

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Sixth Sunday of Easter (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Song of Solomon 4:16 – 5:2; 8: 6-7
Psalm 45
Revelation 3: 14-22
Luke 22: 24-30

I must admit to some surprise when the Lectionary produced an Old Testament reading from the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs to give the alternative description).

In 50+ years as a Local Preacher I cannot recall ever selecting a reading from this book!

I wonder how many of us are familiar with it - we may know isolated verses or passages, but how familiar are we with the complete text? Given the nature of some of its content we may well ask why it is included in the Bible.

The NIV Bible Commentary, in giving background to the book, asks this very same question, then goes on to say:

Its few references to a historically identifiable person (Solomon) and to known places (Jerusalem, En Gedi, Tirzah) show its Jewish provenance. But the usual marks of biblical literature – religious themes, institutions and practices – are absent. There are no references to law, grace, sin, salvation, or prayer. In fact, there is not a single, indisputable reference to the Lord God in the text.

Yet 'The Song of Solomon' / 'Song of Songs' has held a significant place in the affections of the synagogue and the church. In Israel the book came to be associated with the greatest Hebrew festival, being read on the eighth day of Passover. During the first fifteen centuries of the Christian church, most major Christian writers turned their attention to this little work. Neither Jews nor Christians have been able to ignore it.

Matthew Henry commences his "Exposition, with practical observations" with these thoughts:

All scripture, we are sure, is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for the support and advancement of the interests of his kingdom among men, and is never the less so for there being found in it some things *dark and hard to be understood, which those that are unlearned and unstable wrest to their own destruction*. In our belief both of the divine extraction and of the spiritual exposition of this book we are confirmed by the ancient, constant, and concurring testimony both of the church of the Jews, to who were *committed the oracles of God*, and who never made any doubt of the authority of this book, and of the Christian church, which happily succeeds them in that trust and honour.

It must be confessed, on the one hand, that if he who barely reads this book be asked, as the eunuch was *Understandest thou what thou readest?* He will have more reason than he had to say, *How can I, except some man shall guide me?* The books of scripture-history and prophecy are very much like one another, but this *Song of Solomon's* is very much unlike the songs of his father David; here is not the name of God in it; it is never quoted in the New Testament; we find not in it any expression of natural religion or pious devotion, no, nor is it introduced by vision, or any of the marks of immediate revelation. It seems as hard as any part of scripture to be made *a savour of life unto life*, nay, and to those who come to the reading of it with carnal minds and corrupt affections, it is in danger of being made *a savour of death unto death*; it is a flower out of which they extract poison; and therefore the Jewish doctors advised their young people not to read it until they were thirty years old, lest by the abuse of that which is most pure and sacred (*horrendum dictum – horrible to say!*) the flames of lust should be kindled with fire from heaven, which is intended for the altar only.

Matthew Henry goes on to say that the content of the book is AN ALLEGORY.

The NIV Bible Commentary again:

The oldest documented interpretation of the 'Song of Solomon' / 'Song of Songs' sees it as an allegory. An allegory is an extended metaphor and normally is not rooted in history or the real world but is drawn from the mind and imagination of the author. Its purpose is not to present real events related to identifiable places and persons, but rather to communicate spiritual truth of an abstract nature. Allegory is an old device in which there is a divorce between the obvious literal meaning and the "high" spiritual message. As an allegory, the Jews saw this book as a depiction of the relationship of the Lord to his chosen people, Israel. Many Christians have seen the Song primarily as a statement of the love relationship between Christ and the church, his bride.

There are problems, however, in accepting the 'Song of Solomon' / 'Song of Songs' as an allegory.

First, nothing in the text indicates that the intention of the author was to allegorize.

Second, the people, places, and experiences recorded seem to be real, not literary devices.

Third, this little book does not have the narrative character – the clear progressive story-line – that we usually expect in allegory. The result of the use of the allegorical approach is that the 'book' has become to an unusual degree a field for fertile imaginations.

