



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

4 August 2019: Said Matins with Hymns

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

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

Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

‘Love is known by Love’

The bridegroom of the Song of Songs is very elusive. He comes bounding over the mountains, leaping over the hills to His Bride. He seduces her with his voice, his fragrance, his touch, his taste. His kisses, his caresses, his loving glances, his embrace, his ecstatic description of her beauty overwhelm her, until she faints with love. He calls to her to follow: ‘Rise up, my darling, my fair one, come away’.

But then he is gone. Their bed is empty; he is not in the city streets; he is nowhere to be found: ‘Night after night on my bed I have sought my true love; I have sought him, but I have not found him. I said, ‘I will rise and go the rounds of the city through streets and squares, seeking my true love’. I sought him, but could not find him’. And then, in the passage we read this morning, the Bridegroom reappears in the middle of the night, he knocks at the door, whispering: ‘Open to me, my sister, my dearest, my dove, my perfect one...I have put off my robe; must I put it on again?’ The bride is again overcome by his voice, his touch as he slips his hand through the latch hole, meeting hers dripping with myrrh. She opens to him – but again, he is gone!: ‘My heart sank when he turned his back’ the bride bemoans, ‘I sought him, but could not find him, I called, but there was no answer’. She begins to look for him, but where is he? ‘Where has your beloved gone, O fairest of women? Which way did your beloved turn, that we may look for him for you?’ they ask.

The bridegroom’s words are heard again, more seductive than ever; his praise of his beloved becomes more erotic and sensuous as he describes every part of her body: the curves of her thighs, her navel, her belly, her breasts, her neck, her eyes, her very breath: ‘May I find your breasts like clusters of grapes on the vine, your breath sweet-scented like apples, your mouth like fragrant wine flowing smoothly to meet my caresses, gliding over my lips and teeth.’

The bride replies: 'let us go early to the vineyards... There I shall give you my love, when the mandrakes yield their perfume'.

But the song ends with the bridegroom once again gone; the bride sits in a garden, waiting for him to come into the open, to show himself to her once again, like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains.

It is such a good read! But what is going on? Why, unlike the best romances, is love not consummated? Why are we left overcome with sensuous, seductive poetry, in a state of waiting, watching, longing, desiring, stretching out towards a beloved who is sometimes overwhelmingly present, making us faint with love; sometimes painfully absent.

I have moved from talking about the bride and the bridegroom to talking about 'we'. We cannot but identify with them, with their love, their voices, their desire. This is how Christian tradition has read the Song: hearing the Bridegroom as the voice of Christ; the Bride as the voice of the soul or the Church – and there have been wonderful, mystical, commentaries on the Song as a drama of the relation between the soul and Christ. We are, of course, meant to identify with the bride.

But why is Christ the Bridegroom so elusive? Why is the soul not finally united with him? Why is it left always stretching out towards him, full of love and longing?

Before I try to answer this, I'd like to turn to our second reading this morning from the first epistle of Peter. In it, Peter, like the Bride, remembers being with Christ; of being present with him on the sacred mountain when he was transfigured in all his glory and goodness before his very eyes; of being overcome by hearing the voice identifying him as the Beloved. Christ has gone, but Peter holds fast to his memory, and insists that it is his role to remind others of Him, of his saving grace and gifts. These are less sensuous than the attributes of the Bridegroom, but they are just as powerful in inspiring the love of the soul: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, fortitude, piety, brotherly affection, and above all and the end of all these, love itself. These, he assures his listeners, will establish that God has called and chosen them; that they will never stumble; that, as the AV puts it, they will become 'partakers of the divine nature'. While he is with them, Peter is aware that it is his role to constantly remind them of this fact: as the AV puts it in words that resonate with the Song: 'I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance.' This is the Song in ethical register, where the transformative and unitive power of the virtues are enumerated rather than the beauty of the breasts, belly and breath, but the same relation between the soul and Christ is there:

the soul must love and long; remember, recall, and hold His glory and goodness always in mind, until it becomes a partaker of the divine nature – or as our version put it, until it enters ‘into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’.

So Christ is present yet absent; to be lovingly remembered and recalled but also sought after. Now we can return to our question: Why is Christ the Bridegroom so elusive? Why is the soul not finally united with him? Why is it left stretching out towards him, full of love and longing?

There are a number of answers: because here the soul is still in this mortal life; because it needs to be cleansed of its sins; to develop and grow in virtue, as Peter puts it, before it can be united with Christ, and be made a partaker of the divine nature. In the language of the Song, it is because the Bride is still black with sin; she needs to be purified in longing love before she can be united with her Bridegroom. These answers are partly true, but I think there is a much more fundamental one: it is because Christ, the Bridegroom, the soul’s lover and saviour, is God. He is the infinite, boundless, transcendent, eternally begotten Son of God. Yes, in love, He descends – like a young stag bounding over the mountains - and becomes man; overwhelms us with his beauty; with glimpses of his grace, glory and goodness. He inspires our passionate love and desire to be united with him, who gave himself for us. But now he is gone; he has disappeared from sight; into the night of divine darkness and unknowability; drawing us after Him in longing love – a love which inspires our faith, hope and our answering love, endlessly stretching out towards him, until we become partakers of the divine nature.

But do we? Do we, finite, bounded creatures as we are, ever attain our infinite, boundless Creator? I think that, like the Bride, we do not attain Him; He must descend in love to inspire in us our love of Him; that it is not a question of final attainment, or of knowledge, but precisely of partaking: of participation and relationship. Love can only be known, ultimately, by love – and that love is endless. The Bridegroom’s final words are:

‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death...many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.’

The answer, then, is to love as we are loved- endlessly, infinitely, boundlessly, eternally!