Four Advent Studies on the Song of Songs

Craig Thompson

Illuminating Faith

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Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

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DESIRE, BEAUTY, LONGING, POSSESSION

ADVENT STUDIES ON THE SONG OF SONGS

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Introduction

Perhaps some explanation is in order as to why we might look to the Song of Solomon for inspiration during the season of Advent! What has this surprising biblical book got to do with the idea of God's coming-to ('ad-vent') us?

The Song of Solomon brings its own particular kind of smile to our faces when someone refers to it. The Songs are themselves ostensibly the words of King Solomon himself and 'the Shulammite' – one of his brides (6.13). The poems leap into themes of intimacy and sexuality. This can be more than a little confusing in a biblical book, given our strong social and cultural formation about privacy in relation to these issues.

The question of the place of Songs in the scriptures, and the appropriate way to read it, has led to it being one of the most commented upon books of Scripture. One medieval Jewish commentator (Saadia) spoke of it as a lock to which the key has been lost – as if it secures the door to something of great importance but we cannot tell what that thing is. Interpretations of Songs have ranged from ancient (and modern) spiritualising and allegorising of its more explicit language – turning the language into something other than what it seems to be – to the enthusiastic embrace of its eroticism as sheer eroticism. These studies do not try to develop a theory of interpretation for our reflections over Advent but simply engage the text so that we might hear the gospel. The gospel must surely embrace both 'the spirit' and 'the body' if it is to be the Word of a Spirit who takes on a Body – such a Spirit as we meet if indeed in the body of Jesus we have the Christ.

It has been said that the Psalms are God's Word to us in our words to God – our own songs and poems and prayers given back to us as God's revelation of Godself. In thinking about Songs we ask after something comparable: in what way might our words to each other – for that is what love poetry is – become God's Word to us?

It is the central themes of longing and desire in the Song of Solomon which connect the book with Advent. We will ask the question: in what way are the Songs more than simply eroticism, or even pornography? This might seem natural enough categories into which to place them. That is, what do the Songs have to do with us? Pornography, whether in

texts or images, serves the voyeur, the one who watches at a distance but does not participate in bodily exchange with those being observed. But the Songs do not invite us to be voyeurs. What will matter is understanding what it is we desire, and how that desire works in us – in, for and against others and God. The issue is not whether we do or should desire, or not. Longing and desire – the beautiful and possessing it – are at the heart of Solomon's Songs and at the heart of all that we do and say, whether or not we are conscious of it. We cannot but desire; the question is simply one of pressing towards the 'appropriate' object of desire, longing, yearning. Advent is a season for the training of desire.

Suggestions for using this material

The Songs

Those using these materials would benefit from reading through the whole of the Songs several times over the course of the studies. This will give a feel for the book and poems as a whole, and make it easier to assess whether the studies are correct in their reading of the focus texts.

The Readings

Each study takes a focus text from the Songs. These are complemented by the gospel reading for the day and a psalm. The gospel readings are those set by the Revised Common Lectionary for Sundays in Advent, which are taken from different gospels each year but with similar themes on each Sunday in the season. If you are doing these studies in Advent, read from the gospel of that lectionary year. The psalms are not from the lectionary settings but are chosen to reflect the themes of the Songs text for that study.

The poems

The following poems may also be useful for reflection on the themes of the studies; these are easily accessed on the internet via your favourite search engine:

Study 1: 'Longing', Matthew Arnold

Study 2: Lullaby (1st stanza), W H Auden

Study 3: 'The Beast', Kevin Hart

Study 4: i carry your heart with me, e. e. cummings

The Studies

The studies are intended for use as a read-and-discuss study series. The questions for reflection are guides only; the discussion can follow in the interests of the group. The

‘Response’ suggested at the end of each study might be undertaken prior to gathering for discussion as part of individuals’ preparation for the group, or as a group at the end of the discussion. The sessions could be concluded with prayer around the themes of the study.

More work

If you want to look a little more into the background of Songs, the Wikipedia page on Songs gives a helpful introduction. The commentary on Songs by Robert Jenson is contemporary and theologically rich; you can preview it in some depth here (Google Books). A useful devotional companion to the sermon series would be Julian of Norwich’s Revelations of divine love. This is available in a number of hard copy and electronic versions; a PDF version is available here.

AND, many thanks to Joan Wright Howie and Rosalie Hudson for many helpful suggestions to make these studies better!

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Songs 3.1-5
and Psalm 130
and Matthew 24.36-44 or
Mark 13.24-37 or
Luke 21.25-36

'UPON MY BED AT NIGHT I SOUGHT HIM WHOM MY SOUL LOVES'

There is a car bumper sticker occasionally seen around the place which declares 'Jesus is coming' and advises, 'Look busy'. On the first Sunday of Advent each year the Revised Common Lectionary directs us to the coming 'apocalypse': the return of the 'Son of Man'. To modern ears, New Testament apocalyptic arrives divorced from the religious and political realities which made it the background to the New Testament proclamation. And so, when we hear of the coming of God in such terms as gospel writers employ in the Advent 1 gospel readings, the word we hear sounds like sheer threat. This is reflected in the way apocalyptic themes are typically taken up in popular culture. In movies the portrayal of apocalypse takes reference from the image of Armageddon – the final battle between good and evil – with the good being the threatened world and the evil being personified in some demonic figure. These movies make for special-effect extravaganzas, but do little to convey the substance of New Testament apocalyptic.

