

## Sermon 25<sup>th</sup> January 2010 (Songs of Songs 1:1-17) “Songs of Sex”

We live in a sex obsessed culture.

Pick up a magazine in a supermarket (and not even one from the top shelf) and what are the topics? – sex, relationships, body image, how to be desirable, how to find or keep the perfect partner.

The statistics are frightening.

Americans now spend more than \$10 billion a year on pornography. That’s more than is spent on foreign aid. Indeed it is also more than is spent on baseball or football. So, if you ask what America’s national pastime is, well the answer, statistically....

And before you think I’m just getting at evil Americans again, a recent survey suggested that the average British teenager spends 90 minutes a week viewing soft porn on the internet.<sup>1</sup>

We have a culture that says that Sex is God.

It is the most important thing in life.

It is the thing you should spend your time, energy, money and thoughts on.

Our culture says that if you are not in a fulfilling sexual relationship then you are incomplete.

Sex is God, and lot of people worship it.

On the other hand, the Church has a long, long history of running in the opposite direction.

Sex has often been presented as shameful, horrible, and not be spoken of or contemplated.

Certainly not in Church:

as the line goes “sex is dirty, disgusting and gross, so save it for the one you love”.

There’s a long history here.

Origen, a church leader from Egypt at the end of the third century and a great thinker, was, like many of the early church, influenced by Greek thought that saw the physical body as suspicious. He saw physical things like sex and desire as getting in the way of being a good spiritual Christian.

Origen read Matthew 5:28, where it says “if it offends you, if it causes you to stumble, - cut it off!” And he took it literally, and he did. He castrated himself.

Now, Origen is an extreme case, but he sort of indicates one attitude to sex in Christianity.

“Sex is OK for procreation, but it is not for fun, don’t enjoy it, and desire is sinful.”

St. Jerome, the great Bible translator, used to throw himself into a thorn bush any time he felt desire.

In the Middle Ages, the church saw marriage as good for some people, but if you wanted to be a really good Christian – a Christian leader – then you’d be a priest, monk or nun, and you’d be celibate. Sexual pleasure was sinful.

And that’s an attitude that still kicks about today. Since Victorian times sex is seen as something not to talk about, when the church occasionally decided to broach the subject it was to scream “thou shalt not” at someone.

And this hang-up actually causes pastoral problems.

Society is talking about this – non-stop, but we are ignoring it.

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<sup>1</sup> CyberSentinel survey 2009, <http://www.techradar.com/news/internet/uk-teens-view-87-hours-of-porn-per-year-525990>

And the statistics show that people in churches are just as broken, confused and troubled as any other group in society:

Some of us have had bad experiences,

Some of us have been in abusive situations – and we don't feel we can tell anyone in Church,

Some of us have messed up, and we've scared that if people knew they'd condemn

Some of us are in situation or relationships that are not right, and we can't get any help.

A sh-sh-sh attitude has existed.

And so as we look at the Songs of Songs, I want to dare to break the silence – because the Bible has something to say – and it is certainly not negative.

Sex is not God, but Sex is not bad either.

And appropriately, faithful and graciously, we need to open the conversation.

(And if any of these sermons strike a note with your life and situation, I'd like you to find another Christian to speak to. Someone you trust. It could be an elder, or myself or Therese.)

So to the "Song of Songs". Well, what is it?

It is a collection of poems that explore love, desire, and physical intimacy.

It is erotic love poetry and it is pretty explicit stuff.

It speaks of two lovers who delight in and desire each other – and each other's bodies.

It speaks about erogenous zones (yes in the Bible), breasts, and other bits too.

It starts with a woman, who is being upfront and taking the initiative.

Now, you might ask "What on earth is *this* doing in the Bible?"

We never got this in Sunday School.

Well, one answer that the Church has given is to claim that this isn't about sex at all.

Origen and others said it is really an allegory.

It is really a story about how God loves Israel, or how the Christian loves Jesus, and so many have tried to "de-sex" this book.

One 5<sup>th</sup> century writer took 1:13 which says "my beloved is to me like a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts" and he said: this isn't about breasts. The two breasts are the Old and New Testaments which feed us for our spiritual life. And the myrrh? That was Jesus.

That's an allegorical interpretation.

But before we laugh at that, we used to sing a song in Sunday Schools which went:

"He brought me to his banqueting table, and his banner over me is love"

and the second verse was

"I am my beloved's and he is mine, and his banner over me is love"

Now, that comes straight from the Song of Songs.

The beloved says:

2:4 – "He brought me to his banqueting house and his intention to me is love"

2:16 – "My beloved is mine and I am his, and he pastures his flock among the lilies"

Now, did anyone tell us in Sunday School that we were singing verses of erotic love poem?  
No.

O.K.

So the first thing we want to do is to read this book as it is, and not as an allegory, we want to read it in its plain sense – as a poem about physical love.

The title is (1:1) "the Song of Songs".

Now, for the linguists among you, this is a superlative – it means “the best of the songs”  
(Just as the Bible will speak of the King of Kings, the God of Gods or the Holy of Holies.)”

