



ST AUGUSTINE'S
COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY

Windows on Hope: Week Two:

'If it die': hope when hope runs out



Even while John of the Cross felt abandoned, he *also* felt the intimate love of God. In the *Spiritual Canticle*, he dwells at length on this love that meets us out of the depths, at the point of our greatest lack. Behind John's thinking is a basic distinction. There are two different kinds of human lack. The first is an 'appetite' lack, such as you feel when you are hungry. When you get the food that you need, the appetite goes away, at least for a time. The lack is put to rest. The second kind of lack works in the opposite way. The more you get of it, the more you want. This is the kind of lack you feel when you desire what is good, true, wise, just and beautiful – and when you desire God. With these things, however much you get of them, the lack will never go away, because they are endlessly large and greater than any individual.

What goes wrong, John says, is that we reduce the second kind of lack to the first. We think that our feelings of lack always point to some item that is missing which, once we have got it, the lack will go away. But with God, as with the beautiful, the true and the good, the lack does not work like this. To feel lack here is a delight, because it directs us to the endlessly abundant source of all things in God. We are both lacking *and* full at the same time.

What it means, John says, is that we learn to *accept* the kind of lack that yearns for God, rather than treat it as an anomaly that must be eradicated. It will always feel like a kind of 'dispossession' or inner poverty, which makes us feel vulnerable. The Carmelite Constance Fitzgerald, interpreting John of the Cross, puts it this way:

‘From what I have witnessed in spiritual direction and other conversations, [hope] . . . is experienced not so much as consolation but as a profound peace in the silent unknowing and the dark empty space of encounter with God, the truly Other, an emptiness that is content not to seek fulfilment in its own time. . . . [but to] spend considerable time in silent *there-ness*.’

(Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, ‘From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory’, in Mary Frohlich, RSCJ, ed., *Carmelite Wisdom and Prophetic Hope* (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2018), pp. 55-93 (75))

Excerpts from Eddie Howells talk

Remembering meeting:

This week we are considering that hope is shaped not only towards a ‘something’ but a *someone*. In touching our lives God has awakened our longing. When have you had a sense of meeting God? It is likely to have been within the ordinary and the everyday: in a moment when you became aware. As a memory of a time, recent or past, comes to mind, write down a few words that express the character of that experience. Then allow another memory to come in, and again write a word or words to note that time. Continue the same process until you have filled up your page or come to a natural pause. Now look through what you have written. What feelings and thoughts arise in you? You may find yourself wanting to express some of these to God, or being drawn into some particular memory that seems significant for this time.

Beyond words

Sometimes what we hope for is difficult to put into words. A creative activity may be able to give freer expression to what is stirring in your spirit. Use painting, collage or modelling clay to help give shape to your hope. Music may also be a medium for you.

Silent ‘thereness’

Constance Fitzgerald invites us to ‘spend considerable time in silent *there-ness*’. Make time in your week to simply ‘be’ before God. If you want a phrase to hold you in that place of openness you could use the opening line of Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God, I seek you



Some Bible readings for prayer and reflection:

Romans 8.15-25; Song of Songs 2.8 – 3.2; John 16.12-22; Psalm 42; Ezekiel 37.1-14