How do you understand the apocalyptic imagery of the New Testament?

What we miss in our contemporary hearing of New Testament apocalyptic texts is the good news which addresses the religious and political longings and the desires of the Jews of the time. The world was not 'right': God's elect still laboured under foreign domination, the promised reign of God had not yet been realised. The longing for God's righteous re-ordering of the world took shape in the anticipation of a final judgement through which all would be put right. Apocalyptic imagery was, then, not only a matter of 'beware – God is coming'. Such a coming of God was strongly desired, for in God's approach Israel hoped that the righteousness of God would finally be manifest. That God was approaching in this way was good news, not bad: 'your redemption is drawing near'. This is God's response to the psalmist's cry 'out of the depths' (Psalm 130), reaching up to God, and waiting. If we do not cry out for a resolution of life and love, then there is nothing much for us here.

In what ways are social and political desires and hopes expressed today?

What longings for resolution to you find in yourself? In what way are they things to which God might have an answer (or a question)?

This first study explores the identity of those who desire in the Songs.

In our focus text we hear the Shulammite woman on her bed in the night seeking, perhaps dreaming of, 'him whom my soul loves' but not finding

him, calling out for him but receiving no answer. Later – perhaps in the morning – she rises and seeks him again, finds him and brings him back to 'the chamber of her that conceived me', with all that is suggested by 'conception' remaining otherwise unspoken.

Historically – if there is a historical kernel to the poems – these two are likely Solomon and his bride. Yet if we are to read this poem 'spiritually', so that it is a kind of allegory of things other than just one seeking her lover, with whom are the lovers to be identified? More to the point: where are *we* in this text if we are not voyeurs but are ourselves figured by these lovers? Are we the woman on her bed or he whom her soul loves?[2]

Perhaps the natural response is that we are the Shulammite: longing, wanting, waiting, seeking. If we are reading 'spiritually', God then becomes the one who is being sought. This seems to work for a couple of reasons. First, it makes sense that we are the ones who desire, who seek, who long and yearn and call out, for this is the kind of thing we do, rather than the kind of thing a god does. It makes sense also that we might imagine that we have lain down in love with God, and then found that he has left us – perhaps in divine judgement.

What does a longing for God look, or feel, like?

More than this, the notion that God longs, yearns, seeks, calls out in any way which reflects our own longing doesn't fit comfortably with most religious sensitivities. The soul which 'waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning' (Psalm 130.6) is surely ours, and not the heart of God.

But if we are to speak of 'desire' and 'passion' we cannot leave God out of the picture, not only as the one desired but as himself desiring. That God might desire has long troubled the church, for desire suggests incompleteness and this implies change. Setting aside Scriptural declarations about God being the same yesterday, today and forever leads to questions about whether God is reliable. How much might God change? Enough to hate what once he loved? That God might change cannot be separated from the suggestion that God might be capricious, and with that the whole scriptural testimony to God's faithfulness seems to crumble to dust.

Does God desire? What does God desire?

Historical theological debates have asked whether or not God is 'impassible' – im-passionate – without passion, the term 'passion'

[2] We will leave the possibility of our being cast in the role of the city sentinels to one side, but the role of facilitating or inhibiting (see also the sentinels' part in 5.7) the consummation of desire would be an important dimension of a fuller exploration of the identities in the Songs.

originally having to do with suffering. What has the passion of Christ – the suffering, change, decay of Jesus – to do with the true heart of the being of God? That the middle paragraph of our creeds is so much longer than the first and the third is the sign of this problem – can the suffering and dead human being Jesus be related to the immortal God?

Is desire necessarily a suffering?

It is striking, however, that we use the same word to speak of divine suffering – 'the passion of the Christ' – as we do to speak of erotic desire.[3] What if we were to take a lead from an ancient interpretative method and assume that the same word in such different contexts reflects different dimensions of the same thing? Here we might switch the words and meanings around so that we could speak of the passion of the Christ as the 'desire' of the Christ, or the passionate embrace of two lovers as a 'suffering' embrace. Lovers, of course, do not suffer in their embrace as Christ does on the cross, and Christ does not desire the cross as lovers desire each other. There is, however, more going on in suffering and erotic embrace than just the predominant meaning of 'passion' in each context. As much as such a shift in language might jar our sensitivities, we are approaching something here which really matters: that God's passion, suffering, has something to do with God's desire.[4]

What links do you see between suffering and desire, whether ours or God's?

Here we might recall the God who once walked in the cool of the evening calling, 'Adam, Eve, where are you?', the God who urgently seeks the lost sheep, hunts for the lost coin, who searches and calls until the desired thing is found, and joy follows. This searching is passionate – intense, focussed, consuming. But it is also a suffering way – rejection, crucifixion, death. God's passionate suffering in Christ is a suffering out of desire to gather the world back:

> 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23.37 NRSV)

If, first, it might seem that we must be the woman on her bed because God could not desire in that way, then the second reason we might identify with the woman in the allegory takes into account the general pattern of biblical depictions of God: the gender roles in the Songs suggest that we are the Shulammite and God is the male lover. Lurking in the background here are biblical images of God as 'husband' to Israel the (sometimes unfaithful) wife, and the church as the bride of Christ. In the background to these marital images themselves is wordplay on the name of the Ancient

[3] The use of 'passion' in the modern erotic sense is relatively late – 16th century – apparently drawing on the intensity of emotion experienced in suffering.

