

Lovers In The Garden

Not long after it was launched on the market, I became a user of Adobe Photoshop. There were a number of things I liked about the program, not the least being the use of layers. You could use multiple layers to achieve different effects. By either merging layers, changing their order, or, switching some off. My ability to achieve quite dramatic effects led to a period of quite stunning effects.

In practice, the use of layers made it possible to unlock otherwise hidden images and effects.

Very often the same type of hidden-ness underlies the reading of biblical scriptures. This is especially true of The Song Of Solomon. You can read this text at a simple level and that will return a somewhat graphic image of two lovers whose primary occupation, is being together; or you can recognise the multi-layered allusions and make the discovery, long shared by many scholars, that the song is an allegory. It sings of a love relationship between God and Israel. A divine hand has inspired an evocative account of love fulfilled. It is a glimpse of redemption fulfilled. This is imagery that belongs to the joy of being reconciled with God.

For literary sleuths, the question that comes with the unfolding of this evocative image is, whose love for who and why is the imagery so erotic. The language describing the lilies in the field and hints of Spring together with splashes of colour have been seen by scholars as an illusory way of talking about a garden, not a field. Rather than it simply being a place of assignation for two desperate lovers, it is something more. For the Hebrew reader, This is the Garden of Eden. The metaphor alludes to life in the Garden.

One writer, C E Raynel Says of this and other of the love poems in the Song;

Many modern exegetes have rightly urged us to read the love poems in the Song of Solomon for what they are: the celebration of love for love's sake, equally of the woman's love for her beloved and the man's for her. The woman urges the man she loves to share the night with her ("he pastures his flock among the lilies"). The words telling what her man says to her (10b-17) only heighten the initiative she takes for their rendezvous.

Having established one possible view of the love poems, Raynel then takes another step and says;

Choosing this reading from the Song, the brave preacher will also easily see abundant implicit theological claims. The Song of Solomon celebrates the relation of woman and man in God's gracious creation, reflecting the two accounts of God's word and action, God's rich and effective purpose, in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25.

One might ask, given that I have chosen to reflect on the song, "How brave am I?"

Actually, I wouldn't use the term brave, rather, I just can't help myself. A possible mystery has been discovered, I need to understand it!

As I have already alluded, the powerful imagery of the garden in the Song of Solomon, hints strongly of the creation of man and woman in Eden (Gen. 2:4b-25). In this text, the second account of creation, the Lord God brings the whole of creation to its climax by adding the female counterpart and partner to the human being whom God

has created from the dust of the ground. Finally, having breathed into his nostrils so that he would become a living being, God has put Adam into a deep sleep and taken from him, a woman. All the creatures of the earth are then brought before Adam. God has asked him to name them.

Adam and Eve are then placed in the garden of Eden.

The imagery that connects this place to the Song, is glimpsed when one recognises that Eden is the place of a new beginning Adam and Eve are at home in the idyllic confines of the Garden created by God. A covenant exists here. It is lived out when all the parties to the covenant, live by it's rules.

When one now returns to the song, there is an immediate sense of Spring. New growth abounds. There are new beginnings everywhere. Even the mountains seem to be animated. The literary design of Spring is clearly not by chance. It signals Spring.

But another shadow hovers over the excitement in this place of meeting for Israel.

It is many generations since the Baptismal experience of Noah and his family after which they experienced the rainbow. The exodus from Egypt, together with the passover, is a distant, but often celebrated event. The Ten Commandments have been embraced and found a home in the Ark of the Covenant.

What on earth is driving this erotic new life imagery in the time of Solomon?

And here is the sadness of this great Hebraic nation. Clearly, there is now a gulf between the visioned bridal ecstasy in which Israel as the bride, is a metaphor for the nation, and the reality of life in the

court of King Solomon. The imagery of what might be is clear but is Israel up to it?

