

Sermon 7th February 2010 (Songs of Songs 6:1-10 and 2 Cor 5:15-21) “Songs of Reconciliation”

Our readings in the Songs of Songs have been encouraging us to be frank about sex, marriage and relationships.

First, they are good things – they are of God. They are not dirty, squalid and unmentionable, but good gifts to be used rightly.

Second, if faith is about all of life, it is about this part of life too.

Here too, Jesus is to be Lord.

Here too, we are to learn together to follow him.

That means we need to open, and to grow together, so that we can
support each other in our living
help each other in our growing
and share our difficulties.

We also need to open, so that the church can be a safe-place – a sanctuary for those that struggle, and for those that are abused or hurt.

We don't need to pretend, we don't need to be silent.

We certainly don't want to be in denial or sweeping things under the carpet.

(And sometimes churches have been places where the abused get abused again, because they are forced to pretend that all is well, and everything is happy).

We need an openness that there might be forgiving, accepting, and healing, without denial or hypocrisy.

In Church, we live together as brothers and sisters – all part of the same family of God.

But we also live in our distinct relationships – our marriages, our families, our particular and friendships.

And together, we need to support all these individual relationships.

Think of a wedding. It is a public event.

Friends, family, community, congregation, all are invited.

We are all there to see them and support them as they tie the knot.

But then, unfortunately, we tend to leave them to sink or swim.

We are rubbish at preparing people for marriage

and we are not much good in helping them strengthen their marriage afterwards.

So we need to be open and honest about these things.

However, there are limits to openness.

I want to talk a bit today about Songs of Songs chapter 5.

But notice, I didn't ask our reader to read it this morning.

That was quite deliberate.

Because chapter 5 has deeply erotic imagery - full of double entendres, and explicit lyrics. And although we need to be open, and it is good these things are in the Bible, there is also a place for modesty.

Read chapter 5 – but read it in private – or with your spouse.

Some things are better in private.

As I was preparing for this, I was listening to a podcast of a preacher.

And as he spoke about the Songs of Songs, he shared openly and about his physical relationship with his wife.

I thought, no! There are limits!

We want a supportive environment, but there's also a place for privacy.

And now, I've got you intrigued by chapter 5, haven't I?

So let me tell you the story you can read there.

A husband comes home, late at night.

Maybe he's been working late, maybe he's been out with his mates (we don't know).

His wife is asleep, and he can't get in the door.

Maybe she's locked it, maybe he's forgotten his keys (guys do that – or it that just me?).

He knocks; she wakes.

She's angry - "I've had a bath, I've washed my feet, I'm in my pyjamas.

I'm not getting up to open the door."

He calls up to here – but nothing.

He tries to pick the lock – but he can't get in.

Then, eventually, she has second thoughts.

"I do love him – I do miss him."

And so, she goes down to let him in.

But...he's gone.

And she deeply regrets what she's done.

And then it goes a bit crazy for a bit.

She gets hysterical, "he's left me"

She runs outside in a state of undress,

She gets very emotional – and she ends up getting lifted by the police.

Then, once that's cleared up, she runs round to a group of her girlfriends.

Now, we might ask: what is this story doing in Scripture?

We've got romantic love poetry, saying how great relationships and sex and marriage are – and now... we've got a domestic..

But actually, that's life:

We have these wonderful gifts: God-given relationships, beauty, senses and bodies, but in the end, we are sinners.

We lash out at each other.

We go in the huff.

We treat each other badly.

We sin against each other.

My wife foolishly married a sinner, we had sinful children, and we came to a church full of sinners too!

George Bush Snr. (that's the bright one) once said that American families should be more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons.

But the truth is that our families *are* more like the Simpsons, we are all dysfunctional to one degree or another.

As much as we have all these good gifts, we mess up.

And that's why the Church needs to be a place of reconciliation – a place where relationships can be healed and put right.

Firstly, there's our relationship with God:

we sinned,

we ignored him

we shut him out

we locked the door and we treated him shabbily.

So, the relationship was in danger it was headed to the divorce courts, it seemed to have reached an irretrievable breakdown.

But God took the initiative, he sent his son to die on a cross, to take our penalty that we might be reconciled to him – that there might be forgiveness, if only we would repent, recognise we are sinners and seek to be reconciled to God.

Martin Luther, when he pinned the 95 his 95 theses to the door of the University of Wittenberg, to protest against the Church authorities, had as the first of his theses the statement:

“All of a Christian life is one of repentance”.

Do you need to recognise today that you have sinned? Sinned against God? Sinned against your family? Sinned against a Christian friend? Sinned against your spouse?

Do you need to stop passing the buck and saying it is their fault, and to allow God to begin his work of reconciliation?

Marriage, like any other relationship, requires repentance.

There are three statements you need in marriage “I love you” “I do” and “I'm sorry”.

Anyway, back to the story.

The woman is now looking for her man.
She is sorry, she wants the relationship to be right – she wants reconciliation.
Who is to blame is not the point, so she goes looking.

She has these girlfriends, the “women of Jerusalem”
and there is an opportunity here for them to support her and help her,
an opportunity for them to be reconcilers and bring the two back together.

You see, when relationships go wrong, there call on all faithful people is to help put them right.

Jesus said “blessed are the peacemakers”

Paul speaks in our 2nd Corinthians passage of the “ministry of reconciliation”.

In the church, one of our callings is to reconcile: to bring people together.

