

Sermon 14th February 2010 (Songs of Songs 8:4-14 and 1Cor 6:12-20) “The end of the song”

This is our fourth week on the Songs of Songs – and we are finishing up on Valentine’s Day. I’d love to claim that was deliberate – but actually it is simple coincidence.

We’ve spend four weeks reading romantic, erotic, love poetry, and it has:

1) encouraged us to see love, sex and desire as positive things, the gifts of God to be enjoyed and but also to be properly used.

2) encouraged us to believe that we can and should talk openly about such things – that we should help each other, and support each other in this area of our lives.

Our congregation needs to be a safe, supportive, healing place where we help each other grow – and allow Jesus to be Lord here too.

Songs of Songs is an anthology of love poetry, concerning one particular couple.

We’ve seen their courtship, their marriage, their fights and reconciliation, all within this fantastic declaration of unending love.

And these words make Hallmark sound like a bunch of losers.

And so, we come to Chapter eight today.

And there is a sense that here is a deeply sensual married woman, who is now going to offer some advice – her experience is good and positive, but from it there are some lessons to be learned.

And in verse 4, she addresses the “daughters of Jerusalem” again.

We met them last week, they are her girlfriends, they are single, and they are not always very wise.

And here is her advice to them:

“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!”

There is a right way and a wrong way to use this gift: there is a good time and a bad time.

Notice, this isn’t some crusty old Christian moralist, who hasn’t spoken to a woman in 400 years, lecturing us here – screaming “thou shalt not”.

This is a woman who sings sexy love songs, and has experienced the ecstasy of union which she has known to be spiritual, physical and emotional – and she has known it to be good.

So, the first thing here, advice is good.

There is a whole world out there offering relationship advice – sex counselling, moral guidance – agony aunts – and magazines and most of it is not remotely godly.

We need to counterbalance that with good advice – with clear positive Christian teaching.

Let me do a straw poll.

Hands up everyone here who grew up in a committed Christian home, within the context of a Church?

Now, keep your hands up if you received good instruction on relationships, marriage and sex and how to honour God in this area.

Last night I sat watching TV with Rebecca – she’s 9, it was just the back of 8pm – an advert came on, sponsored by the NHS, on the subject of contraception.

I looked at the clock again; yes, it was just after 8 o'clock, before the watershed.
I was embarrassed and I distracted my daughter.

But it struck me afterwards:

If we don't teach our children about such things – someone else *will*.

If we don't teach them about such things in a Christian context – *no one* else will.

So, what does our woman teach?

This is good, this is positive, but do not rush in.

Do not stir up love until the time is right.

Wait for the right man – the right time – the right order.

This is too good to waste on the wrong way.

It is too powerful to mess with.

And then...?

It is almost as if she goes reminiscing, remembering the beginning of their relationship.

She remembers bringing him home to her parents' house.

She remembers the time they spent together underneath the apple tree at her parents' home.

If you are married, do you remember your first date?

(That might be a good thing to remember on Valentine's Day.)

Do you remember the first time you held hands in public, that you let your mum and dad, and the folks in your church, know that you were an item? (I can remember.)

She remembers bringing her guy home to meet the parents.

They said: *"Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"*

It was saying -

This is not a one-night stand, or a passing fancy.

He's not the latest in a long line of men.

He's not the outlet for passion or frustration.

She brought him home, and she expected approval.

And she remembers how they lay down together that first spring, underneath the apple tree, which was probably in her parents' garden.

She remembers, because he woke her there, and they shared a story.

A story under the apple tree.

The story concerned her parents.

They had come there – to that same apple tree.

And there, she had been born.

Or indeed, under a more likely reading of the Hebrew, there her mother had conceived her.

Now, that's a story to tell the grandkids.

Her parents had been open with her, they had shared with her the meaning of that place to them. And now, she was under the same apple tree with her man, and the circle of the generations was about to turn again.

Interestingly, so far the Song of Songs, has spoken of
love
romance
commitment
companionship
sex, celebration and togetherness,
but never so far of kids.
Sex is not just for procreation.

But, on the other hand, neither is it just the selfishness of two people having fun and expressing a private love that's nobody's business.

It is about mum, and dad, and in-laws and family.
It's about grandparents and generations.

This woman has passion and desire, but she knows where it is headed and what it is all about.

He's coming into the family.
She's literally bringing him under the family tree:
the apple tree of the generations.
And that's got consequences for so many more people than the two of them.