[4] Consider Songs 8.6: 'for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave'.

Near East divinity ‘Baal’, whose name means both ‘lord-and-master’ and ‘husband’.

Yet there is no reason to heed these indicators if we try to read the Songs as speaking allegorically of ourselves and God. The man and the woman have (very) roughly the same amount to say, in the same vein. If human erotic impulses themselves can be material by which we can delve into the nature and meaning of desire between God and humankind, then who the ‘boy’ and the ‘girl’ are in the Songs allegory, is theologically, quite a secondary matter.

What *is* theologically significant is that we are then freed to consider not the opposites themselves but the substance of the attraction of these opposites: the longing for the other. Four times in the few verses of our focus text the woman asks ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?.’ Are these our words, casting us in the woman’s role, or God’s words? *We do well to let them be both,* for then we might learn more of who it is who properly should fill our thoughts, and whose thoughts are filled with us.

What to you make of the notion that God might be ‘looking for’ you?

’Have you seen the one whom my soul loves?’ We cannot tell here whether God’s words echo ours or our words echo God’s, just as the Songs themselves do not allow us to identify which of the bride and the groom longs, desires, lusts more than the other. Who initiates and who responds is a question which doesn’t arise because the turning and the searching and the embracing in the poems are completely mutual. They are meant to be together and this is what they seek. Without the other, each is incomplete.

Can God be incomplete?

In relation to our own deep longings, and those of God, we are concerned, of course, not only with the desire but also with its consummation. Advent brings the promise of a consummation of this longing. We could put this in the words of the Shulammite woman: ‘… when I found him whom my soul loves, I held him and would not let him go.’ Here, for a moment at least, what we have said about the interchangeability of the figures of the woman and the man for us and God breaks down, for the woman’s words here are God’s words alone: ‘I hold you and will not let you go’. As much as we might long that these word be ours, they comprise a promise only God can keep.

In Advent we are reminded that we have been found and are now held by God, and we are called to desire that embrace in return.

Borrowing from Julian of Norwich (d.1416), we hear again God’s address to us in the Shulammite’s words:

> I am ground of your prayers.

First, it is my will that you have what you desire.
Later, I cause you to want it.
Later on, I cause you to pray for it, and you do so.
How then can you not have what you desire?
(Revelations of Divine Love, Chap. 41)

RESPONSE

Take time to become still and rest into an attitude of prayer. Quiet your mind and focus attention on your breath. Relax your body. Hear the words stirring in you: 'have you seen the one whom my soul loves?' Repeat this question several times under your breath. Whom does your soul love? Sift through the possibilities and see what emerges.

How do you sense your soul being in love?

What is it like to seek your soul's love?

What would you do if you found your soul's love?

This Advent, how can you search for your soul's love? Where can you look? How will you know when you've been found?

'YOU ARE ALTOGETHER BEAUTIFUL, MY LOVE; THERE IS NO FLAW IN YOU'

2

Songs 4.1-8

and Psalm 84
and Matthew 3.1-12 or
Mark 1.1-8 or
Luke 3.1-6

Our focus text for this study is one of several in the Songs in which the bride or the groom – here it is the groom – exults in the beauty of the other, in detail (see 5.10-16 for the bride's voice). There is in the Songs an undeniable celebration of the body and what bodies promise, and we do neither ourselves nor the biblical text itself any favours by not considering in our studies at least one of such passages as this. Even if we ask the question as to how this might be a gospel (good news) text for us as we think about our own desires and longing – and God's – we do not need to detract from what the Songs clearly are in themselves.

What is evoked for you by reading the descriptions of beautiful bodies in the Songs?

It is often the case in churches these days that there is a strange absence of a specifically theological interest in beauty. Of course, there is much we could call beautiful in the church – the architecture, the windows, perhaps a voice or a vestment, or maybe even the person who happens to be sitting next to us.

Yet the beautiful itself is rarely at the centre of our concerns. We think in church rather more of the right, the good, the holy, and their opposites. Any one of these might be related to beauty, of course, or extended into the beautiful. But whereas we might speak of God as righteous, just, good, holy, we do not much speak of God as 'beautiful.' 'Jerusalem' can be beautiful, or the Temple lovely (Psalm 84); we can sing of 'the beauty of holiness' but God Godself is not as comfortably or obviously 'beautiful' for us. Or, perhaps, if we do extend beauty to God, it is a kind of cool, heavenly, ethereal beauty.

Beauty seems to have more currency for us as a 'worldly' concern, perhaps reflected in our somewhat cynical observation about the kind of beauty which is only 'skin deep'. What are we to do, then, with all the beautiful 'skin' which features in our focus text? The beauty of the bride in the Songs is referred to again and again: she is 'black and beautiful' (1.5), the 'fairest among women' (1.8), 'altogether beautiful' and 'without flaw'

In what sense has beauty been present or absent in your experience of faith?

(4.7), and all of this is 'skin deep' beauty – what can be seen and touched, caressed and more.

In what contexts can desire be corrupted in domination?

