

Session 9: The Song of Songs

As we have seen in Job, the Bible authors do not shrink from dealing with profound emotions. The literature of the Bible also covers every area of our lives, including sex: there is no part of our lives which cannot be brought into relation with God and sex is his invention, and one of his best and most significant.

The Song of Songs is often taken as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the Christian, and there is some justification for this, since in Ephesians 5 the marriage relationship is used as a symbol of Christ and the Church. But the Song is actually a celebration of love between the sexes and especially the sexual expression of it. It refers directly to sex several times in a way that is always frank but never erotic.

1:1 refers to the book as 'Solomon's loveliest song'. It is certainly beautiful but probably not by Solomon, despite the fact that Solomon was a proverbial song-writer, credited by 1 Kings 4:32 with 1,005 songs. Solomon was also a proverbial lover with 700 princesses among his wives, but the setting of this song is not the court but the countryside. The beloved is a country girl and her lover is a shepherd. The wedding takes place in a country village and Solomon figures as a splendid but far-away figure.

Activity 9.1

Before reading this song, how would you expect the Bible to deal with the subject of sex?

Now read Song of Songs. What strikes you about the relationship between the lovers?

We are going to use the division of the Good News Bible into six songs:

First Song: 1:1 – 2:7

The lovers are apart but the girl is dreaming of her lover's kisses. She is afraid that he will be put off by her defects (1:5-6). Her skin is dark because she has to work in the vineyards. Yet all the time she is worried by her appearance he is dreaming of her perfections (1:9-11).

In 2:1 she says she is only a common wild flower, a 'rose of Sharon'. He replies: Yes, you are a wild flower – a flower amongst brambles. She replies that he is like an apple tree in a forest – the only tree that bears fruit. One of the most important things about a love relationship is that each partner has a chance to see themselves through the eyes of their lover: partners are called to build each other up through their love.

The song ends as she imagines herself in her lover's arms and making love to him (2:6-7).

Second Song: 2:8 – 3:5

The girl is dreaming again. It is Spring and the time for marriage is coming nearer. Her words are one of the most beautiful evocations of Spring in literature. In her dream the lover invites her to come away with him and in response she offers her body as rugged mountains on which he will play like a stag or gazelle.

She is not taking the kind of role conventionally assigned to women: either the now rather old-fashioned one in which the woman plays hard to get, nor yet the newer more aggressive pattern in which the woman sets out to get a man. She is eager for his love and offers herself to him without reserve.

In 3:1-5 the dream turns into a nightmare. The wedding is close, but she is afraid that it may never take place. The dream expresses her fear of losing him, searching for him in the city until she finds him and brings him back to her bed.

Third Song: 3:6 – 5:1

At last the wedding has arrived and in 3:6 the girl sees a cloud of dust in the distance as the bridegroom's procession approaches. She imagines Solomon with his retinue coming to take her away. In 4:9 and 10 the man speaks to her as his bride, but rather than simply take her he woos her, describing her perfection in his eyes and urging her to the bridal bed. In 4:12-15 he praises her virginity: she is like a locked garden, sweet with the smell of fruit and spices. In 4:16 she unlocks the garden and invites her husband in, while the wedding guests add their blessing to the union (5:1)

Fourth Song: 5:2 – 6:3

The girl is dreaming again, and again she is afraid of losing her lover, this dream balancing the similar dream of the second song before the wedding. Although married, her fears are still with her. Her description of her lover balances his of her in the first and third songs. In 6:2-3 she wakes to find that she is married and they make love once again.

Fifth Song: 6:4 – 8:4

The wedding continues, as a village wedding might for as long as a week. In 6:4-12 the newlyweds are overwhelmed by the experience of sexual intimacy. To the bridegroom, his bride is breathtaking (6:4). He is amazed at the practice of Solomon and other kings who wanted wives and concubines in abundance. The couple are enough for each other; the women of the harem envy the simple country girl who has the complete devotion of her bridegroom (6:8-9). The poems demonstrate that it is possible to take complete delight in sex without needing the stimulation of pornography or innuendo. They never approach eroticism but simply record the delight of the couple in each other's bodies.

6:10-13 is the prelude to the dancing scene of 7:1-9. The bride is dancing a 'dance of Mahanaim', a type of dance for which the steps are no longer known. As he watches her dance, the bridegroom's excitement is kindled. She is shy and needs to get away from the crowds, so calls him to come out into the country with her where the mandrakes will act as an aphrodisiac (7:11-13). There they make love (8:3-4)

Sixth Song: 8:5-end

The couple return from the countryside and in 8:5-7 the girl describes the joy of sexual passion fulfilled. She remembers her youth when her brothers watched over her courtship. If she had been a wall – that is, too reticent – they would have increased her dowry with silver. If she had been a door – too ready to take the first man who offered – they would have boarded her up. But her choice has been exactly right. In her lover she has found contentment and peace.

in 8:11-12 the bridegroom recalls Solomon's many wives and concubines. Solomon 'leased out his vineyard', but the lover has a vineyard of his own. His beloved is his garden and she is for him alone.

Activity 9.2

How does the approach to sex in these songs differ from that of contemporary society?

Preparation

In session 10 we look at the words of the unknown prophet of the exile usually called 'Second Isaiah'. they are found in Isaiah chapters 40 to 55.