

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 8 MAY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Song of Songs 8: 13-14; Psalm 116; Mark 16: 7- 8; Luke 24: 13-35

“The Endless Longing for the Beloved”

Today we come to the end of our journey with the Song of Songs. A journey that has been a wonderful lesson in the depth of love scripture teaches. We explored the multiple ways in which both the divine and creation are joined in a longing for that love to defeat every force or power that stands in its way.

I hope they have become dear to you, those two ardent lovers we have been following over the last couple of months, as they have become dear to me. That they have shown you how love can transform us and paint our world with the vivid colours of passion and longing. Lift the drab grey of the depressing, inevitable, seemingly invincible sadness of a broken and sinful world and make room for the hope and life love brings. Breaking the seal of death, pulling us from the floods that may threaten to drown us at any one time into a life where divine flashes of goodness and life shimmer through at every turn.

“Make haste my beloved, and be like a gazelle, or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!”

These last few words of the book indicate that there has been, once more, a movement away from the speaker. That the back and forth between lover and beloved continues. They have found each other twice, and twice they have drifted apart and lost sight of each other. And here, for the third time, we find evidence that the passionate expression of union we found in chapter seven is followed once again by a drifting apart and a longing and looking for each other.

The woman even seems to be sending her lover away while she is calling him to her at the same time. She is the mountain of spices, the place where the desire of her lover can be satisfied, she is the one who longs for him to come running to her like a gazelle, or a young stag. But at the same time, hidden in the Hebrew words in a way that is untranslatable in English, she is sending him away, or running away herself, creating distance, hiding from him and the burning of his passion.

Reflecting on these words this week and on the experience of Easter, I read something a colleague had written about his life-long struggle with very poor eyesight. How he forever longed for 20/20 vision, but somehow, in spite of specialist glasses, lenses and operations never quite got there. Only once, after one operation he came very close and “saw” for the first time. But it didn’t last, and after a couple of weeks his sight started to deteriorate again.

It is like that with God. We sometimes see with a clarity that approaches 20/20 vision, but then again there will be times when we don’t, where we lose sight of God, where being whole and at one with the divine alludes us.

Scripture testifies at every turn that that’s how it is for us, people of faith. That faith is not a matter of constant euphoria, but a journey of moving out and in, of being close and feeling miles away, of seeking God’s presence and turning away from it, of finding ourselves in step and then again being out of step with wherever God is leading us. Of finding our eyes and heart opened in his company or being totally blind to where he is beside us.

With these last words the book testifies of the push and pull of love, as well as the push and pull of what leads away from its fulfillment. It testifies to a longing and a passion that is never done seeking, looking, finding.

Love or faith is not a constant state of perfection and wholeness, it is a journey of passion and longing, a journey of development and growth, of coming close and losing the connection, of tenacity and frailty, commitment and fickleness.

We see this journey of passion and longing, of development and growth, of persistence and tenacity and frailty, commitment and fickleness reflected everywhere in scripture, and especially in the stories the gospels tell about Easter.

The conclusion of the gospel of Mark is as open-ended as the conclusion of the Song. "He is ahead of you" says the Angel, "he is not here, you'll meet him in Galilee". Indicating that the journey continues, that their confusion, their seeking, their glimpsing of him and the truth he has lived amongst them does not finish at the cross or even at the empty grave. They are invited to return to where it all began, and start again, in Galilee. Revisit the sites where they first encountered Jesus and his message, where their faith grew, and they gradually began to "see". To travel once again the road that led to Jerusalem, and rediscover what it means to live life with Christ, to die and rise again with him in their own lives and in the life of their community, deepening their understanding, intensifying their love for him and grow in faith for the next two thousand years.

On the road to Emmaus we find two friends of Jesus who have very much lost faith and hope and are heading home to return to life as it was before their journey with him started.

What they discover is that there is no return to life before Christ once he has touched you with his presence. That there may be loss of faith and loss of hope, that there may be lack of understanding and confusion about the meaning of it all, but that somewhere along the road he'll find a way to enter into the conversation once again and open hearts and minds to his living presence.

"Weren't our hearts burning inside us?" we hear the friends wonderingly ask themselves as if they didn't even realise there was a yearning, a desire, an emptiness waiting to be filled. An unuttered prayer: "O, make haste my beloved, and be like a gazelle, or a young stag upon the mountains of spice!"

Is your heart burning? Longing for the beloved to come and lift the veil? Longing to meet Christ in the stranger you meet on the road, burning to share, to understand, to love, to welcome him in whatever guise he may appear next to you? Are you ready to open your heart to his understanding, to let your eyes be opened to the emptiness inside you that longs to be filled? Ready to re-embark on your journey with him, entering forever deeper into the mystery of his healing presence? Let the world come alive with the colour of passion for his way of life that seeks to love with a burning intensity that will forever flood the world with a resistance to the powers that bring death and despair. That will break the chains of sin through the stubborn belief that goodness and mercy, justice and peace will win the day, even in a world that seems to be drowning in hatred and the longing for revenge. That does not rejoice in the death of an enemy, but lives forgiveness.

Let us return once more to the Song and hear the bridegroom speak to his beloved, God to his Church, Christ to his people, our inner voice addressing the image of the divine living in us, calling upon the goodness that is ingrained in our being to come out, to bear fruit, to be Christ in a world that needs the sound, taste and smell of it so very badly.

“How sweet is your love,
how much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!
Your lips distill nectar,
honey and milk are under your tongue;
the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.
A garden locked, a fountain sealed,
an orchard of pomegranates
with all the choicest fruits,
henna with nard,
nard and saffron,
calamus with cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,
a garden, a fountain,
a well of living water”

Amen.