

Monday 3rd Week of Advent: St. John of the Cross

St. John of the Cross (1542 - 1591), whose memorial we celebrate today was a Spanish Carmelite, mystic and poet who was persuaded by Saint Teresa of Ávila to pioneer the reformation of the Carmelite order, a difficult and dangerous task. His poetry is considered to be some of the best in the Spanish language, yet it came out of a time of total despair, known as his dark night of the soul. Above all, St. John sought a deep experience of the presence of God in the depths of His very being but persecuted by Church authorities who felt threatened by his zeal, he was imprisoned and punished. Physically alone, his soul cried out to the One who never abandoned him, yet whose presence at times seemed hard to experience. He knew in his head that he was not alone, and was able to write,¹

En la noche dichosa,
En secreto, que nadie ne veia,
Ni yo miraba cosa,
Sin otra luz y guia,
Sino la que en el Corazon ardia.

Upon that lucky night
In secrecy, inscrutable to sight,
I went without discerning
And with no other light
Except for that which my heart was burning

Today's first reading is also poetry. Balaam, a pagan "seer," was asked by Balak, the local king, to curse the tribes of Israel they journeyed to the promised land. Balaam, unable to curse the tribes, he issued a blessing instead. Balaam did not know God, yet the Holy Spirit inspired him to bless rather than curse God's people. Notable is the mention of the rising star and sceptre out of Jacob/Israel; which is taken to mean a prophesy of the coming of Christ, the universal King. This image, from the catacomb of St. Priscilla (early 3rd Century) is of a man (probably Balaam) pointing to a star over the Virgin Mary, with the Christ child on her lap. The earliest Christians recognised that even those who have no knowledge of Christ can point to Him in their words and deeds.

St. John of the Cross's poetry gives us hope that in the darkest days of our lives, God does not abandon us, and the poetry of the pagan Balaam gives us hope that even those who do not know Christ can, by their words and gestures lead us to Him. Let us pray that in all the secular signs of Christmas around us, we can pause for a moment and seek the one who resides deep in our souls, and who having united Himself to us in Baptism, will never abandon us.



¹ From "*Songs of the soul in rapture having arrived at the height of perfection, which is union with God by the road of spiritual negation*"
Translation by Roy Campbell.