To reconcile our broken community

our broken families

the relationships that are broken.

But these women of Jerusalem are not very helpful.

She comes saying “I’ve lost my husband, I treated him badly, and I think he left me.”

And their response?

(5 v9) “What’s so special about him? Go find another one, there’s plenty more?”

You see, when we fall out with someone, maybe in church, maybe at home, there are two types of people we can go to.

There are peacemakers.

They will calm you down. They will sort you out.

They will let you talk. They will help you reflect.

They will help you reflect, and repent, and move you towards reconciliation.

They are peacemakers.

And then there are troublemakers.

They will take your side. They are trying to help.

But they will stir you up; they will tell you are in the right.

They will agree the other person is in the wrong.

Perhaps they’ll share some gossip about something they heard about them.

They will encourage your anger, your self-pity, your feeling of self-righteous indignation.

They will tell you to stand your ground and they will rip the thing apart.

Do not seek the counsel of troublemakers.

Do not be a troublemaker.

I have met both in Churches – even in this church.

Peacemakers do so much good, and troublemakers do untold harm.

But as the troublemakers come, the woman stands her ground.

They will not badmouth her man.

She sings his praise:

(vs10-16)

“my man is radiant, he has great hair, full features, strong arms, he woks our, and he’s sensitive.” He’s a god in her eyes – her Adonis.

She might be angry, she might feel hurt, but she’ll remain loyal.

Are we that way with our friends? With each other? Are we loyal?

And then finally, we move to chapter six.

He friends hear that her man’s a hunk, and they immediately offer to come and find him.

“We would love to meet him”.

But she pulls back – no.

Friends are fine, but only to a point.

Friends can support the marriage, they can be peacemakers, they can help reconcile.

But marriages also need intimacy and privacy.

She will meet her man in the privacy of the garden.

Marriages are not merely private affairs between two people.

They have implications – for the wider family, for the church, for the community.

Whether you are married or you are single, the health of the marriages around you should matter to you. You have a stake in them. And we should all pray for the marriages in our congregation, we need them to be strong.

But in the end, my marriage is, *my* marriage.

Between me and my wife, and it needs privacy and intimacy.

The same is true with children.

We bring them up as part of society.

We bring them up together as a congregation – as they are baptised we all promise to help nurture them and we all have a role in affirming them.

But, it is the parents who take the baptism vows, because as much as we support them, they are the parents.

So this woman wants intimacy.

There are two people in the marriage, not three or six.

And so she meets him in the intimacy of their garden.

And she says “I am my beloveds and he is mine”

“We belong to each other. It is till death us do part.”

That’s the starting point.

I am his, he is mine, we are one.

She's feeling guilty,
he's feeling angry,
but because they are utterly committed to each other, they have to work this out –
there are no other options to even be imagined.

They are in a garden; private, natural, but also a place that needs cultivating -
just like a marriage. It's good, but it needs work – constant work.

She takes the initiative, and pursues the reconciliation.
She repented and affirmed her love.
Now he moves to reassure her, and sings the love song of vs 4-10.

And it is quite a love song.
It starts with him saying
"You are as beautiful as the town of Tirzah, as comely as Jerusalem"
(Which is perhaps a little strange – have you ever compared your wife to a city?
"Darling, you look just like Manchester!")
But Tirzah and Jerusalem were the two royal cities of the time – associated with beauty and
power. He's saying: "Darling you are awesome. Spectacular, like an army with its banners"
And he goes on to say he loves her hair, her teeth, he cheeks.

These are the same, somewhat corny, lines he's used elsewhere in the Songs of Songs.
He used them when they were courting.
He used them at their marriage.
And they are still appropriate – he still loves her.

Then in 6:8-9 he says "you are unique"
"There are 60 queens, 80 concubines, many maidens.
But to me you are the one.
The world is full of beautiful women, but I want you."
"She's the only one" he says, "even your mother thinks you're great."

And the point?
Relationships have their ups and downs;
there are domestic problems;
all screw up, because all are sinful.
But Christian marriage is about total commitment – exclusive and forever.
A commitment that forgives and seeks to be forgiven.
That doesn't wait for the other to make the move to reconcile, but it always seeking to be
reconciled.

But the whole passage reminds us that *all* relationships are broken by sin.
And if we value them, we all need to repent, we all need to humbly admit when we've got
them wrong.

We all need to work together at this ministry of reconciliation.
We all need to seek to be peacemakers and not trouble makers.

Are you estranged from someone this morning?

Perhaps a spouse or family member, perhaps someone else in the congregation, perhaps a friend or a neighbour.

What does reconciliation involved?

First it involves a life of repentance – just as Luther said our lives should be.

Recognise your sin.

Never mind who started it, never mind their faults and sins – you repent.

And you take the initiative to reconcile.

Second, if you involve others – seek wise friends:

not the ones who will back you up and tell you are right,

but ones that will be peace makers – that will minister reconciliation.

And all of this reconciliation of relationships, is in the context of our relationship to God.

A husband and a wife's love – points to God's love for us.

He is utterly committed to us.

He is focussed upon us.

He has chosen us.

He makes possible our reconciliation to him.

Sin gets in the way – we are unfaithful, we deserve to be separated – to be divorced for ever.

But he comes with the reconciliation bought by Jesus:

Jesus who is the peacemaker:

making peace, says Paul, "through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20).

And so his church is to be a place and a people of reconciliation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen