

Sermon September 2, 2018 Song of Songs

Our first reading this week is what I would call a rare treat. The Bible contains so many songs - the songs of Mary, Hanna, Simeon, Zechariah, Deborah - to name but a few of the more famous ones. But this song? As Christ is called King of kings and Light of lights, this song of Solomon is called the Song of Songs - in the bible's own terms, it's greatest song.

There is, of course, a *lot* about love in the Bible. It is a major theme and preoccupation of almost every book, from Genesis to Revelation: love for God, love for one another, love for parents and children, agape love in communities. The Song of Songs celebrates *Eros*, purely and simply, the 'adult' kind of love that brings lovers together.

This is a love poem of surpassing beauty. I was trying to think of a love song that would come even close to this one. I couldn't think of one. I thought of all the songs we all know from pop music of various eras. A lot of those are great and mean a lot. I don't think they really hold up to the Song of Songs. Just saying.

The sonnets of William Shakespeare are surely among the greatest. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds...".... "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?..." Great great love poems. I'm not sure they surpass the Song of Songs for beauty or sheer romantic feeling. And *yet* this one is in the *Bible*. Can this be? The greatest of all love songs

in the Bible? What? And, well, I'm sort of wrestling with how to say this in a sermon in church but it *has* to be said: the Song of Songs is not just beautiful and romantic. It's beautifully *erotic*. There's no way around it. It's never explicit, or vulgar, or bawdy in any way. But its poetry is *definitely* erotic, and *sensual*, in the loveliest way.

Despite the fact that it contains no law or wisdom writing or prophecy, and never mentions God, the Song of Songs has been part of the accepted canon of the bibles of both Jews and Christians since the 2nd Century CE - roughly 1800 years. Traditionally the Rabbis interpreted it as an allegory of the love between God and Israel, and Christians (beginning with Origen of Alexandria in the 3rd century) as an allegory of the love between Christ and His Church, a beautiful insight which led, among other things to thoughts of the Church as 'the Bride of Christ.'

These are wonderful interpretation to my way of thinking. I very much celebrate and recommend them. I'd also suggest though, taking your bible *with* you next time you're out for a picnic with your significant other. Leave the kids at home, bring a bottle of wine, and some tasty treats, maybe a blanket, and pick a spot with some...um... *privacy*, surround yourself with pastoral beauty, and just read the book aloud to one another. Then let me know if you still think it's an allegory.

I wish there was time read more of it aloud because it really is quite ravishing. Sadly the passage we heard today is the only one that is ever read in church. If you don't know the rest of the Song, please do give it a read. This beautiful book and all that it affirms in human life should not be neglected.

In addition to its poetic delights, the Song of Solomon also provides something much needed by people of faith. It affirms and celebrates human sexuality *unabashedly*, with beauty and confidence, without shame or judgement, and most importantly, without equating sexuality with sin. This is much needed. That sexual love has been for thousands of years, within the pages of the Bible, provided an allegory for God's love of humankind says so much that we all know about the *goodness* of our sexuality and especially that this precious gift is to be affirmed, received, and joyously celebrated for what it is - among God's greatest gifts to us.

We *also* know, that God's gift of sexuality is deep and powerful, arising directly from the life force itself. For all that is beautiful and fun in our sexuality, there's a lot that can go wrong as well, a truth that too many have learned the hard way. In recent decades sexual *abuse* has come to light in pretty much every sphere of human activity, from sports to politics to music and everything in between. Most horrifying perhaps is how pervasive sexual abuse has been in Christian communities. Recent reports from Pennsylvania detail over a thousand children

raped or sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests over the past 70 years. The horrors of this are indescribable. They compound the horrors of untold numbers of reports of similar abuse in other places. This cataclysm for our children is painful even to think about. It is painful and difficult to talk about in any setting and perhaps especially in church. Yet we cannot keep silent. This needs our attention, our prayers and urgent action.

Something that seems new this time is Nancy Huston's 'Open Letter to Pope Francis' that was published in the Globe and Mail a week ago in which the author, a Canadian living in France, calls on the Pope to end mandatory celibacy for Roman Catholic priests. She makes a compelling case that forced celibacy has no basis in scripture, or the teachings of Christ, is a 'barbaric custom' from the Middle Ages which is akin to widely condemned practices such as female circumcision, and most importantly, that it is physically impossible for most human beings and leads priests to rape and abuse children and others. To Nancy Huston this is 'obvious,' as it likely is to some or all of us here. She points out that celibacy was a decision made at a particular moment in history, a thousand years after Christ, and that it can be cancelled in an equally historic moment of decision. She calls on Pope Francis *to be the Pope* who cancelled it.

I think she's right. Although Anglicans have by definition no allegiance to the Pope, I notice that Pope Francis wins my respect again and

again in ways that other pontiffs have not. I pray God that he will heed Nancy Huston's plea and end this barbaric custom of mandatory celibacy. It does not mean that no one will ever be able to commit to periods of celibacy for the spiritual purpose that individuals of most world religions have always sought it from time to time. The very small group of those truly called to celibacy may choose it for their whole lives, religious or otherwise. But the illusion that no one can be a priest without it will end. And please God, may it help end the abuse of children.

The faith of Jesus Christ is much needed in our world. Forced celibacy for priests does so much to undermine the faith and the credibility of Christians. We as Anglicans or other non-catholic denominations can very well say, 'oh well, that celibacy thing is just the Catholics and we don't do that,' but it deeply affects how the world sees all Christians. At this point in our history we need a game changer. Some call it a new reformation. We need greater unity and greater solidarity among the global community of Christians, a deepening of our integrity that makes the world sit up and take notice, not of our failures, but of the *love* God wants to share with the world through us.