In the Songs the declaration 'beautiful' serves to explain the desire which the body of the other evokes. The bride and bridegroom desire because they each find the other beautiful. This need not have been the case. Desire can also be covetous – an expression of the will to dominate. It can be the expression of the need to possess and control. Desire can, therefore, imply or intend weakness in the thing desired. It may reflect the fears of the one who desires such domination or control. But there is in the Songs no weakness or fear other than that which might be said to arise from the longing itself in the absence of the other. There are no hidden agendas or unconscious drives, there is no manipulation.

And there is no aesthetic affectation operating here – the kind of aloof desire which craves or seeks beauty and mounts it on a wall, sets it on a glass shelf, or has her hang off his arm. Not beauty *per se*, but the beautiful one, is the centre here. The difference is subtle, but critical. It is the difference between being in love with another person and being in love with love. The woman does not want 'a' lover, nor the man; they each want the other – this other. As absurd as some of the ascriptions of beauty are to our ears – teeth like a flock of shorn sheep (4.2), a nose like a tower of Lebanon (!! 7.4) – things which are 'indifferently' beautiful in nature or culture are being used as a way of addressing a particular person: someone is hearing not that there is such a thing as beauty, but that she is beautiful. The lover has an identity, has face: 'your hair, your eyes, your lips, your cheeks.' And in her hearing the desire of the bridegroom is heard. He is looking; and she is becoming, under his gaze.

How is a relationship enhanced when lovers delight in who each other is, and encounter each other as beauty?

Does this 'work' with God?

Of course, it works the other way as well. In the first study we heard her ask four times, 'Have you seen him whom my heart desires?' She does not simply desire or long, even for love, but for her lover. He too – specifically him – is altogether desirable (5.16), he whose love is better than wine (1.1). The beautiful is not an idea; it is caught up in the address of the one to the other. And it is bodily. It cannot be separated from how they actually are, and so they delight in how each other is: beautiful, in detail. This beauty is no mere aesthetic experience but an encounter with one who is beautiful. Beauty is here not a cool blue – sky and clouds and a gentle breeze; it is flushed.

For the bride and the bridegroom this is erotic desire, not simply in the shallow sense that it is sexy, but in the more specific sense that it reflects *eros*[5] – hungering love, love which places a claim on another, which longs

[5] One of the ancient Greek words for 'love', with a tendency towards denoting what we call erotic love, as distinct from the kind of love expressed in friendship or charity.

to possess and to be possessed: 'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' she yearns from the very beginning (1.1).

The erotic, of course, can be corrupted. Even so, and for all our moral squeamishness about what bodies can do, perhaps the way that the erotic is so often corrupted reflects just how deeply it goes into what makes us tick. What is good for us, and so good for God – if the beautiful is also the good – can also be good for the devil. That the erotic part of our nature can be so badly corrupted should not surprise us, given how important it is to what we are.

The question which really matters then is whether God can take desire – our erotic nature – back again, or whether it is now irredeemably ruined. Or, to put the matter differently and to return more obviously to the themes of desire and the advent of God, the question is, Are *we* beautiful, even if our desires have been skewed? We may not necessarily be beautiful, of course, in the sense that our 'bodies are ivory work' (5.14) or our eyes 'like pools in Heshbon' (7.4). But are we – *as we are* – desirable? We shall not be able to answer this with a confident 'Yes' unless someone has already answered it for us: unless someone desires us.

Can you imagine God desiring relationship with you in the way lovers desire one another?

Desire and beauty are not far from the heart of modern western culture today. The economy of consumption works constantly to manufacture desire, which it does through beauty or association with beauty. Manufactured desire is necessarily desire which cannot be fulfilled. It is associated with a beauty which necessarily fades, else the kind of economy in which we have invested so much would crumble. Our world, then, is filled with desire. For this kind of world to keep turning we are required to desire and to acquire. And yet we are ourselves not desired in this economy other than as desiring ones – as consumers. Desire and beauty here have to do with objects created and consumed, and not persons.

What is the difference between desiring a thing and desiring a person?

Such an economy of desire strikes deep into our theological thinking as well. It is easy to reduce God to one who *gives* us what we desire rather than *being* what we desire – the one who gives us 'the' beautiful, the thing we think we ultimately need, rather than himself being that thing. The bridegroom can desire the bride for what she gives, or for herself. If things are working properly, these desires will be indistinguishable. But, at least when it comes to God, God is usually desired for God's utility: for what God does or gives. God gives us the beautiful, but is not Godself in any final sense beautiful or desirable. When God, then, fails to deliver, at-fault divorce proceedings will be commenced, to return to the image of bride

In what sense might God be 'properly' desired?

and bridegroom. Or, if we retain the image of the economic consumer, we will simply switch to a 'brand' which more reliably delivers what we think we need, what we think is beautiful.

But what if the beautiful were not the thing we get from God but God Godself? This is not to minimise the pain of suffering, the pain of right but unmet desires in this world – the pain of 'passion', to recall the first study – but it is to suggest that God's role in all of this is not so much to give us what we desire as to declare and to realise in us that we are desirable and, in this, to become the beautiful one to us, the contagiously beautiful one. For it is a contagious beauty which is active here. It is as the bride gives herself to the touch of her lover that he becomes the bridegroom. It is as she hears herself declared to be beautiful that she becomes, for herself now, as for him, beautiful. It is in the giving of self to the other that the other becomes itself and, so, becomes beautiful.

