

Advent 2
7/12/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Song of Songs 4:1-8

Psalm 84

Mark 1:1-8

“You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you”

Introduction

There are very few Scripture passages of which it could be said that, whoever reads it and understands it, it will bring a smile to the reader’s face. We all have our favourite and least favourite passages which will move us but not others, and vice-versa. But whoever reads or hears one of the passages in Songs like the one we will hear this morning – whether the reader be atheist or fundamentalist, liberal or conservative, married or celibate, rich or poor, young or old – that reader or hearer will at the very least have to suppress a smile.

Our reading is one of several in the Songs in which the bride and the groom – today it is the groom (see 5.10-16 for the bride’s voice) – exults in the beauty of the other, in detail. 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 hearing in our series at least one of the kinds of passages we will hear this morning. Even if we ask the question as to how this might be a gospel text for us as we think about our own desires and longing – and God’s – we don’t need to detract from what the Songs clearly are in themselves.

As I reflected on what this erotically charged passage from Songs might have to say to us as Scripture, it occurred to me that there is a strange absence in the church 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 sitting next to you.

But the beautiful itself is rarely at the centre of our concerns. We think here 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 (as in today’s psalm); we can sing of “the beauty of holiness” but God Godself is not as comfortably “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 reading this morning? 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” (4.7), and all of this is “skin deep” beauty – what can be seen and touched, caressed and more.

In the Songs the declaration “beautiful” serves to explain the desire which the body of the other evokes. The bride and bridegroom desire and pine because they each find the other beautiful. This need not have been the case. Desire can be 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. Of course, it works the other way as well. Last week 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 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*¹ – hungering love, love which places a claim on another, which longs 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, is thoroughly corruptible. But for all that, and for all our moral squeamishness about what bodies can do, perhaps the corruptibility of the erotic 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; if we are to be corrupted, so much the better (or worse) that it go right to the core of what we are.

The question which really matters then is whether God can take desire 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? Not necessarily, of course, in the sense that our “bodies are ivory work” (5.14) or our eyes “like pools in Heshbon” (7.4). 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.

¹ 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.

Desire and beauty are not far from the heart of our culture today. As the study groups have been learning over the last few weeks, the economy of consumption works constantly to manufacture desire, which it does through beauty or association with beauty. This manufactured desire is necessarily one which cannot be fulfilled and 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.

And this kind of 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 who *is* 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 his utility: for what God does or gives. God gives us the beautiful, but is not himself 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 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 last week’s reflection. 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. Or, to borrow coarser erotic language: as she “has” him she “does” him, and he “does” or makes her.

To get back 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 last week, this week we borrow again 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."

Or, as Auden put it: "...mortal, guilty, but to me the entirely beautiful"²

"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 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 last week – "I will hold you and will not let you go" – then today we hear God in the groom's voice:

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

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

All thanks be to this passionate God. Amen

² W H Auden, *Lullaby*, see <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/lullaby-0>.