

05. Part II Gift (pages 19-34)

1. The Living Flame of Love (pages 19-27)



Living Flame

poem & prose commentary for Ana de Peñalosa, who opened her home to Carmelite nuns.

Written (1586 aged 44) at Granada when Vicar Provincial (travelled 8,600 miles). Written in a fortnight.

John at his most relaxed, and so most intense.



‘John’s prayer, his poem (expressing the prayer), and his prose (unfolding theme) glow with consistent heat. His words here bring us as close as words can to the reality of his relationship with God, the ‘depths of the spirit’, ‘unveiled’ (page 22).

‘No words have been invented for the works of God in the soul. The only language to cope with them is acceptance for oneself, experience, joy and silence.’

(Flame 2.21).

‘In the Flame John is most himself – confident, close, consistent, and hushed. If so, his witness to God is here least protected, and we are ready to hear this now, first in the poem’ (page 23).

‘John shows his indebtedness to secular love poetry ... and to the traditional understanding of the Song of Songs, as the love song of YHWH for Israel, of the Lamb for his Church, of Christ for the soul. This points to an organic link between human and divine love, for married love contains within itself a reality beyond itself. It is so sacred that it derives from and points to the love of Christ for humankind’ (page 23).

‘The point is that John *said* it, that *he* said it, and that it is possible to relate to God in this way’ (page 23).

John of the Cross – Oh llama de amor viva : The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 1 Flame, alive, compelling,
yet tender past all telling,
reaching the secret centre of my soul!
Since now evasion's over,
finish your work, my Lover,
break the last thread, wound me, and make me whole.

Stanza 2 Burn that is for my healing!
Wound of delight past feeling!
Ah, gentle hand whose touch is a caress,
foretaste of heaven conveying
and every debt repaying:
slaying, you give me life for death's distress.

John of the Cross – Oh llama de amor viva : The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 3 O lamps of fire bright-burning
with splendid brilliance, turning
deep caverns of my soul to pools of light!
Once shadowed, dim, unknowing,
now their strange new-found glowing
gives warmth and radiance for my Love's delight.

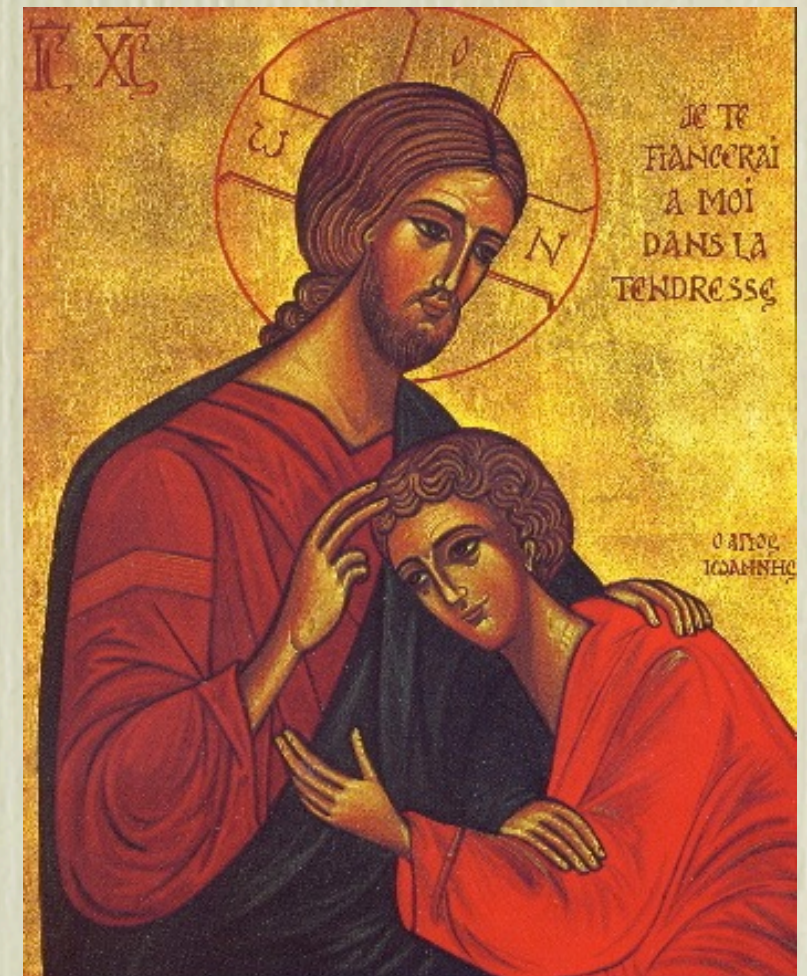
Stanza 4 Ah! gentle and so loving
you was within me, proving
that you are there in secret and alone;
your fragrant breathing stills me,
your grace, your glory fills me
so tenderly your love becomes my own.