Are *you* beautiful? How so?

To return to our question: are we beautiful, are we desirable, we who are corrupted, erotically or otherwise? And how could we answer this? Who can address us – 'do' us – in such a way as to make even us beautiful?

As we did at the end of the first study, again we borrow from Julian of Norwich, who speaks once more in God's voice:

> You must learn to understand that all your deficiencies, even those that come from your past sins and vicious habits, are part of my loving providence for you, and that it is just with those deficiencies, just the way you are now, that I would love you.
>
> Therefore you must overcome the habit of judging how you would make yourself acceptable to me. When you do this you are putting your providence, your wisdom before mine. It is my wisdom that tells you, 'The way you are acceptable to me, the way I want to love you, is the way you are now, with all your defects and deficiencies. I could wipe them out in a moment if I wanted to, but then I could not love you the way I want to love you, the way you are – now.'[6]

Or, as W H Auden put it: '…mortal, guilty, but to me the entirely beautiful'.[7]

'You are beautiful' – whether or not (as the bride describes the bridegroom) his carved alabaster legs are still holding him up, whether or not her gazelles are still leaping, whether or not we are virtuous or lost in sin, whether or not we are coherent or no longer so, whether we are dead

[6] Attributed to Julian's *Revelations of divine love*; version unidentified.

[7] W H Auden, *Lullaby*, see http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/lullaby-0.

or still dying. This is no justification of sin but rather a statement of the gospel: addressed as beautiful we, like the bride, 'become'.

If we heard God in the bride's declaration in the focus text for our first study – 'I will hold you and will not let you go' – then in the present text we hear God in the groom's voice:

'You are altogether beautiful, my love; I see no flaw in you.'

What is it like to hear God say, 'I see no flaw in you?

And so, God straightens the paths, levels the mountains and fills the valleys that God's way to God's beloved not be impeded, that she might be kissed by the one whom her soul desires, whose love is better than wine (1.1).

God straightens the paths, levels the mountains and fills the valleys that God's way to God's beloved not be impeded; that, in spirit and in flesh, all God's people might join in Songs of joy to the living God (Psalm 84.2).

With such passion, is this God.

:(❦):

RESPONSE

Take some time to be quiet. Rest into stillness. Breathe in and breathe out, and be still. Think about your body sitting in the chair. Just rest. Starting with your toes, scan through your body, noticing each part. Hear God say to your toes, 'You are beautiful!' Work through each part of your body and offer it the affirmation of beauty. What is it like to affirm your beauty?

Turn your attention to the presence of God around and beyond you.

This Advent, think about the people you encounter each day. Hear God say that they are each beautiful. Look at them with the eyes of God.

3

Songs 7.10-8.3

and Psalm 112
and Matthew 11.2-11 or
John 1.6-8,19-28 or
Luke 3.7-18

There is a plot device which moviemakers use, known as the 'MacGuffin'. The MacGuffin is the thing which is to be resolved, obtained, settled, gotten out of the way – whatever – and the action all revolves around this. Alfred Hitchcock was one of developers of the technique and remarked of the MacGuffin that 'in crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.' Someone is reaching for – desires – something, and this is the basis upon which the story is built.

'Desire is the engine that moves most narratives.'[8] Or, to put it differently, narratives – the stories we tell and are – spring from our longings and desires.

We see just such a combination of longing and movement in the Songs of Solomon. The desire of the lovers leads to movement, or longing for movement, and what movement takes place arises from their desire. In the first study we heard of the bride's longing for her lover on her bed at night and how she rose and went looking for him, found him and brought him back to her home. Elsewhere we read of the bridegroom, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills in order to be with her, calling her, also, to movement: 'arise and come away' (2.8-10).

What are the longings which seem to drive you, your culture, your church? Or seem to hold you back?

There is no story here, as such – in the sense that there is a beginning, a middle and an end. The songs are more cyclic than this. But the cycle is an intended movement and not an accidental or imposed one. It is whole-heartedly embraced, a steady heartbeat-pulsing of proximity, and then distance, and then proximity again. The constant concern of the lovers is movement towards each other. Whether in their minds or in actual fact, they are searching, finding and bringing home: 'His desire is for me…' is met with 'Come…I will give you my love.'

Of course, there is more to life than just this kind of erotic desire and acting for its fulfilment. But the movement which we see in the desire of these lovers for each other contrasts instructively with other desires and movements which are typical of our lives. And this is our question in

[8]H. C. White (1994). 'Desire and Promise in Genesis.' Word & World 14(2), p178.

hearing the Songs this Advent: what are our desires, what is the rhythm to which we move?

