

## **Sermon for 1<sup>st</sup> September 2024, Year B, Proper 17**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

**Song of Songs 2:8-13**

### **Sermon**

The wonderful love poetry from the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament has long been one of my favourite passages in the whole bible. I even have “Arise my love, my fair one, and come away” inscribed on a ring, because the words are so precious to me.

There's something about these words that are profoundly moving and full of an aching, timeless love, even two and a half thousand years after they were written. “For now, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come.” After a long period of waiting and planning and preparation, when times are a struggle and work is hard, suddenly a moment of pure bliss appears, when everything is perfect, and hearts previously divided come together as one, seeing and loving each another as they truly are.

I must admit that in this part of Scotland, as in the Highlands, it can sometimes feel like the rains are never truly over and gone, and even if you glimpse the round yellow thing briefly from behind a cloud, if you wait an hour, it will almost certainly start raining once again, but that just means we're even more full of wonder and delight when we do, finally, get that one clear day of summer. The longer the terrible weather goes on, the more joy there is in the appearance of the sunshine.

No one – not the first Christians or even the ancient Jews are entirely sure how this beautiful love poetry found its way into the bible, especially in the Old Testament where we're more used to stories about strict commandments and

wicked kings, not to mention Joseph and his dream-coat, Moses parting the Red Sea, and David defeating Goliath. There is plenty of poetry in praise of God, especially in the Psalms, but songs of love between women and men are rare to say the least, and especially not poetry written, like this, mostly from a woman's point of view.

The ancient Jews were so convinced that no erotic poetry could have any possible reason for being in the bible that they decided it wasn't really about the love between a man and woman after all, but the love between God and his people. And the early Christians continued this by arguing that it was really all about the love between Jesus and the human soul. In their view, the lover in the poem is Jesus, who comes bounding down the mountainside like a gazelle to draw out the selfish human heart and remind us of God's unstoppable love for us.

The thought of Jesus bounding like a gazelle may seem like an odd romantic image, but for many celibate nuns who were taught to passionately yearn for Jesus as a way to stir up love within their hearts, this could often be the most beautiful and helpful imagery imaginable.

During my own time as a novice nun, I'd wake up for the first prayers of the day at four in the morning and glide down to the dark church in my black habit, veil and sandals, and sometimes in the early silence I'd hear the gentle voice of God telling me how much he loved me, if only I believed him.

"Arise, my love, my fair one," he'd whisper, "the winter is past, the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of singing has come", and my heart would soar in that way it does when you know beyond any doubt whatsoever that you are totally and completely loved, just as you are, and nothing else matters. 'Time to leave behind all your sense of unworthiness and become the beloved child you've always been,' says God.

I can't overstate how important this knowing ourselves to be completely loved is to our faith. When I went into the monastery, I saw myself as broken, unlovable, far distant from God – but wanting to be good, wanting to be less selfish, more compassionate. I thought I might get there through religious discipline – living under obedience, following the rules, 'fake it 'til you make it,' but God doesn't seem to do things that way.

In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, when the young man crawls back home in shame intending to beg his father to treat him as a servant for the sake of a little food, his father rushes out instead to welcome him, and before he can utter a word of apology, the father has already brought his child fully back into his love, forgiven everything and started a celebration party.

Some people still see God as a strict judge they have to appease and obey perfectly to have the slightest chance of reaching heaven, but that's not the sort of God that Jesus showed us through his life and his teaching, and it's not the sort of God revealed in bible poetry like the Song of Solomon. Instead, we see a God who transforms us not by strict discipline and harsh punishments but by unexpected forgiveness, overwhelming compassion, and unstoppable love especially for those who feel they cannot ever deserve it.

This is why, in Christian terms, human marriage is considered to be a reflection of the love of God for his creation. We human beings flourish most completely when we know that we are completely loved – when we have found our forever home in someone else's heart that can never be taken away from us, even by death. Once we know a love so complete, so all-encompassing, so liberating, then we are able to become completely ourselves, free from anxieties and doubts about whether we can ever be good enough.

For those times when life is hard, and we struggle with difficulties and battles perhaps of our own making, when we are finding it hard to find the good in ourselves, let alone in others, reading the Song of Solomon as a love letter to us

– personally – from the Creator of the Universe, reminds us that whatever mistakes we have made, to God we are all still as beautiful as any child is to their mother and father on the day they first enter the world.

“Arise my love, my fair one, and come away, for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come.”