John Michael Talbot

O living flame of love, tenderly wound my soul
to its deepest inner heart, without oppression.
Come, consummate our love,
tear through the veil of our union.
If it be your will come and rend the veil of the temple.

O lamps of fire in deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscured and blind
Are now leading in the warmth
and the passion of Your love.

Yet gently your hand does wound
as you rend through the veil of my temple.
Come, take this life that I give,
So that I might come to live in this our dying.



‘All the initiative belongs to the Other.’

‘What we find filling John’s mind
is a God who is supremely active.’

‘*You* are piercing, repaying, slaying, giving life, waking, breathing;
you did seem oppressive, but it was *you* who seemed it;
you may tear the veil but it has to be *you*.

If ‘my’ soul gives radiance it is because *you* shine on it;
and if ‘I’ love, it is because *your* love awakens it.’

‘John’s God anticipates, initiates, gives, transforms, like a flame
entering till it engages the deepest centre. John’s universe is
drenched in a self-outpouring God.’

‘Where God is concerned, love is never idle, it is in continuous movement’ (Flame 1.8).

‘God presence is like a song that is new, always new, wrapped round with joy and love’ (Flame 2.36).

‘Permeating the commentary is an awareness of a self-communicating God, a God whose plan is to fill us with nothing less than himself.’

(page 25)

‘The Flame is a person, “the Spirit of your Bridegroom”, the Breath of Christ’ (page 25).

- ‘As we sound John’s experience at its most authentic, we find this to be the reality he knew: a God who is pressing in to give God’s self’ (page 26).

‘I am yours, and for you, and I am pleased to be as I am that I may be yours and give myself to you’ (Flame 3.6).

‘If you are seeking God, know that much more is God seeking you.’
(Flame 3.28).

‘God’s purpose is to make the soul great’ (Flame 2.3).

‘When the deep caverns of the soul are empty and pure, the thirst and hunger and sense of spiritual longing is more than can be borne ... The capacity of these caverns is deep, because that which they can hold is deep and infinite; and that is God’ (Flame 3.18, 22).

‘God, in giving, transforms’ (page 26).

I am purified so that I may receive what God is offering
and respond and so be in love.

‘All the soul's infirmities are brought to light. They are set before its eyes to be felt and healed. Now, with the light and heat of the divine fire, it sees and feels those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided in it, hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire was applied to it and made it sweat and smoke and sputter. This is what the flame does to the imperfect soul’ (Flame 1.21-22).

‘The soul is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air’ (Flame 3.9).

Meditation

‘For a better understanding of this beginner’s stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination. Those in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world’ (Flame 3.32).

Contemplation

‘When the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean the soul and place it in a state of contemplation.

‘Some quickly accommodate their senses and appetites to God and, in their activity, pass on to the spirit which God works in them. This happens when the soul’s discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as its initial sense of satisfaction and fervour, and it is unable to practice discursive meditation as before, or find any support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses’ (Flame 3.32).

Contemplation

‘Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God.
If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love’ (Night I.10.6)

Contemplation

‘We should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. We should conduct ourselves passively without efforts of our own, but with a simple, loving awareness, as with eyes open in loving attention’ (Flame 3.33).

‘When it happens that we are conscious of being placed in solitude and in the state of listening, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening’ (Flame 3.35).

Detachment

‘You should not bear being attached to anything, whether it be to the practise of meditation, or to anything, whether sensory or spiritual, which delights you, or any way of thinking. You should be very free regarding everything, because any thought or discursive reflection or satisfaction upon which you may want to lean would impede and disquiet you, and make noise in the profound silence of your senses and spirit, which you possess for the sake of this deep and delicate listening’ (LF 3.34).

‘My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God’ (Psalm 84:3).



‘Is not my word like a fire, says the Lord?’ (Jeremiah 23:29).

‘My words are spirit and life’ (John 6:63).

Light in darkness

