

Turning Lockdown into a Retreat: Week 3

Meeting God within Uncertainty

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved
in her Lover.

[The Dark Night: John of the Cross]



People tend to think of the ‘dark night of the soul’ as a severe experience that happens to only a few. But John of the Cross defines it as any experience that is both outside your control and significantly affects your spiritual life. It may not be a deep suffering, but the usual way of proceeding has been obstructed. You cannot change these circumstances or make them go away. The ‘darkness’ is a kind of *fog* in the mind, generated by the stress of not being in control and not knowing what happens next. Feeling that there is nothing certain to grab hold of, it can even produce a kind of vertigo, as if looking into a frightening abyss. This ‘fog’ or ‘darkness’ may well be part of our experience of Lockdown, with all its uncertainty. And yet, John shares, this dark night is also a place where God meets us.

Name your fears: There’s a tendency to think that what faith asks of us is to try a bit harder and put a brave face on it. That might be the case if we could do anything about it; but in this case, the circumstances are far beyond our control. God has far more to give you than a stiff upper lip: God wants to be with you. Name your fears and anxieties and yearn for God’s presence with you in them.

Be open to Jesus with you within darkness: We naturally think that the light of God’s presence can have nothing to do with the darkness of our fears and anxieties. But Jesus went into the darkness to experience the fear and anxiety of ‘extreme abandonment’. At this moment, our darkness was penetrated and transformed by the divine light. As you sense the darkness of uncertainty and fear come upon you, consider how Jesus shares this space with you.

Go with Jesus into the darkness: Contemplative prayer involves a form of darkness, where we let go of our need to control or understand, and rest our being in God. Go with Jesus into this darkness. Stay with it, and it will begin to be illuminated from a deeper source, and from further within, and by a greater light.

Praying in the dark: Many of us will have learnt as children to close our eyes when we pray. We let go of the stimulation of our moment by moment existence to rest in a presence that is in every moment and beyond every moment. God is in the darkness as well as in the light.

Night invites a deeper trust to that presence and care that is always there.

Night bids us relinquish our weary efforts to micro-manage life

We let go – not into nothingness – but into Love...hidden from us perhaps, but very real. God bids us rest.

Find a physical dark space. Turn off the lights. You might want to light a candle but be open to the darkness surrounding it that makes this light shine so brightly and warmly. Sit quietly, relaxing into the moment.

As worries, concerns, thoughts and fears come to mind neither fight them, nor cling to them. Let them come and go, passing them over into the darkness.

Rest the palms of your hands on your thighs, turned upwards and open; that way your preoccupations can slip away from your grasp into God's care.

You may feel you want to move away: darkness and stillness allows inner anxieties and hurts to surface; they can seem overwhelming. But stay in the dark. Just as your eyes slowly adjust to the night so you might begin to sense the presence of a Love you can trust and rest in,

Thoughts and words of prayer may come, but you may also find it enough to rest in stillness. There is no need here for explanation and often words fall so short.

Look at the stars

Go out one clear night and look up at the sky. Find a place as far away from natural light as you can find. Lose yourself a while in gazing at the moon and the stars.

Reading for the week:

The resurrection narratives express both the confusion of darkness and the surprise of breaking light through the presence of Jesus. Go with Mary Magdalene while it is still dark into the garden where the body of Jesus was laid [John 20.1-2,11-20]; spend the night with Simon Peter and his friends on their boat on the lake [John 21. 1-14].

Other readings for this week:



Psalm 91; Isaiah 42.16; John 3.1-9; Psalm 8

*Peradventure the darkness shall cover me: then shall my night be turned
to day; yea, the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear
as the day: the darkness and light to thee are both alike*
[Ps. 139:10-11: Coverdale translation]