

10. Love Is as Strong as Death

As John of the Cross writes, the soul "would consider all the difficulties of the world, the fury of the demons, and infernal afflictions nothing if by passing through them she could plunge into the unfathomable spring of love. In this respect it is said in the Song of Songs: 'Love is as strong as death' " (CB 12.9). In this topic, we will explore John's commentary on the Song of Songs.

I. Love and Death: John of the Cross was convinced that it is for love that we were created (CB 29.3); not any love, but the love that God grants to one transformed in God, the love of spiritual marriage. All other love is oriented toward this love. The biblical assertion that "love is as strong as death" needs some explanation.

At the time the Song of Songs were composed, men and women were defined by death. At that time, there was no thought of afterlife. But, according to the "Song," we are defined by love, or as John of the Cross says: "In the evening of life we shall be examined on love" (Sayings, 60).

II. Bridal Mysticism: The Song of Songs tradition, known also as Bridal Mysticism, was introduced more fully into the Carmelite tradition by Teresa of Avila, and brought to perfection by San Juan de la Cruz. Jewish prophets used the imagery of God as spouse to Israel as bride. This was a way of communicating the power, beauty, intensity, and fidelity of God's love for God's people. The symbolism of human marital love points to the God who loves his creation lavishly. As the Carmelite scholar Father Roland Murphy wrote: "human love and divine love mirror each other." Murphy added, "The love that forms human partnership and community, and that sustains the whole of creation, is a gift of God's own self."

Starting with Origen, the early Church saw the Song of Songs as a blueprint for the love that Christ has for the Church and for individual Christians. Origen and the tradition have proposed that the love of a woman and a man, as described so vividly in the Song of Songs, is a way to express the beauty, power, and intensity of love between Christ and the Church, between Christ and individuals, and even at times has been used of the Blessed Virgin.

The mystical tradition latched on to this Bridal Mysticism as the best way to create a Christian imagination about love and its primacy. Bernard of Clairvaux is probably the best-known proponent of Bridal Mysticism with his Sermons on the Song of Songs. Bernard's sermons were spread throughout sixteenth-century Spain.

My hypothesis is that Teresa and John brought Bridal Mysticism more fully into the Carmelite tradition in a way that it had not been before.

III. Encountering the Song of Songs: John of the Cross would have heard much about the Song of Songs when he was a student at the University of Salamanca. The Augustinian friar and university professor Luis de Leon got into trouble, in part, for translating the Song of Songs into Spanish.

Fray Juan de la Cruz used the Song of Songs and its tradition extensively, and never apologized for doing so. John spoke of "the divine Song of Solomon" (CB, Prologue, 1), and of the "bride of the divine Song of Songs" (CB 1.5). John's bridal imagery helped him to express the mystery of divine and human love. It may have been that John's bridal imagination shaped the way he encountered God.

When John of the Cross lay dying in Ubeda with only a very brief time to live, he asked that the Song of Songs be recited for him. He listened avidly and commented: "Oh, what precious pearls."

Some contemporary voices have suggested that Bridal Mysticism has had its day, that this erotic language and symbolism will no longer be effective in a sex-soaked culture. One author prefers the friendship imagery of Thomas Aquinas. While Bridal Mysticism predominates in John of the Cross, my response is that we cannot afford to jettison a tradition that has served the Jewish and Christian imaginations so well for so long. It would be a loss if we were to say that human sexuality no longer has the power stir the imagination about divine love.

Moreover, without an appreciation for the Song of Songs, one can no longer understand the poetry and other writings of John of the Cross. John wants his directees to know that God loves them passionately and lavishly. John of the Cross would have his readers appreciate the power of John's 17:23, that the Father loves us in the same way that the Father loves the Son. (CB 39.5)

Take away the Song of Songs and its imagery, and one would be left with an empty shell. John of the Cross chose Bridal Mysticism as his way of plumbing the heights and depths of the divine/human love affair. Thus in his celebration of this love, wrote: "There he gave me his breast; / there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge; / I gave myself to him; / keeping nothing back; / there I promised to be his bride" (CB 27).

Review Questions

1. As a reader of John of the Cross, do you feel a need to be better informed about the Song of Songs and its tradition?
2. Reflect on the need to appreciate the power of human sexuality as a metaphor for the power, intensity, and beauty of divine love.
3. Do you think that the Song of Songs tradition can be a way of having a more positive appreciation for human sexuality?