Many years ago, I was responsible for the leadership of a youth group. A mother rang me and asked if her daughter could join the group. I said absolutely! The mother went on to say, "my daughter has a disability and has real difficulty socializing". I said that's okay. We will do what we can. Etched in my mind forever is that young girl saying goodbye when we dropped her off at the end of the evening. She was happy. She was buoyant, and she skipped from the van to the gate, and then again from the gate to the front door.

I suspect that the writer who penned the song had seen a break in the clouds. Perhaps he had likewise skipped from his place of reflection to his tent. Perhaps we can dare to imagine a storm, following which a rainbow has appeared. Although the nation had lapsed into a form of lethargy, the writer saw this vision as a chance for the relationship between God and his people to embrace bridal glory. The scribe has glimpsed it but who will alert and lead the nation?

Much later in Israel's story, Isaiah hears a call:

8 Then I heard the voice of Adonai saying,

"Whom should I send?
Who will go for us?"

I answered, "I'm here, send me!" 9 He said, "Go and tell this people:

'Yes, you hear, but you don't understand.
You certainly see, but you don't get the point!'

10 "Make the heart of this people [sluggish with] fat,
stop up their ears, and shut their eyes.
Otherwise, seeing with their eyes,
and hearing with their ears,
then understanding with their hearts,
they might repent and be healed!"

11 I asked, "Adonai, how long?" and he answered,

"Until cities become uninhabited ruins,
houses without human presence,
the land utterly wasted;

12 until ADONAI drives the people far away,
and the land is one vast desolation.

13 If even a tenth [of the people] remain,
it will again be devoured.

"But like a pistachio tree or an oak,
whose trunk remains alive
after its leaves fall off,
the holy seed will be its trunk."

Unless something happens, the cities will fall into ruin. Someone needs to heed the call and help the people rediscover their mission. Perhaps, as is often discussed, Israel is beginning to understand that mortal Kingship is not the same thing as the Kingship of God.

There is a double whammy here as images of what it is really like in Israel emerge from distant blurs to become sharp and vivid. The issue driving the writer of the song is that Israel have taken their eye off the ball. While it is certainly true that Israel is the primary focus for the song, there is another bell being tolled. John Donne from our near recent history cautioned; ask not for whom the bell tolls. In all history, humans have reached for a kind of normality in

which everything is 'normal' There is a kind of..... 'this is what we always do'.....'No surprises' 'Life is an animated habit.'

This place, St Peter's is a place I have come to love as my spiritual home. Twenty years of ministry in this place has forged a bond between myself and the people of St Peter's. These are a people I have come to love. These are a people with whom I have experienced the privilege of being loved. Despite the many wonderful achievements of this congregation, how can I talk of a bond of love between God and his people in this place. I don't see this place falling into disrepair, but if we do not re-new our covenant, God may well tell us; "you have dropped the ball!"

How can I laud the many wonderful acts of love in God's name, in this place, and yet also talk of a need to re-covenant.

The answer to that question is of course, a recognition that there is never an excuse for resting on our laurels. Doing so is like going to sleep at the wheel. Our response to God is a story about a constant renewal of the love we have for each other. The vibrancy of this parish is a story about that love in action. The place in which need to be on our guard, appears when we recognise that love as some kind of familiarity with an old friend is not enough. There needs always, to be an awareness that enables us to say, "My abiding love and friendship is what it is because the key ingredient in it, is our sharing of God's love." Such a bond has an immediate and ongoing effect. What we have, we want to share with everybody, especially those at the margins of life in our social environments.

Solomon's scribe saw the new signs of Spring and he pictured his lovers gambolling like lambs just before sun-set. The girl with disability who tasted the youth group, skipped from the van to her door because she sensed an opportunity for inclusion and caring. She was richly blessed by a foretaste of what is yet to come.

We too can embrace this enhanced life that God is offering. To do so, we must begin by celebrating what we already have. From there, our worship and Sacramental celebration needs to offer all that we are and all that we shall be, because we share the refining love of God.