

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SONG OF SONGS.

Now and then people have asked me to explain in a few sentences what the Bible is all about. That's a bit like being asked to say in a few sentences what Tolstoy's War and Peace, or indeed Tolkien's Lord of the Rings is all about. But I guess you can with both of those books and probably with most great novels, boil the plot down to a few major ideas, obviously grossly over-simplifying things.

One of the great, over-arching plots in the Bible is that God wants to make, indeed makes, covenants with his people. In the world in which the Bible came to be, a covenant was an agreement between two parties who were not related – either individuals, clans tribes or even nations – that from now on they will behave to each other like close relatives. The best example of a covenant in our modern world is a marriage when two people who are not related by blood for a bond which is life long, will last through thick and thin and involves the most intimate ways of relating.

In the Bible this Covenant between God and his people is expressed in various ways, but the most powerful, the most expressive image is of a marriage. God wants to marry us! We find this idea in various places in the OT, above all in Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel.

And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. ²⁰ I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2:19-20)

*For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:5)*

But in addition, there is one book that speaks of nothing else but the passionate, all-consuming love between a man and a woman, and that book is The Song of Songs. The title in Hebrew idiom means 'greatest of all songs'. Just as 'the Holy of Holies' means 'the most holy place' or 'the most holy thing.' But what on earth is this volume of sensuous

love poems doing in the Bible? Well there are several different approaches. There is the interpretation which says that this is a poem about erotic love between a man and a woman, who are married. That's all This approach became very popular in the 20th c. due to the dominance of historical criticism in biblical studies. Basically such scholars study the Bible as a collection of ancient literature, full stop. Such scholarship can be useful if the scholar is able to shed light on the meaning of Hebrew words, or on the culture which produced them. But, as Christians we also approach the biblical text as something through which God is speaking to us. That is not importing meaning which the author did not intend, it was the original intention of the author to say that God addresses his people through these words. This is the only type of interpretation which can possibly be faithful to the author's original intention. For that reason we reject all interpretations of the Song of Songs which say it is only about human love and rule out the possibility that it can also be about God's love. The most ancient Jewish interpretation of this book is that it is an allegory of the relationship between God and his people. The Bridegroom represents God and the bride is Israel (or sometimes Jerusalem.) in fact the great Rabbi Akiba (AD 50-135) said of the book:

All the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. (Mishnah Yadayim 3:4)

He also denounced any interpretation of the song in merely human terms. He said

“He who sings the Song of Songs in a banqueting hall or makes it into a kind of Ditty has no place in the world to come.”¹

The great Alexandrian Biblical scholar Origen of Alexandria (184-253) took a similar view:

“Located in the middle of the Bible, the Song lifts to its height the great fundamental image going from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation: mankind has become the bride of God”²

A third, slightly different interpretation is that the Bridegroom is the messiah, the future anointed king of Israel and the Bride either Israel or

¹ Quoted in BERGSMAN & PITRE *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible – The Old Testament* (San Francisco 2018) 643.

² Ibid 643.

the Church. This also has great merit and is well represented in both Jewish and Christian writing. A fourth approach, the mystical interpretation, once again identifies the Bridegroom as God, but the Bride is seen as representing the soul of an individual rather than a collective, be that Israel or the Church. Since the Middle Ages this has been by far the most popular and also spiritually very fruitful and it features in the writings of St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, St Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila, St. John Paul II and many others. In what follows I will consider each of these three spiritual interpretations valid and possible and at the end will suggest somethings else in addition.

Some of the greatest mystics expressed their experiences in very sensuous, indeed erotic imagery. St. Teresa of Avila spoke of a vision in which an angel pierced her with a lance, something which she found at once terribly painful and ecstatically pleasurable. The famous statue of 'St. Teresa in Ecstasy' in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome shows this very clearly.

