

A matter of love ?

2912

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you
through him who was lifted up on a cross.

Our text today may be found in the Song of Songs chapter 2 and verse 10:

'Arise my love my fair one
And come away.'

It's been a busy summer. In the ten weeks from mid-June to mid-August, I married 6 couples and this month, I have four more weddings to conduct: two here and two in Malouinières near St Méloir des Ondes. Then there has been a crop of baptisms: four in July including a hat-trick one Sunday, one in August and now one today. Love is a wonderful, beautiful thing and one real privilege that belongs to being a priest is that we can play a part in the loving relationship between two people by blessing their union in the sacrament of marriage; then at some point, blessing the fruit of that union in the sacrament of baptism.

And it is to the theme of love I should like to turn this morning rooted in that great Hebrew love poem, 'the Song of Songs' from which today's text is taken:

‘Arise my love my fair one
And come away.’

If you’ve never read ‘The Song of Songs’, then let me recommend you do. It’s quite short: just eight chapters and 117 verses, less than seven sides of an NRSV Bible. Essentially, it is a love poem, or a collection of love poems, with two or three voices: a Shulamite woman, a shepherd and possibly that of King Solomon who is regarded as the author of the work by some not least the translators of the King James Bible which is indicated by its title for the work – ‘the Song of Solomon’.

The actual title of the work, ‘The Song of Songs’, is a form of the Hebrew superlative which might be translated as the best song ever. It is essentially a celebration of the love between a young man and a young woman. Nowhere in the book is God mentioned by name but the gift of love between two people is regarded as another good gift of God in creation to his children whom he has created in his own image. The book may well extol the virtues of physical love but it has also been interpreted as an extended image of the love of God for Man.

There is no doubt in my mind that it is a poem about love: it has all the hallmarks of love poetry: the yearning for the beloved; the joy at finding him or her; the distress at losing them. There are descriptions of how each sees the other though some of the similes may sound a little odd to our 21st century European ears –

‘Your hair is like a flock of goats
Moving down the slopes of Gilead’

There are some effective turns of phrase which capture what it is to be in love.

Let me just highlight a few:

'My beloved is mine and I am his'	2 v16
'Let me see your face let me hear your voice for your voice is sweet and your face lovely'	2 v14
'Your love is better than wine'	1 v2
'Your name is perfume poured out'	1 v3

But my favourite passage is the one most often chosen at weddings:

'Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love all the wealth of his house
It would be utterly scorned.'

8 v6/7

And there in the phrase flashes of fire, we have a parallel with notion of God's burning love for His creation – in Hebrew, 'resheph', literally the flames from burning coals, the flame of Yahweh. The gift of love between two people capture

something of the very real love God feels for us collectively as his people and individually as his child.

What a wonderful idea on which to reflect.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 26 : Love