If desire is the engine which drives most stories, then we also have to say that movement does not require desire and that desire does not necessarily issue in movement. Mere movement can have the semblance of life, but be quite other than lively. Introductory biology classes teach that one of the characteristics by which something is defined as being alive is 'response to stimuli'. That is, if it is alive it will jump when you poke it. But if this kind of movement is a necessary element of being alive, it is not sufficient of itself. There is a strong sense in which there is movement all around us: stock markets rise and fall, politicians come and go, we are born and we die, new gadgets replace old ones, and so on. Change seems almost to be constant, even accelerating; there is always something new to splash across the front page, always a new challenge to be dealt with. But most of this can be reduced to mere response to stimuli. A social tremor sees stocks fall, a pollie makes a mistake and out she goes, birth and death are just the ebb and flow of the natural order, gadgets are replaced by many almost automatically because – well, because that is what you do with gadgets: new models are stimulus enough to upgrading. This is all undeniably motion, but rather like billiard balls bouncing around a table, changing direction because they have hit the cushion or each other, but without any intention. It is a kind of clockwork: immensely complex, perhaps, in order to produce precise timing or outcomes – but each part in fact merely doing exactly what it should when some other part does what it should, all hinged upon the initial tightening and release of a spring. This kind of movement issues in no fulfilment, no satisfaction, no real change, because it is simply a going through the motions. A sense that life is like this is familiar enough in the work place, in our relationships with each other, in the church and other institutions in society.

What kinds of seemingly pointless movement do see around you?

If movement can happen without desire, so also desire does not necessarily issue in a real movement. We noted in passing in the previous study the necessity of creating desire which is part of our modern economic system. If the economy is to grow – and growth is an unquestionable good in our economic system – consumption must continue. Consumption requires hunger – here desire – and if we were left to our own devices too many of us will be satisfied with what we have already consumed. Rather, it is economically necessary that we cannot but think that 6 airbags are better than 2, 4G really is better than 3G, 55 inches are better than 32, digital is better than analogue, what someone else has just got is better than what I have already had for a while. Such desires will give rise to change – out with the old and in with the new – but not necessarily to movement. For

Where do you see the pursuit of desires leading to no real progress?

we know that the new will soon be old again, as the next thing makes its return.

The desire we see in the lovers in the Songs and the movements they make in response to that desire are different from this. It is a desire which arises from within, a desire for each other which not only reaches to claim, but is claimed. It is natural and not contrived. It is desire which is appropriate to what the bride and the bridegroom are. It has to do with being 'made for each other', and so it is also freely reciprocated: what he, she desires is him, her.

> 'I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me…'

is met with

> 'Come, my beloved… I will give you my love.'

Again, as we noted in the last study, this is entirely and perhaps even eminently corruptible. But that cannot be allowed to reduce the importance humanly and theologically of what takes place when desire and its object 'match'. Perhaps most notably, and in contrast to the kind of desires which are manufactured to keep our world turning, the matching of the desire of lover with beloved produces not simply a longing for more but for more of the same. This sameness is not the simple repetition of something which will eventually bore us to tears, but the sameness of the identity – the person – of the one desired. The corruption of erotic desire begins when the person – an identity with a story, with needs and desires of her, his, own – is not part of what is desired. But when the person of the other is present, is desired for himself, herself, desire and movement are for each other and towards each other, and continue to be so. Consummation of the desire does not end the longing, but changes the lovers enough that there is both sameness and difference: knowing each other – 'knowing' in the 'biblical' sense[9] – is not to exhaust what the other is but is actually part of the creating, or re-creating, of the lover. We are changed, so that there is still more to be desired in the same person after the consummation.[10]

Are there other instances in which consummation of desire changes the one who desires?

The Scriptures do not hesitate to take up this dynamic of desire in the speaking of God's relationship to the world – and to Israel and the church in particular.[11] We have just noted in passing the notion of knowing someone 'in the biblical sense'– which refers to the fact that the same

[9] The 'biblical' sense of 'know' reflects the use of the same word in Hebrew for what we would normally speak of as knowledge in English, and for sexual intercourse.

[10] It may be worth noting in passing that a sexual consummation of the lovers of the Songs is perhaps hinted at in the middle of the book (4.10-5.1).

[11] Properly, as the thinking develops, the dynamic of human erotic desire is reversed, so that the way in which God desires the world is made the basis of ours desires.

Hebrew word is used for sexual intercourse as for 'mere' knowledge: the old standard English translations declare that 'Adam knew Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain…' (Genesis 4.1, and similarly in other places). The double meaning was not lost on the Hebrews. The intimacy of God's knowledge of Israel, and the intended intimacy of Israel's knowledge of God, was often tinged with sexuality, particularly in the use of the metaphor of marriage.[12] Who Israel 'knew' – in the biblical sense! – would affect who and what 'she' was, would change her.

How does understanding affect our sense of what we 'know' more generally?

Who we know, and the desire and movement which results, are at the centre of the gospel reading for Advent 3. Crowds are motivated to wander into the desert in search of John and his baptism of repentance. With them are the religious authorities who test John in terms of their own longings: are you Elijah? The Prophet? The Messiah? But John and his baptism ministry do not fit these longings, and no more will the ministry of Jesus. It will unfold in the gospel not only that these do not 'know' God, but that they cannot, for to know God, if indeed it is God who is known, is to be changed, and it is this which is so difficult to accept. If God knows us, and we know God – not forgetting here 'the biblical sense' of knowing each other – then we will become different, will look different, will act differently. Being changed by arrival of the thing we should have desired is the dynamic of the gospel.

But it is the gospel that God's desire and God's movement are also present in John's preaching: 'one who is more powerful than I is coming, and he brings the Holy Spirit.' God is on the move. God is motive-ated: 'aroused to action toward a desired goal' (as one dictionary defines 'motivated').

