

A Sermon by Fr. Sam Wood
January 20, 2008

The Feast of St. Agnes

Song of Songs 2:10-13

Psalm 45:10-16

II Corinthians 10:17-11:2

Matthew 18:1-6

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

I know I had to wait for the rector of the parish to go out of the country to do this, but I've always wanted to preach on the Song of Songs. No other book in the bible so captivated my imagination as a young boy in Mississippi, and if you've read the Song, you can probably imagine why. But why is Song of Songs even in the Bible? Both the Synagogue and the Church placed it in the canon of Holy Scripture, but it's one of only two books in the Bible without any reference to God (the other is Esther). On its face it's a love poem full of rich, sometimes erotic, images. Some say it made the cut because it is attributed to fabled King Solomon, the son of the great King David, and the builder of the Jewish temple (1 Kgs 5-7). Solomon's name does appear seven times in the Song, most prominently in the title, which, literally translated, is "The Song of Songs which is of Solomon," but the preposition "of" doesn't necessarily mean Solomon wrote it. In fact, today almost nobody¹ believes Solomon actually wrote the Song. So who did? The fact is: We don't know? When was it written? We don't know. Where? Don't know. The Song has been described as "a lock for which the key ha[s] been lost."² So – what's it doing here?

Were we to go back to the second century and ask that question of a man named Hippolytus, he would tell us about the "spiritual meaning" behind the literal meaning of the text. Greeks had long used this method to interpret the sacred poems about their gods, taking literal descriptions of some fairly despicable things and reading them as allegories, as extended metaphors in which fictional characters shed light on truths of human existence. Hippolytus was the first Christian to read the Song in this way, not as a poem about the relationship between two actual lovers, but as an allegory of God's relationship to his people. So when Hippolytus read verse 4 of chapter 1 – "Take me away with you – let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers" – the one yearning to be taken away was Christ's bride, the Church.³ Here's a quote:

[F]rom the early days of the Church, Solomon's salacious Song, which at first blush tended to appeal to the pernicious pruriency of men, women, and children, had to be interpreted in a way that

1 Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Prince, 1999): 1050.

2 Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, ANCHOR BIBLE (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977): 17.

3 Pope, 114.

would eliminate the evil impulse and transform and spiritualize carnal desire into praise of virginity and celibacy and sexless passion of the human soul and/or the Church of God, and of God's response in kind. This was accomplished by means of allegorical interpretation in much the same way that the Greek philosophers had managed to change the lusty gods of Homer and Hesiod into spiritual ideals. Celibate Christian theologians were thus able by allegory to unsex the Sublime Song and make it a hymn of spiritual and mystical love without carnal taint. *Canticum Canticorum* thus became the favorite book of ascetics and monastics who found in it . . . the means to rise above earthly and fleshly desire to the pure platonic love of the virgin soul for God.⁴

Reading this way does avoid the messiness of the sexual imagery. Do we really like describing God as having legs of marble (5:15), arms like rods of gold (4:14), and what's all this about breasts (4:5) and mouths and necks and such? It was unseemly to the Greeks who equated holiness with sexual renunciation, and the Romans who prized chastity and virginity. Incidentally, that's how a passage from a fairly racy book shows up in the lectionary for this particular day, the Feast of St. Agnes, a virgin martyr and this parish's patroness.

But that kind of thinking is suspect for two reasons: First, there's the danger of rampant subjectivity: Just make the text say whatever you want it to say. Just look at a verse from today's passage: "The time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land." (2:12). Ellie and Patrick watch a cartoon about a talking turtle named Franklin, but this Hebrew word probably means *turtledove*. Literally, the writer is echoing Tennyson when he said "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." It's spring, the snows are melting, new life is coming back, and the paramour is in love. But to Origen, one of the early allegorical interpreters of the Song, the "cooing of doves heard in our land" really means the conversion of foreigners to the religion of Israel.⁵ So if we read the Song allegorically, we have to be aware of the risk of making it say whatever we want.

Second, searching for an allegorical meaning nurses a dualism that strikes at the heart of what Christianity is all about. This dualism says all sex is bad, not just because it's sex, but because it's earthy – it's bodily, it's fleshy, it's the kind of thing upstanding Christian people don't talk about in mixed company, much less read aloud in church. But the church decided a long time ago that sort of dualism is not orthodox Christianity. Docetism is a heresy because Jesus didn't just *seem like* he was a real human being, he *was* a real human being. Christianity is all about God taking *on* flesh, not about us putting ours *off*.

It occurs to me that we get somewhere near the truth if we can hold a deeper

4 Pope, *Song of Songs*, 114.

5 Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, BST (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994): 133.

“spiritual” meaning in tension with the literal meaning. One commentary calls the Song “a *double entendre*, in which the theme of human love is interpenetrated with a mystical concept of a far deeper order”⁶ Remember that there’s not a single specific reference to God in the Song, but I find in that a compelling lesson. The creation itself, with all the earthy bodiliness of it, is good and tells us something about God. “So if we ask the question, ‘Where is God in the Song?’, the answer is ‘Nowhere and everywhere.’ He is nowhere explicitly mentioned, everywhere assumed.”⁷

If that is the case, I think the Song teaches us two things: (1) We should relish our human loves. We should marvel at how love makes our hearts larger, how the love of a man or a woman or a child makes us want to be better people. We should ponder the tenuousness of the loves in our lives, how they are precious but passing, here for a moment then gone. One of my favorite songwriters is Richard Shindell. He wrote a song called “Hazel’s House” about a holiday family dinner at his grandmother’s in New Jersey, of all places. The song talks about cousins all around, the uncles with one eye on the Rose Bowl, Hazel with “crumbcake at the ready,” and then there’s this line that just blows me away:

*[N]o one seems to know that this is heaven
They say we only know it by and by.
But someday all will be revealed;
Well, here it is.*⁸

When the Second Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the holiest place in Jewish life became not the synagogue, but the home. A traditional Jewish expression for “home” is *mikdash me’at*, literally “little sanctuary” or “little holy place.”⁹ Our dining room tables are altars where we bless God for what he has given us in creation, and we receive God back in our bread, our wine, our families and our friends. Wendy Mogel, a psychologist who uses the Torah and Jewish tradition in her practice, says our dining room table “has the potential to be the holiest spot on the planet.”¹⁰ And yet no one seems to know that this is heaven.

(2) We live in a sacramental universe. Every facet of life, every person, every act, every object, can be an icon, a window through which we can see God. I don’t mean that in a hokey pantheistic way, but in the way Psalm 19:1 says “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” If we’ve eyes to see, the created order speaks of God’s existence, his power, his glory, and our human loves speak of his love, a love of another order, a love that

6 Harrison, 1053.

7 Gledhill, 37.

8 Richard Shindell, “Hazel’s House,” from *Vuelta*

<<http://www.richardshindell.com/index.php?page=songs&display=93&category=Vuelta>> (last visited 19 January 2008).

9 See Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Compass, 2001): 35.

10 Mogel, 35.

compelled him to step into his creation in order to save his creation, to take on flesh to redeem flesh, to die to give us life. And that gives us hope that can withstand even the certainty that all human loves give way to death. Hope like that extolled in the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy: “How fair and lovely is the hope which the Lord gave to the dead when he lay down like them beside them. Rise up and come forth and sing praise to him who has raised you from destruction.”

He lay down like us beside us

“Arise, my love, my lovely one come,
The winter is past and the rains are gone.
The flowers appear, it's the season of song,
My beautiful one, arise and come with me.”¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

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¹¹ Lyrics to “Arise My Love,” by Michael Card.