Perhaps the author and those who admitted the book into the Canon realises that sexuality can be an experience of the divine, just like nature or community. The mystery of love and attraction must point in some way to the mystery of God if we believe that he is revealed in all of creation. If looking at a beautiful scene in nature can be a springboard to God, then surely contemplating a beautiful person, someone who is beloved, can do the same for us. Catholicism insists that marriage is a sacrament, not just a contract. The sacrament does not just take place on the wedding day, but is continually conferred by the couple on each other throughout their married life. A sacrament is "an outward sign of inward grace" Even the most intimate parts of married life are touches of God, encounters with his grace.

One of the difficulties with the Song is trying to figure out who exactly is speaking since that isn't explicitly indicated in the Hebrew text. However, the Hebrew language does make it somewhat easy in that second and third person pronouns are gendered. So it's easy to tell if the Bride is speaking to the Bridegroom since the word 'you' will be in its masculine form, and likewise, when he is speaking to her, the word you will be in its feminine form. So many modern translations indicate

in the margin whether it is the Bride, the Groom or the chorus who are speaking.

The Prologue. 1:2-4.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine;

your anointing oils are fragrant;

your name is oil poured out;

therefore virgins love you.

Draw me after you; let us run.

The king has brought me into his chambers. (Songs 1:2-4)

We need to note at the beginning the dream-like nature of a lot of this material. It's hard to make sense of it if what is described is actually happening. There are two actual dreams in the book (3:1-5 and 5:2-6:10) and a daydream (6:6:11-8:4) So we can see most of what transpires in the book as dreams, daydreams, and poetically expressed longings.

The bride almost in a frenzy of love cries out for the kisses, i.e the loving attention of her spouse. She is the Christian who longs to enter into deep loving relationship with the indwelling Trinity. That desire is put in us by God himself. The longing and the lack, the incompleteness a lover feels without her loved one is like the desire we feel for God. As St. Augustine put it: "you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until the rest in you"

We find this longing expressed in countless ways in the Scriptures.

O God, you are my God, for you I long;

for you my soul is thirsting.

My body pines for you

like a dry, weary land without water. (Psalm 62:1)

In the office before Pius X's reforms in 1910 this psalm was said every day at Morning Prayer, because in some ways it says perfectly what a Christian needs to express first thing. Or this from Psalm 42:2-3, also said at Lauds:

Like the deer that yearns

for running streams,

so my soul is yearning

for you, my God.

*My soul is thirsting for God,
the God of my life;
when can I enter and see
the face of God?*

Or this from Isaiah 64:1

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—*

We could talk about the desire for God that is ultimately in all people's hearts, but often in non-believers or in Christians with little knowledge of the faith that desire is some vague sense that that must be more, that their life is somehow incomplete. No, here the Bride clearly knows her beloved, knows him well and he knows her. This is the longing of someone who knows God well and desire further intimacy, indeed desires union with God. John of the Cross expresses in Stanza 11 of his *Spiritual Canticle*:

Reveal your presence
and may the vision of your beauty be my death
for the sickness of love is not cured
Except by your very presence and image.

St Bernard in his commentary teaches that the kisses which the bride desires are the Holy Spirit. In the NT the Spirit is the one who communicates the very nature of God to us.

We have received the Spirit that comes from God, to teach us to understand the gifts he has given us.....it can only be understood by means of the Spirit. (1Cor 2:12, 14.)

There is hardly a more intimate way of communication between two people than passionate kissing. It transcends all words and all other gestures, it is both communication and delight. When someone experiences God at first hand it is like that, and he can only use metaphor to describe it. In the traditional rite of Mass, there is a huge amount of kissing. The priest kisses the altar ten times, also the gospel text; the servers are constantly kissing various objects, the cruets, the thurible, the priest's hand. The people who put together the *Novus Ordo* found this a bit over the top and some of us might but it all betokens a great deal of love and affection at the heart of the Church's central act of worship. My guess is also that if we understand the Mass to be the fulfilment of God's nuptial plan for us all, that we are all invited to the

wedding feast of the Lamb, then it's natural that there is going to be quite a lot of kissing involved. Some of the Fathers described receiving the Eucharist as the kiss of Christ the Bridegroom. St Ambrose, preaching to the newly baptised says that the first line of the poem

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

is fulfilled in their first communion.