So, here are two people, deeply, physically in love – full of desire  
and Scripture does not moralise for us  
it does not allegorise for us  
rather it sings a song of celebration - this is the greatest of songs – this is Good  
just as when God made Adam and Eve for each other  
put them naked in a garden  
said they were to be “on flesh”  
and pronounced it “Good” – naked and unashamed.

What a contrast to the Church’s uptightness!

I remember as a teenaged going to a Scripture Union weekend away,  
and there a middle aged man, slightly bald, came to give us a talk on “relationships”.  
I remember him saying “you teenager are full of hormones, anticipation, you can’t wait to  
find a partner, you can’t wait for sex”  
and then he said  
“let me as an old married man tell you, it’s not all it is cracked up to be!”

I always wondered what he wife would have thought if she’d known.  
Maybe they should have read the Song of Songs together!

Now, let’s not get it wrong.  
The Song of Songs is not advocating free love.

Indeed, it warns us that desire is powerful and significant.  
It is never “just sex”.

You hear people saying that today.  
A man has an affair, he says “it didn’t mean anything, it’s just sex”  
Song of Songs would have none of it.

And the Song comes to us a part of the whole canon of Scripture.  
Whoever wrote it (and some people think it may well have been a woman) she was deeply  
steeped in the language of the rest of the Scriptures.  
And the Scriptures have more to say about how God intended sex  
about marriage and faithfulness  
about the dangers of abusing sex  
and about the goodness of singleness too.

Indeed, the Bible is just full of stories of people who got it wrong,  
of adultery, abuse and unfaithfulness and even incest  
and it shows how they mess up lives.

The Song was probably not written by Solomon, we should interpret his name in the title as  
meaning “associated with Solomon” or “in the wisdom style of Solomon”.  
But Solomon is a case in point – he got involved with the wrong women, women who lead  
him astray from God, and it destroyed him as a King.  
Sex can be powerful and destructive – handle with care!

But, in the right context  
in godly marriage  
it is good.

Physical things are good – and they are not opposed to being a spirit-filled Christian.

Indeed against a background of a wrongheaded Christian tendency to see the body as suspect – and they best things as being to do with the mind and the soul – the Song celebrates the physical – the emotions and the sense. Its poetic language celebrates the imagination.

It opens talking about desire – and the senses  
“let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” – touch  
“love is better than wine” – taste  
“your name is perfume poured out” – smell

We are not platonic souls in regrettable bodies – we are physical creatures of a loving Creator.

We need kissed and hugged and patted on back – we enjoy our senses.

So, in the plain sense, this is a sensuous love poem, and as we look over it in the weeks that come, we won't forget that.

But, Scripture often uses human love to help us understand God's love for us. It uses the language of human desire to help us understand how we are designed to desire God.

For the linguists here, this isn't allegory, it is analogy.

The Bible often speaks of God's love using the language of lovers.

God loves Israel and wants her to love him.

He wants to have a unique relationship with her.

He wants her to be faithful.

The Lord is a jealous God – he won't share her love.

Israel is adulterous.

And Hosea speaks of a day when Israel will be married to the Lord and never divorced.

The New Testament takes up there theme.

We are united with Christ – we are “one spirit” with him, just as Adam and Eve were “one flesh”. (1 Cor. 6)

The Church is the Bride of Christ – his beloved.

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for her. (Eph 5)

Indeed we are to desire Christ, anticipate his love, and look for a consummation in heaven.

So maybe applying “I am my beloved's and he is mine” to Jesus is not so wrongheaded.

Human love points to God's love

Human desires point to God's desires

The oneness of husband and wife – reflect the oneness of God.

And that's not surprising, because God made human loving.

St Augustine said:

“you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you”

In the western Church we tend to say that we need God's forgiveness, we need God's salvation, we need God's righteousness,

but in the Eastern Church they tend to say, we just need God himself.

We need to be in union with him

to have a relationship with him

to experience something of him now, which promises more to come,

like courting lovers anticipating marriage,  
like a kiss that promises so much more to come.

Our experience of God is not just to be thoughts and souls and minds  
it is not to be a platonic relationship.  
It is about desires, and feelings,  
it is about imagination and emotion  
it is about the body and the senses.

That's why our central sacrament isn't a set of thoughts, but an experience.  
The Lord's supper, where we experience the worship, hear the words and music, see the  
table, taste the bread, smell the wine, touch on our lips and in our hands – and anticipate that  
great feast in the consummation of heaven.

Origen may have got castration wrong, but he got it right when he wrote, quoting this passage  
of the Song of Songs:

“Send him, that he may no longer speak to me just through prophets, but may come in person  
and ‘kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’ that pour his word from his mouth into mine.”

And so the Song of Songs  
is about a sexual relationship  
it is about the goodness of all that God gives  
in sense  
in creation  
in life.

But we all of this goodness that he gives, is not God himself  
and we appreciate all this goodness more, when our first desire is to know the living God who  
made all things good.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.