In moving from an Allegorical to a Natural interpretation the NIV Commentary records:

Occasionally through history someone has become unhappy with the allegorical treatment and has raised a voice for a more natural approach to the plain sense of the text. Until the modern era a price was usually extracted for such bravery. In the first century apparently some Jewish readers understood the 'Song of Songs' literally. Some were even singing portions of it in their drinking hoses. This evoked the wrath of Rabbi Aqiba who pronounced an anathema on such practices.

In a further section (Purpose and Message) the NIV Commentary asks the question – "*Why is this seemingly erotic little book included in the sacred canon?*"

It goes on to discuss marriage as seen in both Old and New Testaments and concludes:

‘Song of Solomon’ / ‘Song of Songs’, however, is more than declaration that human sexual love in itself is good. The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship of God to his people is almost universal in Scripture. From the time that God chose Israel to be his own, the covenant was pictured in terms of a marriage. Idolatry was equated with adultery (Exodus 34: 10-17). The Lord is a jealous God. Monogamous marriage is the norm for depicting the covenant relationship throughout Scripture, climaxing with the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. (Revelation 19: 9)

I apologise for a rather long introduction to the ‘Song of Solomon’! Our reading, coming from chapters 4, 5 and 8 appear to be a dialogue. Many translations, such as the Authorised Version, simply print the text but others have given a ‘prefix’, identifying the speaker, before the text of the dialogue. They do not all appear to agree as to the speaker!

In the anglicised version of the NIV 4:16, 5:2 and 8:6-7 the prefix is **She**; 5:1a has the prefix **He** and 5:1b **Friends**.

The equivalent prefixes in the NIV Study Bible are **Beloved, Lover, and Friends**.

The New Living Translation has **Young Woman, Young Man, and Young Women of Jerusalem**.

The New King James Version has **The Shulamite, The Beloved, (To His Friends)**.

A Shulamite was an inhabitant of Shulam/Shulem (probably synonymous with Shunem) and the prefix is generated from this town. (Song of Solomon 6: 13):

Friends

¹³ Come back, come back, O Shulammitte; come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!

After occupation of the ‘Promised Land’ Shulem was a town in the allotment for the tribe of Issachar (Joshua 19); it is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 28:4 and 2 Kings 4:8. In 1 Kings 1 we read:

¹When King David was very old, he could not keep warm even when they put covers over him.

²So his attendants said to him, ‘Let us look for a young virgin to serve the king and take care of him. She can lie beside him so that our lord the king may keep warm.’

³Then they searched throughout Israel for a beautiful young woman and found **Abishag, a Shunammite**, and brought her to the king.

⁴The woman was very beautiful; she took care of the king and waited on him, but the king had no sexual relations with her.

The Message gives yet more and slightly different prefixes for our reading as well as the expected freer ‘translation’:

The Woman

4¹⁶Wake up, North Wind, get moving, South Wind! Breathe on my garden, fill the air with spice fragrance. Oh, let my lover enter his garden! Yes, let him eat the fine, ripe fruits.

The Man

5¹ I went to my garden, dear friend, best lover! breathed the sweet fragrance. I ate the fruit and honey, I drank the nectar and wine. Celebrate with me, friends! Raise your glasses — “To life! To love!”

The Woman

2 I was sound asleep, but in my dreams I was wide awake. Oh, listen! It’s the sound of my lover knocking, calling!

The Man

“Let me in, dear companion, dearest friend, my dove, consummate lover! I’m soaked with the dampness of the night, drenched with dew, shivering and cold.”

The Woman

8⁶⁻⁸ Hang my locket around your neck, wear my ring on your finger. Love is invincible facing danger and death. Passion laughs at the terrors of hell. The fire of love stops at nothing — it sweeps everything before it. Flood waters can’t drown love, torrents of rain can’t put it out. Love can’t be bought, love can’t be sold — it’s not to be found in the marketplace.

There seems to be little to add by way of comment on the actual text of the reading.