The Christian who truly comes to know the Lord becomes intoxicated by his beauty. The bride then says:

Your love is more delightful than wine.

Wine is a symbol of joy rest and pleasure, and at Cana in Jn 2 Jesus is saying "I am like wine to you, when I come into your life, it's as though now you know me you have started drinking rich well matured wine which will never run out" Two of the characteristic gifts of the Spirit are joy and peace, just what wine gives, (or at least sometimes gives!) Then she says:

your anointing oils are fragrant;

your name is oil poured out;

therefore virgins love you.

Perfume is something subtle, it does not assail the senses, but gently touches and arouses them. When sprinkled in a room it can create a whole different, pleasant atmosphere. The presence of Christ is so often something gentle, not immediately apparent. In 2 Corinthians Paul uses the image of perfume for the presence of Christ in us.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2Cor 14-16)

The name of a person in Semitic idiom stands for his nature or essence. So Christ is a healing oil poured out on people. The name of Jesus features very strongly in the piety of the Eastern Churches, where the 'Jesus Prayer' is what the rosary has been for Western Catholics.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Have mercy on me,
A sinner.*

The purpose of this prayer, prayed unceasingly is to enable the name of Jesus to enter the heart, the core of one's being. It is the greatest of names:

But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names. (Phil 2:9)

The virgins or girls who love the groom are those who are drawn to Christ by his warmth and human attractiveness, maybe those who are still in their first fervour. The Hebrew word used here is 'almah (the same word Isaiah uses in his famous prophesy

Behold the virgin is with child (7:14)

The word can be translated as 'virgin' or 'young woman of a marriageable age'

The bride asks her beloved:

Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers.

Here she recognises that she cannot come to him by her own strength. The delights he promises are not enough to sustain the Christian in his journey towards Christ. People who try to follow Jesus according to their own strength and ideas are doomed to failure. Many people who advocate 'muscular Christianity' try to do this. How many sermons exhort us to work harder, try better, but our backs into the business of being Christian. Obviously we cannot be Christians without effort, but if we think it's all down to us then we fall into the trap of Pelagianism, the idea that our own efforts can save us. What each disciple must realise is that the work of transformation is ultimately God's work, not his.

No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise him up on the last day. (Jn. 6:44)

At this point it's time to make a slight detour in order to locate this book in its wider context. One of the enduring understandings of Christian spirituality is that it progresses in three stages, the purgative stage, the illuminative stage and the unitive stage. And one of the most enduring understandings of this book is that it represents or puts forward the climax, the final stage in the spiritual life, the unitive. There are three books in the OT attributed to King Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (or Qohelth) and the Song of Songs.

Proverbs is a book of practical wisdom, good advice and spiritual insight. It tells us that the good life demands discipline and avoiding the ways and company of sinners. To grossly oversimplify things, you could boil its message down to: ‘good behaviour produces good results and happiness; bad behaviour produces bad results and misery’. This corresponds to the purgative way. This stage in the Christian life does involve quite a lot of hard work, a lot of purgation in the sense that we are required to renounce many things that are not really beneficial to our growth in holiness.

But for just about everyone who is serious about their Christian life there will come a point when all their efforts and hard work and good will seem of no avail. No matter what the person does, no matter how hard they pray, they seem to be getting nowhere. And it’s precisely this which Ecclesiastes describes.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, 9)*

St John of the Cross calls this stage “the dark night of the senses”, it’s the stage which has also been called the desert or the cloud of unknowing, when all the spiritual practises which gave comfort and delight seem to do nothing any more, and no matter how hard one tries, it seems impossible to get back that earlier fervour and enthusiasm. And John, and all the mystics say this stage is essential, it’s important just to persevere at this point, not give up, but that in fact God’s grace is operating in the dark and the person is in fact being enlightened by God. And after that comes the unitive stage. In his great Dark Night poem, John of the cross describes what happens:

*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.*

This is what seems to be happening in the Song of Songs, or should I say more accurately this is what both he and she long for in the Song. Some people give huge amounts of time and energy to the Church, some people invest their entire selves into it. We spend our time teaching and organising and discussion and planning and worshipping. But the whole point of the entire enterprise, going back nearly four thousand years and spanning every nation and most cultures on earth is to bring about our union with God. Remember question 2 of the Penny Catechism.

