

**Advent 3**  
**14/12/2014**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Song of Songs 7:10-8:4**

**Psalm 112**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

**“I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me...”**

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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.”<sup>1</sup> Or, to put it differently, narratives – the stories we tell and are – have to do with movement and purpose.

We see just such a combination of purpose 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 week of this series 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).

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 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. In science classes 30 or so years ago I learned that one of the characteristics by which something is defined as being alive is “response to stimuli”. That is, if it is alive, when you poke it (one way or another) it jumps (one way or another). 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

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<sup>1</sup>H. C. White (1994). "Desire and Promise in Genesis." *Word & World* 14(2), p178.

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.

But if movement can happen without desire, so also desire does not necessarily issue in a real movement. I spoke last week about 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’ve 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’ve 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 we know that the new will soon be old again, as the next thing makes its return. It will only be 15 or 20 days before hot cross buns start appearing in a bakery section near you.

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 last week, 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<sup>2</sup> – 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> I’ve just mentioned in passing the notion of knowing someone “in the biblical sense” – which refers to the fact that the same 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.<sup>5</sup> Who Israel “knew” – in the biblical sense! – would affect who and what “she” was, would change her.

In our gospel reading today who we know, and the desire and movement which results, are at the centre. 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. Last week we heard God’s voice in the bridegroom: “You are altogether beautiful, my love; I see no flaw in you.” The week before it was in the bride’s voice, “I hold you and will not let you go”. Today, 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 has served us well over the last two weeks, and can again, I think today. God comes to us that we might know, in the voice of Jesus:

“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!” (from Revelations of Divine Love)

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> We noted in the first sermon 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.

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."

By the grace of God, may his unbounded love indeed be met with ours, that our desire might be met with the knowing which fills us and calls us into ever new life and love.  
Amen.

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