I happened to comment, to my wife, my surprise at this reading coming from the ‘Song of Solomon’ – she cast her eyes over the printed verses, picked out parts of two and started, hesitantly, to sing a remembered tune that went with them:

8⁷ Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.

8⁶ for love is as strong as death,

John Ireland had incorporated these verses in his choral anthem “Greater Love” which once again links our reading with the love of Christ:

**Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death.**
Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends.
Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree,
That we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness.
Ye are washed, ye are sanctified,

ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.
Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation;
That ye should show forth the praises of him
who hath call’d you out of darkness into his marvellous light.
I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God,
that you present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy,
acceptable unto to God, which is your reasonable service.

There is a tenuous link (?) between the reading we have just considered and the psalm appointed for this service – Psalm 45. The instruction for the latter is clear - it is to the director of music, specifying the tune for this **wedding song**.

And it is not for ‘any old wedding’ – it is to be a royal wedding. The preface to this psalm in the NIV Study Bible has:

A song in praise of the king on his wedding day. He undoubtedly belonged to David’s dynasty, and the song was probably used at more than one royal wedding. Since the bride is a foreign princess (v10, v12), the wedding reflects the king’s standing as a figure of international significance.

As a royal son of David, he is a type (foreshadowing) of Christ. **After the exile this psalm was applied to the Messiah, the promised Son of David** who would sit on David’s throne (for the application of vv. 6-7 to Christ see Hebrews 1: 8-9).

The same connection, from Hebrews 1:8; Jesus as the Son of David, seated on the eternal throne, is also made in the introduction to the psalm in the NIV Bible Commentary.

The psalm divides into two halves – the first part in praise of the king, the bridegroom, extolling his virtues and his glory; the second part addressing the bride before also extolling her glory.

The final two verses are concluding promises to the couple but primarily to the king:

¹⁶Your sons will take the place of your fathers; you will make them princes throughout the land.

¹⁷I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.

Is it the psalmist writing “I” in verse 17 or is he expressing a promise from the Lord? (Nearly all translations of this verse commence - “I” – there is no available clarification!)

When first reading this psalm my memory was jogged by some of the words from verse 1 – “*my tongue is the pen of a skilful writer*”.

First thoughts were in the direction of song memories but a trawl of the internet has not brought any familiar words/tune to light. I did however come across an entry from a member of staff at the Chicago Moody Bible Institute - remembering a song he had known and sung at a state elementary school:

I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees,
The Spirit of the Lord has come down on the earth.
The Church that seemed in slumber has now risen from its knees
And dry bones are responding with the fruits of new birth.
Oh this is now a time for declaration,
The word will go to all men everywhere;
The Church is here for healing of the nations,
Behold the day of Jesus drawing near.

**My tongue will be the pen of a ready writer,
And what the Father gives to me I’ll sing;
I only want to be His breath,
I only want to glorify the King.**

And all around the world the body waits expectantly,
The promise of the Father is now ready to fall.
The watchmen on the tower all exhort us to prepare
And the church responds – a people who will answer the call.
And this is not a phase which is passing,
It’s the start of an age that is to come.
And where is the wise man and the scoffer?
Before the face of Jesus they are dumb.

A body now prepared by God and ready for war,
The prompting of the Spirit is our word of command.
We rise, a mighty army, at the bidding of the Lord,
The devils see and fear, for their time is at hand.
And children of the Lord hear our commission
That we should love and serve our God as one,
The Spirit won’t be hindered by division
In the perfect work that Jesus has begun.

We come, this week, to the final of our ‘letters to the churches’ from Revelation – perhaps the best known of all seven, that to the church in Laodicea.

We saw, last week, the location of the city on the map of modern Turkey. In Roman times it was prosperous, being located on major trade routes and also a centre of textile production and banking.

The wealth of the city is expressed in our reading: (Revelation 3: 17)

¹⁷You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Material prosperity, following the ways of the world, was obviously a controlling factor in the lives of these Laodicean Christians.

