

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2015.  
Lectionary: Song of Songs 2:8-11; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

## A Song of Love

### “Winter is past”

*She Speaks:* I hear the voice of the one I love, as he comes leaping over mountains and hills like a deer or a gazelle. Now he stands outside our wall, looking through the window and speaking to me.

*He Speaks:* My darling, I love you! Let's go away together.

Winter is past, the rain has stopped; flowers cover the earth, it's time to sing.

The cooing of doves is heard in our land. Fig trees are bearing fruit, while blossoms on grapevines fill the air with perfume. My darling, I love you! Let's go away together.” (C E V)

You have just heard the words of two people in love. These are unadulterated Hebrew love poetry. Let us explore the theme of romantic love as a gift from God. “Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father, who created all the lights of heaven,” says the Epistle of James. Romantic love is one such gift for God's “own special people.”

The Song of Songs is one of only two books in the Bible that make no mention of the word “God,” the other is the Book of Esther. Yet the awareness of reality is implied.

“the one I love...is like a deer or a gazelle...fig trees are bearing fruit...”

The expressions conjure up wonderful, joyful and exuberant love. This romantic love is not the *agape* love that the church witnesses to, but the *eros* love celebrated in romantic novels and films and indulged in by teenagers and some eighty-year olds.

So we acknowledge the provocative language of love as a gift, as a way of saluting the passion, desire and longing of one for another.

In love we are consumed with thinking about the other, wanting constantly to be near, losing sleep and even writing poetry or reading love poetry, going on walks together, sharing candle-lit dinners, wanting to burst out into song and not caring who hears, voicing aloud the beloved's name.

Outward behaviour of this sort is a sign of the inner dislocating experience of love, which at this stage is a burning infatuation which may look crazy to those who are unfamiliar with this erotic experience.

This initial period of infatuation may go on for a considerable time, but usually it becomes transformed into romantic love. Or infatuation disappears, later to be regretted as a mistake. There are some who look back and say “What a fool I was when I had that crush in High School.”

But when it does continue into romantic love, it echoes the quality of feelings described in the Song of Songs, and a new entity emerges, called “us.” We are a unity.

Love is a gracious move from “I” to a “We.” We find ourselves, when in love, to be tied up in our whole being with the other person, caring about what the other cares about, and wanting to be where the other is. So strong is this linkage that we call the two a “couple.”

They feel and act like a couple. The identity of each has become more complex and is, in a sense, a new creation. There is a desire, as Jesus put it, to “become one flesh.”

This longing is so intense that getting ready to be with the beloved is just about as exciting as being with the beloved. And not to be able to be with the beloved is like being near death.

Do you imagine that it is implausible to think that just one person is the only right person in the world for you? That's the way lovers feel after they have formed the bond called a “we.” They feel that they naturally are meant to be “one.”

Lovers become aware of depths of feeling and development of their own psyche which astound and amaze them and can't imagine that a different person could produce the same result in them.

There can be a danger, sometimes, that people in love may merge the other's identity under or into their own. We must beware of the dissolution of the "I," the identity of the other. The delightful particularities and peculiarities of the other are to be treasured and respected. We each must retain our own quirkiness or personality, our own "edge."

We need to be loved as we are, not as some reforming partner might strive to make us! That's why the Song of Songs goes on and on, rather ridiculously, like lovers do, with poetic descriptions of feet, breasts, neck, toes and fingers. These are signs of our uniqueness, our loveliness so that every aspect of us is adored.

The sense of being "one flesh" is an attempt to portray the mystery of what happens when "me" becomes "we." It is almost as if we get a second self, a better self, one which can allow the emergence of the neglected, uncultivated aspects of ourselves. Perhaps that is why sometimes refer to our partner as our "better half?" The other allows us to reach deeper self awareness.

Romantic love longs to reproduce itself, and that brings in the activity of sex as a way of expressing itself. Let's populate the world with carbon copies of oneself.

Having brought sex into the picture we remind ourselves that there is nothing more wonderful and more dangerous than our love. We can be wonderful and self-giving when in love and we can also be extremely self-deceitful.

It would be good if we could articulate some helpful guidelines so we could distinguish between love and self-aggrandising infatuation, some way to avoid just being self-regarding and only thinking of one's own needs and satisfaction.

This is a difficult area, and explains why the church has found it necessary to ask couples being married to make a public declaration of commitment to have a trusting and life-long relationship, and be prepared to work through together the challenges, opportunities and decisions that are ahead.

The Song of Songs is a gift to us in that it reminds us that what we love, the longer we love, is the idiosyncrasies, the peculiarities, the things that set the beloved apart from others.

"Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father, who created all the lights of heaven," says the Epistle of James. Romantic love is one such gift for God's "own special people.

To love another person is to enter into another world than the world of "I." To love another person is to give them a great gift. It is an intimate affirmation of the being of another. Because we are each a great mixture of positives and negatives, of needs and talents it is a gift that has mixed benefits, promising a great variety of risky experiences.

To avoid taking risk is why some decide to avoid romantic love and life-long commitment. Life itself is, of course, a risky business. We all have to leap into the unknown. The unknown is within each of us and the unknown is also in the other. To try to protect ourselves from the mystery of life ends up in failure. Let us, instead, welcome the mystery of life and love it!

One of the joys of reading or reciting the Poetry of the Song of Songs is to revel in the sense of adventure, of anticipation of the presence of the other. Perhaps we can see this as not only the celebration of romantic love, but also a reflection of the way we can joyfully anticipate the wonders that life is offering us in each moment and every situation.

Life is coming, "like a gazelle... winter is past, the rain has stopped; flowers cover the earth; it's time to sing."