We are God's desired goal. In the focus text of the second study we heard God's voice in the bridegroom: 'You are altogether beautiful, my love; I see no flaw in you.' In the first study before it was in the bride's voice, 'I hold you and will not let you go'. In the present text, perhaps, where she begins is to be our beginning: 'I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me…' God comes to us, for us, because of us.

Why? Julian of Norwich continues to serve us well in summing up the point of the study. God comes to us that we might know, in the voice of Jesus:

[12] We noted in the first study in this series the ambiguity of the word 'Baal' – master, Lord, (god), husband – and so the punning possible with respect to choices of gods and husbands.

> ‘I am the one! I am what you love! I am what delights you! I am the one you serve! I am what you long for! I am what you desire! I am what you intend! I am all!’[13]

If this is God’s address to us in Christ, then in Advent we are reminded of the invitation to desire the one who desires only us, and to declare to him as the bride declares: ‘Come, my beloved… I will give you my love.’

RESPONSE

Sit in a quiet place and become still. Under your breath repeat the phrase, ‘Come, my beloved. I will give you my love.’ Slowly and gently repeat these words as your prayer. If your thoughts wander just return to the prayer: ‘Come, my beloved, I will give you my love’.

Sit with this prayer for 5-10 minutes. Notice what emerges in you at the conclusion of your prayer. Thank God for the gift.

[13] Attributed to Julian’s *Revelations of divine love*; version unidentified.

’MY LOVER IS MINE AND I AM HIS’

4

Songs 2.1-17
and Psalm 21.1-7
and Luke 1.26-38 or
Mark 13.24-37 or
Luke 1.39-45 (46-55)

Our focus text for this study contains once more all the themes we have been considering so far – desire, beauty, longing. To these the present texts adds ‘possession’ – a mutual possessing and being possessed by one another: ‘my lover is mine and I am his’ (2.16; see also 5.6; 6.3; 7.10). For one of the striking things about this passage is the number of possessive pronouns on both his and her lips: ‘the voice of my beloved… my lover is like a gazelle… Arise, my love, my fair one… O my dove… your face… your voice’.

To say ‘my’ or ‘your’ can sometimes be merely a matter-of-fact statement of the existence of a relationship without much information as to the ‘value’ of the relationship. In the address of the lovers to each other, however, ‘my’ has an erotic intensity which reaches far beyond the mere fact that each ‘belongs’ to the other. While this is easy enough to see in a ‘plain’ reading of the text, there is an even more intense possessing hinted at here and in the Songs as a whole. In verse 16 the bride declares, ‘My lover is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies’. If you have been reading the Songs over the last few weeks you have probably become used to the strangeness of the images, so that the notion of him ‘pasturing his flock among the lilies’, even if it doesn’t fit the context, has a nice poetic feel about it which is consistent with the rest of the Songs.

What does the word ‘possession’ evoke in you?

Yet the sense of what is meant here becomes clearer – and more suggestive – when we know that the Hebrew could also be translated as ‘he eats among the lilies’, rather than, ‘he grazes his flock among the lilies’ – the ‘flocks’ are in fact not mentioned in the Hebrew. The translation ‘he eats among the lilies’, which some English versions follow, changes the sense altogether; now it is quite possible to read verse 16 as implying that the bridegroom’s feeding among the lilies as a kind of ‘consuming’ of the bride: the woman has previously referred to herself as ‘a lily of the valley’(2.1); he will later refer to her breasts as being like two fawns that

How do you feel about being possessed by a lover? Can a person be possessed in this way?

feed ‘among the lilies’ (4.5) and later still she speaks of her lover as feeding in the gardens and ‘gathering lilies’ (6.2).[14]

On this understanding, the sense in which ‘I am his’ is intensified. Such possession is a kind of consuming – and in this connection we should keep in mind the rich and sensuous references to food and wine and perfumes throughout the Songs, and the inscription by the lovers of these sensuous things onto their appreciation of each other’s body: he says, ‘… your kisses [are] like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth’ (7.9); she says, ‘…his lips are lilies [again with the lilies!], distilling liquid myrrh’ (5.13); he says, ‘… honey and milk are under your tongue’ (4.11)

What kinds of things – social, political, economic – ‘possess’ us in general?

Our particular interest here is not (just) the eroticism of the Songs *per se* but the fact that we live within a matrix of ideas around possession and consumption which we already know apart from this text: what we possess, what possesses us, what we consume and what consumes us are central to how our lives and relationships are ordered.

If we were to speak generally of ourselves as ‘possessed’, this would normally refer to our being dominated by a power from which we need to be liberated, or even exorcised. We do not much speak of demon possession today, but the notion of being under the influence of powers which limit our humanity remains strong, even if they are now ‘only’ secular-social or personal-psychological conditions which inhibit us.

Our contemporary language of possession is also strongly influenced by the fact that we are accustomed to having so many possessions – in the sense of things we have acquired as our ‘property.’[15] No small part of the social and political history of the last 400 years has had to do with the question of the security of our personal possession of objects. And, of course, we have already noted in the last two studies the importance of consumption for the way in which our social and political worlds are organised economically. Quite apart from what we might read in the Song of Solomon, we are already possessing, consuming; we are already possessed and being consumed. The question is: in what way is possession and consumption as we find them in the Songs different from how they operate for us more generally? What does possessing and consuming, being possessed and being consumed, have to do our relationship to God?

