world, the flesh and the devil, pleasures that can never satisfy, he found he was

able to become totally open to God and to find in Him the fulfilment and satisfaction for his soul that he most dearly desired. This purging of desire for all worldly and sensual things he described as the Dark Night of the Senses and the Dark Night of the Soul. It is a journey taken in darkness in the sense that God does not reveal Himself in the journey where the only light is the fire that burns in the soul, the fire that longs for God and which spurs the soul onward despite the darkness of unknowing. The end of the soul's journey is union with God. For John, the soul is a bride seeking God her bridegroom and this ultimate union with God is described as 'mystical marriage'. This is how John describes that final union of the soul with God:

Upon my flowering breast which I kept holy for him alone,  
There he lay sleeping, and I caressing him.  
I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved  
All things ceased.  
I went out from my self, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

Nine months after his arrest, John eventually managed to escape by lifting the door to his cell off its hinges and escaping through a window in the next room. The window was very high up in the city wall of Toledo and there was a thirty foot drop on the other side. How John managed to get to the ground is a mystery and some have said he might have had the help of a sympathetic friar. Eventually, after many more struggles, John was accepted and came to occupy high office in the reformed Carmelite Order.

Why is he John of the Cross? What did the cross mean to him? Why did he take that as his title? Because he saw in Jesus on the cross one who gave absolutely everything to God, even his life, out of love for us. John wanted to imitate that total giving of himself in his own life so that Jesus would live through him for others. Like St Francis last week John became detached from everything so that there was only God for him and he lived a life of utter simplicity and detachment from worldly things.

The image of the crucified Jesus that he received in a vision shaped the direction of his life and enabled him to embrace the cross in his own life and have a unique insight in to the sufferings and self-sacrifice of Jesus which he lived out in his own relationship with God and which gave rise to such exquisite poetry and such sublime spiritual writings.

In 1951, the surrealist artist, Salvador Dali, inspired by the drawing of the crucified Jesus sketched by John, painted his famous depiction of the Christ of St John of the Cross.