Q) Why did God make you?

A) God made me to know him, love him and serve him in this world and to be happy with him for ever in the next.

I can scarcely think of a better more succinct description of the purpose of human life than that, and this is really what the Song of Songs is all about, union with God.

Back to our text. The passage ends with the bride making a humble plea to be drawn into ever deeper union with the spouse, the rooms being a metaphor for inner life.

Draw me after you; let us run.

The king has brought me into his chambers.

Those rooms of the king are none other than the heart of Christ, and it is in our hearts that we make this loving encounter. When lovers are alone in together they need make no pretence, they can be exactly who they are with each other and not worry what others think about them. In this intimacy of the heart we form an I-thou relationship with Christ. So while Christianity is communal by its nature, that communality can allow people to settle for a somewhat superficial type of relationship with Christ. There is a dreadful hymn written in the 70's but very popular in Uganda when I was there in the 90's which went:

Here we are, all together as we sing our song, joyfully

Here we are, joined together as we pray, we will always be

Keep the fire burning, kindle it with care

And we'll all join in and sing

Here we are, all together as we sing our song, joyfully

This is fine as far as it goes but it doesn't go very far. The real Christian is drawn further and deeper. The Christian does not encounter Jesus just through the faith of his group, his church, but through his own

response to Christ. This personal encounter brings intense *joy and gladness*. Christianity is not in its essence about obedience or observance, but about love.

What this prologue has done is laid the ground rules for real faith, finishing with an exclamation of love for Christ, since any other response to him is unworthy. Yes obedience is a *sine qua non* of discipleship, but how many Christians does one meet who have been very obedient to Christ, but have never really had any joy in their following of him. Their religion has consisted of duty, of bending their stubborn wills to that of God. Fine, but the Song reminds us here that while love is an act of the will it is also a response of the heart.

I had intended to do a fuller exposition of several other passages. It's not just the constraints of time which prevents me, but a growing realisation that this book is just part of a much bigger story in the Bible and a story which culminates in the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

A vitally important thing to note about this beautiful love poem is that it ends with the marriage still not consummated, with the bride still waiting for the groom. Surely you may say they have already been together. No actually, if we look at the passages where they seem to achieve intimacy we see that they are dream sequences, she is dreaming, or fantasising about the beloved – admittedly very vividly!

*On my bed by night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not.
I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.
I sought him, but found him not.
The watchmen found me
as they went about in the city.
“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”
Scarcely had I passed them
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
until I had brought him into my mother's house,
and into the chamber of her who conceived me. (3:1-4)*

How can she seek him lying on her bed? In a dream of course. It's made even clearer a little later, this could not be anything but a dream:

*I slept, but my heart was awake.
A sound! My beloved is knocking.
"Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one, (5:2)*

In the last verse she is still longing for him to come:

Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices! (8:14)

This to me suggests the longing for the Lord's coming expressed in the Advent liturgy in so many different ways. As Brant Pitre puts it: "[the Jewish people] are not just waiting for the kingdom of God or the Messiah, or the restoration of the twelve tribes. Above all they are waiting for the coming of the bridegroom God of Israel who will forgive their sins and unite himself with them in an everlasting marriage covenant."³ What is expressed in the Song of Songs is the longing of Israel and of every human being which cannot be satisfied in the OT alone. Israel awaits the bridegroom, and when the OT closes he still hasn't appeared. The very last chapter of the OT begins with words of longing and expectation:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (Malachi 4:1-2)

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus calls himself "The Bridegroom"

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they

³ PITRE, B. *Jesus the Bridegroom, the Greatest Love Story Ever Told*. (New York 2014) 27.

cannot fast. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. (Mark 2:18-20)

In Ch. 25 of Matthew we have the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (25:1-12) where these women await the bridegroom who eventually arrives. Later in the chapter we have the parable of the last judgement where the King arrives and separates the sheep from the goats. Well remember how in the Song of Songs the bride is longing for the bridegroom who is also the King. So perhaps Jesus is telling us that in him Israel's longing for her Bridegroom king is at last fulfilled. Consider too the words of John the Baptist in John 3

28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

We are all familiar with this verse in John 14:3

3 And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

We often use this at funerals and understand it as meaning that Jesus has gone before us to heaven and because of that there is place for us there too. This interpretation is fine, but does not exhaust the meaning.

