



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

2 August 2020: Matins Sermon

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Song of Solomon 5:2–end, 2 Peter 1:1–15

The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology

‘On Passion and Self-Control’

Passion these days is most definitely a virtue. In fact, together with compassion, it’s one of the two virtues most talked up. Every right-thinking person is passionate about what they do. Every applicant for a job claims it. Everyone competing on *The Apprentice* is keen to make sure that Lord Sugar hears it. They’re passionate about their plans, utterly committed to them, ready to give them body and soul, in love with them.

This morning’s reading from the Song of Solomon gives biblical blessing to passion as an overwhelming, all-absorbing love. Listen to it again:

I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;
I gather my myrrh with my spice,
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,
I drink my wine with my milk.
Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love.
I slept, but my heart was awake.
Listen! my beloved is knocking.
‘Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one;
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.’
I had put off my garment;
how could I put it on again?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?
My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,

and my inmost being yearned for him.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
upon the handles of the bolt. (5.1-5)

“Be drunk with love”. The metaphor is sensual and erotic—and to my whitewashed, Protestant sensibility, gaudily so—but the meaning of passion is broader. It’s a love that possesses the lover, so that the lover becomes a passive channel for an overwhelmingly greater power. A passion is not something that we do; it is something that takes hold of us.

In contrast to the Song of Solomon, our second reading from the Second Epistle to Peter seems altogether more restrained, more controlled, perhaps more stereotypically Calvinist:

[God in Christ] has given us ... his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. (1.4-7)

Here a main concern is with ‘lust’, which is like passion in that it’s in the driving-seat, but is distinguished by being disordered. It’s disordered in one of two ways. Either it’s in love with the wrong thing, “striving”—as Michael Palin’s William Thackeray put it in the recent television version of *Vanity Fair*—“for what isn’t worth having”. Either that, or it loves something that is worth having, but not that much. Conscious that passion can become sinful, therefore, the Epistle to Peter counsels self-control and endurance.

This morning’s two readings, therefore, set up something of a tension between passion and self-control. Both, it seems, belong in the biblical vision of things. But how are we to think them together?

One clue can be found in a novel I’ve recently finished reading—John Buchan’s *Sick Heart River*, which was completed in 1940, just a few days before the author died.¹ Unlike all of Buchan’s other novels of derring-do, this one is a spiritual odyssey. It, too, is set in 1940 and concerns a London-based Scot, Sir Edward Leithen. Leithen is dying of tuberculosis and has been given a year to live. Determined not to suffer death lying down, he undertakes to find a man who has gone missing in the Canadian North-West. This man is of no personal consequence to him, but the North represents the granite-like

Inexorability of Things, a sort of sub-Christian Calvinist God, and Leithen is determined to meet it face to face like the true Calvinist Stoic he is.

He finds his man and, on the journey back, begins to recover his health, thanks to the ministrations of his two guides. But then they come across a community of the Hare tribe, which is dying from a mixture of malnutrition and despair. Father Duplessis, their French priest, begs him to stay and help; his two guides beg him not to waste himself. Duplessis and Leithen had both served in the First World War, and his mind goes back to the trenches:

The effluence of death seemed to be wafted to his nostrils over the many thousand miles of land and sea... But it did not sicken him. Rather it braced him, as when a shore-dweller who has long been inland gets a whiff of the sea. It was a spark which fired within him an explosive train of resolution.

There was a plain task before him, to fight with Death. God for His own purpose had unloosed it in the world, ravaging over places which had once been rich in innocent life. Here in the North life had always been on sufferance, its pale slender shoots fighting a hard battle against the Elder Ice. But it had maintained its brave defiance. And now one such pathetic slip was on the verge of extinction. This handful of Hares had for generations been a little enclave of life besieged by mortality. Now it was perishing, hurrying to share in the dissolution which was overtaking the world.

By God's help that should not happen—the God who was the God of the living. Through strange circuits he had come to that simple forthright duty for which he had always longed. In that duty he must make his soul.²

Leithen reflects:

In his first days in the North his old world had slipped from him wholly, leaving only a grey void which he must face with clenched teeth and with grim submission. He smiled as he remembered those days, with their dreary stoicism. He had thought of himself like Job, as one whose strength lay only in humbleness. He had been crushed and awed by God.

A barren creed! He saw that now, for its foundations had been pride of defiance, keeping a stiff neck under the blows of fate. He had been abject without true humility. When had the change begun? At Sick Heart River, when he had a vision of the beauty which might be concealed in the desert? Then, that evening in the snow-pit had come the realisation of the tenderness behind the iron front of Nature, and after that had come thankfulness for plain human affection. The North had not frozen him, but had melted the ice in his heart. God was not only all-mighty but all-loving. His old happinesses seemed to link in with his new mood of thankfulness. The stream of life which had flowed so pleasantly had eternity in its waters. He felt himself safe in the hands of a power that was both God and friend.³

Leithen decides to stay with Father Duplessis and aid the Indian villagers. Together, they save the village, but Leithen exhausts himself in the process and dies.

What does the story of Edward Leithen tell us about how to reconcile passion and self-control? Leithen appears to have adopted a Christian kind of Stoicism. He's very aware of God's overwhelming, awe-inspiring power. But he's experienced it as an iron fist that crushes, as the icy, unfeeling North that freezes to death. So, to save his integrity, to stop himself being taken over by passions of self-pity, of rage against the unfairness of things, and of the fear of mortality, he has decided to keep his upper lip defiantly stiff. Self-control is what keeps him together, literally. The creed may be a barren one, but it does offer salvation of a kind.

What transforms him is a series of experiences. First, there is natural beauty: "The mountains were no longer untidy rock heaps, but the world which he had loved long ago, that happy upper world of birds and clouds and the last magic of sunset".⁴ Then there's the observation of the tenderness that lies behind the iron front of Nature, and an intuition of God's mercy:

Out of the cruel North most of the birds had flown south from ancient instinct, and would return to keep the wheel of life moving. Merciful! But some remained, snatching safety by cunning ways from the winter of death. Merciful! ... And human beings, men, women, and children, fending off winter and sustaining life by an instinct old as that of the migrating birds.... Surely, surely, behind the reign of law and the coercion of power was a deep purpose of mercy.⁵

Raised up and exhilarated by a renewed faith in God—not just as God but also as friend—Leithen is liberated to surrender himself gladly to the call of love, and to spend the last of his life in saving the Hares from starvation and despair.

In the end, then, we can say that Leithen was released from barren, defensive self-control to give himself over to a passion. But this wasn't the passion of the lust for sexual gratification, or the passion of fear, or the passion of rage. It wasn't the kind of passion that needs guarding against and controlling. It was the passion of love for all that God loves, a passion to share in the eternal love of God. It was a passion in which, by losing ourselves, we find ourselves. One in which, to use Buchan's phrase, we 'make our souls'.

¹ John Buchan, *Sick Heart River* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007).

² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.