Is there a worse accusation than that which is brought against them in verse 15 –

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!”

I am reminded of the similar challenge Elijah presented to the people of Israel on Mount Carmel: (1 Kings 18)

²¹ Elijah went before the people and said, **‘How long will you waver between two opinions?’**

If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.’

“How long halt ye between two opinions?” (Authorised Version) Does that question challenge us today, would we recognise our Christian Life as being *neither cold nor hot*? It is interesting that the Spirit’s word to the ‘angel/messenger’ of the Laodiceans can be interpreted as ‘I would rather see you ‘cold’ than ‘apathetic’. Better still of course is to be ‘hot’.

The eternal Love of Christ, His yearning to see people turn to Him, is expressed in verse 19, followed immediately by the verse which inspired that well known, great, painting by William Holman Hunt – ‘The Light of the World’ (1851):

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.

²⁰ **Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.** If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

The ‘letter’ concludes with a promise for those who are ‘hot’:

²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

²² **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’**

Reputation and Status – they are regular human desires! Have you ever given in to the temptation to seek some prominence in a group or to put yourself forward for an important, vacant position?

Remember the contrast between the two subjects in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: (Luke 18)

⁹ **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else,**

Jesus told this parable:

¹⁰ Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

¹³ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

¹⁴ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Today’s gospel reading finds the disciples arguing amongst themselves as to who is the greatest. In Luke 22 this dissension comes immediately after they have shared the ‘last supper’ with Jesus and His statement that one of them will betray Him. The argument starts when they question, among themselves, which of them it might be – but it was only the beginning; as our reading reveals, *“a dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest”*.

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark record another time when James and John (plus mother in Matthew) came to Jesus with a request for pre-eminence when He comes into His kingdom. We read that the remaining disciples were incensed when they heard of this.

Jesus aware of this feeling calls them together and delivers a message that is very similar to that we find in our reading: (Mark 10)

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

⁴² Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

There appears to be a further episode recorded in three of the gospels - in Matthew 18 the disciples come to Jesus with the question *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*

In Mark 9 and Luke 9 there has been another argument – who is the greatest among them?

In all three passages Jesus gives a similar reply: (Mark)

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’

³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’

There appears to be a common root in the words of Jesus quoted (apparently on two of these different occasions) - in Luke 22: 25 and Mark 10:42. *“The kings of the Gentiles lording their position over others”*.

All of the gospels give us this clear picture of our now risen and ascended Lord, seated in glory with His Father, who during His time on earth came as a servant, giving His life as an example to us all

The Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah described ‘a servant’ indeed a ‘Suffering Servant’:

- ³He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
- ⁴Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
- ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Let us pray that we may not be found among the wayward sheep but firmly found, protected and serving in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

O loving Lord, who art for ever seeking
Men of Thy mind, intent to do Thy will,
Strong in Thy strength, Thy power and grace bespeaking;
Faithful to Thee, through good report and ill –
To Thee we come, and humbly make confession,
Faithless so oft, in thought and word and deed,
Asking that we may have, in true possession,
Thy free forgiveness in the hour of need.

In duties small, be Thou our inspiration,
In large affairs endue us with Thy might;
Through faithful service cometh full salvation.
So may we serve, Thy will our chief delight.
Not disobedient to the heavenly vision,
Faithful in all things, seeking not reward,
Then, following Thee, may we fulfil our mission,
True to ourselves, our brethren, and our Lord. Amen

William Vaughan Jenkins

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labour to pursue,
Thee, only Thee, resolved to know
In all I think, or speak, or do.

The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil,
In all my works Thy presence find,
And prove Thy acceptable will.

Thee may I set at my right hand,
Whose eyes my inmost substance see,
And labour on at Thy command,
And offer all my works to Thee.

Give me to bear Thy easy yoke,
And every moment watch and pray,
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to Thy glorious day:

For Thee delightfully employ
Whate'er Thy bounteous grace hath given,
And run my course with even joy,
And closely walk with Thee to heaven.

Charles Wesley