What range of things possess *you*?

In normal speech, ‘possession’ relates to objects. What I possess is a piece of property, a thing I imagine to be wholly at my disposal. If I imagine

[14] The same translation issue for ‘feed’ applies in 6.2 as in 4.16 – ‘feeding [his flocks?].’

[15] The sense of ‘property’ as possession is relatively recent (17thCent); ‘property’ originally had the sense of that which is ‘proper’ to a particular thing: its properties.

myself or somebody else as being possessed, then there is a similar objectification operating, but now it is me (or the other) who is the object subjected to another possessing power or identity. This might be subtle dynamic by which a child can be possessed by her parents as a kind of extension or fulfilment of them, or the very unsubtle possession of a person as a sex slave. In a related way, consuming typically objectifies some other reality. We have no relationship to what we consume other than that it becomes part of us or an extension of us in the world. As delectable as something we eat might be, or as beautiful or useful as something we consume in economic terms might be, they are but passing.

But the possession and the consumption in the he-is-mine-and-I-am-his of the Songs differs radically from these normal dynamics. The bride sings here of a mutual possession: 'my lover is mine, and I am his'. Her possession of him is met with his possession of her. If indeed in some sense she is consumed as 'he feeds among the lilies', this does not reduce her, but makes her part of him, just as he is made part of her.

Our consuming of each other has had a central place in the church's thinking from its very inception in the practice of the Eucharist. We consume God in the person of Jesus. We might recall John's gospel, where Jesus' command 'Eat me' is driven home with ghastly realism: 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (John 6.53).'[16]

Christians are very familiar with the language of eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood, but we must recognise how strong the imagery is, and how central.[17] For the point Jesus makes when he commands his disciples, 'Eat me,' is that we have to eat something and we are already eating, consuming, possessing. The emphasis falls on 'me' and not 'eat': *that* we eat is a given; *what* we eat is a choice. The polemical point is whether or not the things we consume and the things by which we are consumed – the things which we possess and the things by which we are possessed – are life-giving for us and others, or life-denying. What are the human costs of how we live, love, own and relate? We are already possessing and consuming each other, the effects of which are realized in the crucifixion of Jesus. As ghastly as it is, we persist with the imagery of body and blood in the Eucharist because it tells the truth: our destructive

How does our consumption give life, or take it?

[16] In the traditional 'Prayer of Humble Access' we pray, 'Grant that we may so eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and drink his blood, that he may evermore dwell in us, and we in him' (noting that while the imagery of consuming remains the same, the imagery of possessing shifts to that of [in-]dwelling).

[17] When this is understood, the response of Jesus' disciples to this then is very often what it is now: 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' (John 6.50).

possession and consumption of each other breaks and spills the very bodily elements of others.

But the gospel is that God takes even our destructive possession and consumption of each other and makes of it a source of life. Jesus says 'eat *me*', the victim of your broken humanity returned to you as judgment, and as grace unto hope: God can re-make us and our relationships to each other. This surprising reversal – that our brokenness might be the shape of our healing – is reflected in the effects of eating in the Eucharist: we eat not another but 'what we are'; and our food does not become part of us but we become it:

> let us eat what we are; let us become what we eat: The Body of Christ *(St Augustine).*

The type of consuming and possessing we see taking place in the Eucharist is given as the basis of a proper desire – a proper consuming and possessing of each other. As we consume the Eucharist – the 'body' and 'blood' of Jesus – we do not reduce him to ourselves. Rather, those who consume the Body of Christ become the body of Christ. In the Songs, the possession of one lover by the other does not reduce the other to nothing but recreates him or her. His 'feeding among the lilies' does not reduce her to a thing, and neither does her reciprocation. This is because in the gift of God the reality of Jesus as the Christ becomes our reality just as, most surprisingly, our reality has become his.

This exchange or sharing of identities in the possessing and consuming of each other springs, ultimately, from the desire of God Godself. For a final time, we look to Julian of Norwich to sum up for us the gospel here:

> '… God wishes to be enclosed in rest in peace. And so Christ's spiritual thirst has an end. For his spiritual thirst is his longing in love, and that persists and always will until we see him on the day of judgement; for we who shall be saved and shall be Christ's joy and bliss are still here, and shall be until that day. Therefore his thirst is this incompleteness of his joy, that he does not now possess us in himself as [completely] as he then will'
>
> *(Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter 15).*

God's will is to possess us. Julian again:

> 'God, our Lover, you desire the soul to adhere to you with all its power and you want us always to adhere to your goodness. For of all things that the heart can think, this pleases you most and soonest profits the soul, so preciously loved. So, with reverence, we ask from you, our Lover, all that we will, for our natural will is to possess you, God, and your good will is to possess us'
>
> *(Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter 6).*

This divine will is what takes shape in the life and death and life of Jesus. It is this end for which we wait, to which we look, in our Advent reflections: the particular end in which our words and God's echo each other: 'Love of my life, I am yours, and you are mine'.

RESPONSE

In Advent we recall a pregnant woman's body, possessed by new life growing in her womb. She has no control over what happens within. The baby changes her physically, emotionally, spiritually. It is exciting, painful and debilitating. Imagine God growing within your body, taking form within.

What is it like to sense yourself becoming possessed by God?

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