Consider also how in the culture of his time when a Jewish man wanted to marry, he was required first of all to build a house, a dwelling place for him and his wife and only when that was ready was he allowed to come and take his wife home. In this passage Jesus speaks exactly like a bridegroom. At the marriage feast of Cana, in subtly asking Jesus to provide wine she is putting him into the role of the Bridegroom, whose specific task it was to provide the wine for the feast. And remember the beautiful scene on Easter Sunday morning with Mary Magdalene at the tomb; She is weeping and an angel says to her:

Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the

gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

John tells the story of the resurrection with an eye and the Bible's greatest love poem, the Song of Songs.

Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. 2 "I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but found him not. 3 The watchmen found me, as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" (Songs 3:1-3)

Remember how much Mary loved Jesus and expressed her love by tenderly anointing his feet with perfume. In her the Bride's search for the Bridegroom comes to an end, she finds him.

And what happens at the very end of the Bible in the book of revelation? The wedding of the Lamb. That which God has promised to do for his people, the perfect union, the marriage takes place.

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9)

In the Divine office we say this every Sunday because what we are celebrating the whole day is the fact that God has finally married us, through the Eucharist especially has brought us into a union with him which is as deep and intimate as possible.

Finally, a word about the way the Church has used and read this lovely book for many centuries. There is a huge use of these texts in Marian piety. This may seem a bit far-fetched, what we call accommodation, making a text say something that it was never meant

to. But remember Mary was a woman of great desire, and her desire was above all for God, so much so that he came to dwell in her womb. So it's not surprising that the Church applies the texts about desire for God to her. During the Renaissance, perhaps the highpoint for music in the history of the Church many famous polyphonic composers set texts from the Song to Music, always in honour of Our Lady. People like Palestrina, Victoria, Lassus, Guererro, Gombert and many others set these texts to often ravishingly beautiful music.

In many eastern religions, notably Buddhism, the whole point seems to be to extinguish desire. For Buddha, desire is the cause of all suffering, therefore get rid of desire and you'll eliminate suffering. Judaism and Christianity have never gone down that road. They are religions of intense desire, but the point is to desire the right thing and desire it fervently, as people say today, to go for it. All her life Mary wanted nothing more than to be close to God and when the angel Gabriel puts God's plan to her, she goes for it. This at least partly explains why the Song of Songs is so often connected in the liturgy with Mary.

Several of the antiphons in the office of Our Lady come from there . Listen to these antiphons from Vespers:

Ant 2 His left hand is under my head and his right arm embraces me.

Ant 3 I am dark but lovely O daughters of Jerusalem; therefore the king has loved me and has brought me into his room.

Ant 4 Now that the winter has past the rains are over and gone; arise my beloved and come

Ant 5 You are beautiful and sweet in your delights holy Mother of God.

One way to get rid of sinful desire is to fight it, to practice asceticism, to be tough with ourselves. Sometimes that works and, let's face it, sometimes it doesn't. Mary probably never had to do that, not because she was without desire but because her desire for God and for his kingdom and to do his will pushed any other desire out of the way. I pray that our reading of the Song of Songs will enkindle in us a greater desire for God.

The most famous poem of St. John of the Cross, the 'Dark Night' uses imagery which sounds very sensuous:

1. One Dark Night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- Ah the sheer grace -
went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

2. In darkness and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- Ah the sheer grace -
in darkness and concealment
my house being now all stilled.

3. On that glad night,
in secret for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart

4. This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was waiting for me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. 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.

6. Upon my flowering breast
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When the breeze blew from the turret

as I parted his hair
it wounded my neck
with its gentle hand
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself
laying my face on my beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.