One of the biggest misnomers of our modern society is the term "family planning".
What we call "family planning" has nothing to do with planning at all –
it is just about reproductive biology.
True family planning is where we think about sexual passion in the wider context of how kids will be brought up – what the influences will be – how the family tree is being built.
And that ought to begin when people start dating: "Is this the person God wants me to be with?"
Family planning does not begin with conception.

So, here is her advice to her single friends:
"don't chase love for loves sake alone.
If you are to be married, you want the right man, so that you can plan for a godly legacy."

And then, in verses 6-7 she speaks about what a true godly relationship should be:
beautiful, romantic, yet profound words.

6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;

for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

In the ancient world, a wax seal was the sign of authenticity, of identity, a man wore a signet ring on his finger or round his neck. It was valuable, given only to someone utterly trusted.

So she says:

I want to be your trusted one, your confident
I want to be imprinted on your heart
I want to be at the centre of your life.

And love she says, is strong as death.

Death is irreversible, final, unbeatable
and that's what this love is to be.

And it will not be quenched by many waters.

Yes, storms will come, floods and rainy days, but this true love chooses to endure.

And love cannot be bought.

Love in the Bible is not just a feeling, not passing romance

Love comes from God himself, and all human love is a reflection of the Divine Love.

Jesus said "love one another, as I have loved you"

Paul said "husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church"

And God's love is

permanent,

faithful,

unconditional,

sacrificial,

irrevocable and free

and our human love must reflect that love – because that is where it comes from.

We are made in the image of God.

If the daughters of Jerusalem will only grasp that, they'll not mistake it for some cheap Valentine
cars, and they will not stake their lives on anything less.

If we understand the true goodness of what God has made,
the love of husband and wife designed to model the divine love,
we will not want any shoddy temporary liaison.

We will not want sexual expression without that irrevocable covenant.

We will not want the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong place.

For that will be a poor, blasphemous, reflection of his Divine Love.

And now, we have a very strange passage (vs8-10)

We have her brothers asking here, what advice will you give about our younger sister?

The sister is pre-pubescent, she has no breasts yet.

And they ask, how shall we protect here as she grows.

Now, our modern reaction might be: "you don't protect her at all.

That's patronising. She'll make up her own mind, when she's old enough.

She'll make her own choices. It's her body."

But that's to fall into the error of thinking sex is a private matter.

The Bible rather says, we are our brother's keeper (and our sister's)

And as a community we teach, train, shape, encourage, warn and rebuke.

And so, the advice the woman gives the brothers is this:
There are two types of women (and this holds true of me as well),
there are walls and there are doors.

Walls are good at repelling things. They reject unwelcome advances.
They naturally say no, and admit none until the right time.
Doors, however, are prone to open – sometimes too easily.
They are vulnerable to the wrong people, at the wrong time, and they need protection.

So, if she's a wall – affirm her.
And if she's a door – then get out the two-by-fours and reinforce her, protect her, keep her safe.

And the woman says “I was a wall – until the right man came, and all was at peace.”

Then she gives another analogy – perhaps an easier one.

Solomon, the rich king has rich, valuable vineyards.
But they are available for hire.
He has tenant farmers, and you can rent them for cash.
But my vineyard, my body, is not for sale.
I may be poor, but this is priceless to me.
I am my own, and I value what I have.

She's already said that her body is a private garden and not a public park.

You see, we live in a society where many people enter into relationships because they do not value themselves – they have a low self-esteem, low self-worth, and so they enter into relationships to feel wanted.

We live in a society where single people are often made to feel less valuable – second best – even worthless.

Or insecure people, seek the security of a relationship, sometimes any relationship.
And sometimes people are left feeling even more used, debased and worthless.

But the Bible wants to start with the opposite.
You need to know that you are valuable.
You are precious in your own right >
Because you start from a position of being utterly loved by the Divine Love.

And if you know and respect that Love of God
The God who made you in his image
Who made your body, your sexuality, your very self to reflect his Love.
Then you will respect yourself.

One of the ways we help each other live our lives in obedience and in the way God wants us to live
whether that be as married people or as single people
is by reassuring each other of how precious we are – loved already just for being ourselves.

Yes, there are forbidden things to avoid.

Yes, the church has to say certain things are sin, and are wrong
but the affirmation of who you are in Jesus, is far greater than the “thou shalt not”.

In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul is addressing people who are treating sex lightly.

They are saying “it’s no big deal, it’s just bodies”

And he writes to them:

“do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

It is good, you are precious, God care intimately about you.

And, I suppose if there was one sentence to sum up all we’ve said about the Song of Songs, it might be that command “glorify God, in your body”

Amen

