

Advent 1
30/11/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Song of Songs 3:1-5

Psalm 130

Mark 13:24-37

“Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves”

Introductory notes

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 we’re-not-quite-sure-why-it’s-in-the-Bible book got to do with the idea of God’s coming-to (“ad-vent”) us?

The Song of Solomon is a book of the Bible which brings its own particular kind of smile to our faces when someone refers to it. The Songs are themselves ostensibly the words of Solomon himself and “the Shulammitte” – one of his brides (6.13). More than simply touching upon the kinds of things we generally leave out of civil discourse, the poems leap into them. And this is more than a little confusing. Just by way of illustration of the challenge it presents in the church, it was not easy choosing the four readings for the four Sundays of Advent knowing that, if we were going to do justice to the tone of the text, some real person – one of you – was going to have to stand in front of the congregation and extol in explicit detail the beauty of the female form – not straightforward for either a male or a female reader. Of course, “it’s in the Bible” and so we ought to be “mature” about it all – but our social and cultural formation is very strong in relation to these things.

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.¹ 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 else – to the enthusiastic embrace of its eroticism as *sheer* eroticism. I’m not going to try to develop a theory of interpretation for our reflections over Advent but simply “use” the text that we might hear the gospel, which must surely embrace both “the spirit” and the “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 himself. 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?

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There is a car bumper sticker you see occasionally around the place which declares “Jesus is coming” and advises, “Look busy”. Today, as with the first Sunday of Advent each year, we have heard of the coming “apocalypse” – the return of the “Son of Man”.

¹ R Jenson describes it as the third most commented-upon book in the Bible (without identifying the other two!)

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 we have from Mark this morning, the word we hear tends towards being sheer threat. This is reflected in the way in which apocalyptic themes are typically taken up in popular culture, such as in movies. Here 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 constitute a pretty bodgie take on New Testament apocalyptic.

What we miss in our contemporary hearing of New Testament apocalyptic texts is the good news which arises in response to 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 the 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 as we heard in the gospel reading this morning. Such a coming of God was strongly desired, for in it 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”. It is God’s response to the psalmist’s cry “out of the depths” (Psalm 130) which reaches up to God, and waits. If we do not cry out to God for a resolution of life and love, then there is nothing much for us here.

I’ve proposed to look at the Song of Solomon over the next few weeks because among its central themes are longing and desire. We will ask the question: in what way are the Songs more than simply pornography? – which is a natural enough category into which to place them. That is, what do the Songs have to do with us? For 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 we are not to be voyeurs here (Pecknold). The thing which 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 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.

Today we will focus on the question of the identity of those who desire in the Songs.

In our reading, we heard the Shulammitte 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, does find him and brings him back to “the chamber of her that conceived me”, with the 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. But 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, who is who? Or, 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

The “obvious” response is that we are the Shulammitte, 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. 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.

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 can’t leave God out of the picture, not only as the thing desired but as himself desiring. That God might desire has long troubled the church, for desire suggests incompleteness and this implies change. Leaving Scriptural declarations about God being the same yesterday, today and forever, the idea that God might change raises 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.

The historical theological debates have asked whether or not God is “impassible” – im-passionate – without passion, the term “passion” 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?

But, setting all the technical theological details and history aside, a suggestive link arises here in connection with our thinking about Songs. We should not miss that we use the same word to speak of divine suffering – “the passion of the Christ” – as we do to speak of expressing 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. Of course, lovers do not suffer in their embrace as Christ does on the cross, and Christ does not desire the cross as lovers desire each other, but the point is that there is 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

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.

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 POSTSCRIPT: Consider 8.6: “for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave”.

Here we might think of 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 he finds what he desires and then rejoices. 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 of the general pattern of biblical depictions of God: the gender roles in the Songs suggest that we are the Shulammitte 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 Near East divinity “Baal”, this name meaning both “lord-and-master” and “husband”.

But 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 gets to be the boy and who the girl is, theologically, quite a secondary thing.

But 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 we have heard this morning 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.

“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 don’t 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.

What matters is the longing for that which not only *promises* to complete us, for there are many things which promise this to us today and so offer themselves as objects of desire. What matters is what *will*, in fact, complete us and so must be desired. Identifying what that thing is, and is not, is part of our training of our desires.

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 Shulammitte 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 I’ve 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".

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

To borrow from Julian of Norwich (d.1416), God addresses us here:

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?

By the grace of God, may all his people desire what they need, and have what they desire. Amen.
