11 August 2019: Choral Matins
The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
Song of Solomon 8:5-7, 2 Peter 3:8-13
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‘Faithful Worldliness’

The fact that the Song of Solomon (or the Song of Songs) is in the Bible at all is remarkable and significant. It belongs to that body of texts in the Old Testament known as ‘Wisdom Literature’, which also includes Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. What’s unusual about this literature is its complete absence of reference to religious institutions and practices in general, and Jewish religious tradition in particular. In Proverbs and in Ecclesiastes there is some mention of God, who arguably displays the steadfast loving-kindness of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph. But in the Song of Songs, of this God or of any other: not a whisper.

And yet the Song of Songs belongs to the Christian Bible and we read it out aloud in public in services of worship, such as this one.

That’s remarkable. And it’s also significant. It’s significant, because what it implies is that biblical religion, and therefore Christian faith, is not all about God, or about religious institutions or religious practices that try to clear conscious space for him.

Biblical religion and Christian faith is also about the world in itself. It’s about a world that has its own, perfectly genuine attractions, its own intrinsic values. The Song of Songs gives us one example: the sheer and intrinsic beauty of exhilarating, ecstatic, erotic love. There are others: relationships of trust and generosity; the discovery of beautiful truths; the nobility of moral integrity; the ecstasy of music; the exhilaration of excelling at sport.

Biblical religion and Christian faith is also about the world and its very own goods. It’s about our enjoying them, celebrating them, and striving to protect and foster them. The opening verses of the first book of the Bible presents God as the creator of the world, and at the end of each one of the seven stages of creation it intones, “And God saw that it was good”.

The world is good. It deserves our attention and care. It deserves our investment. This is one of the main—and most creditable—reasons why orthodox Christianity has always affirmed the goods of procreation and marriage: because the world of time and space, the historical world, the social world is worth investing in. For this reason, St Augustine (in the 4th century AD) came to oppose the celibate Manichees, who saw in procreation the imprisonment of pure spirit in evil matter. For Augustine—and for orthodox Christianity since him—to have and to raise children, and to marry in no small part for their sake, is one important way to give the historical world the thumbs-up. It’s a vote of confidence in the future of God’s good world.

This, then, is what’s remarkable and important about the presence in the Bible of the Song of Songs, an anthology of lyrics whose attention is entirely on erotic love and not at all upon God. Its presence is an affirmation of the worldliness, the morally serious worldliness of biblical religion and Christian faith.

That, of course, is not the whole story. Our second reading, from the Second Epistle of Peter, reminds us that what we find in the world is not only goodness, but also incompleteness and corruption. According to Biblical religion and Christian faith, then, human life should not amount simply to the enjoyment and celebration of created goods; it also needs to include moments of yearning for change, moments of critical detachment, moments of tactical renunciation, moments of prayer for the coming of God in Christ to bring this world to an end.

Thus our Epistle: “… the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God …!” (vv. 10-12a).

Here’s where the contradiction between our two readings this morning seems to arise. The Song of Solomon sanctions our giving ourselves over to the sheer enjoyment of the world; while the Second Epistle of Peter urges us to live toward its destruction. Solomon encourages investment; Peter cautions disinvestment.

But the contradiction is apparent, not real. As the former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, has argued, the violent language of biblical apocalyptic should not be taken to mean this world’s simple annihilation; and its replacement by something absolutely different. It shouldn’t be taken to mean a radical and absolute discontinuity between this
world and the next. It shouldn’t be taken to sanction a simple withdrawal from the world into callous apathy or gleeful carelessness.

No, according to Bishop Tom, what apocalyptic passages such as ours from Second Peter are saying is that this world can expect to undergo dramatic renovation—terrible, wonderful transformation. Like the risen Jesus, the world to come will be familiar-strange: still this world and not some other, but nevertheless marvelously changed.

What appears to be a contradiction between our two readings, then, turns out to be a tension; and it’s a salutary tension in which Christian life is to be lived.

On the one hand, the world is good—as it was created by God—and we should recognize it as such. Through the Incarnation God has invested deeply in it, and we should do likewise. Moments of sheer absorption and enjoyment, where God is hardly on our minds, are not by that token moments of unfaith.

On the other hand, all the goods of the world are contingent, vulnerable, corrupt, and imperfect. So if we really care for them, then we cannot but look for their healing, their resurrection, their transformation, and their being made secure. And since resurrection is beyond our power, we must wait, in faith and hope, for God to exercise his.

It is precisely because we care for this world that we pray for the next one: “We wait for … a new earth—or better, for a renewed earth—where goodness and righteousness are finally at home” (after v. 13b).