

“THE GOOD BOOK – 6. POETRY PLEASE”

Song of Songs 1:1 – 2:13

It's great that we have been able to join in celebrating with John and Val this morning and it fits in well with some of the things we've been doing recently in our Sunday morning services. For those who've not been here or who've forgotten, we've been taking a look at the Bible as a collection of different books (sixty-six in all) and trying to discover **how** we should read those books. Because they're not all the same kind of book. There are books of history, books of law, books of biography, books of philosophy, books of stories and so on. Just as we don't approach all the books in the library in the same way – we read novels differently from cook books and thrillers differently from science textbooks – so we need to be aware of what kind of book we're reading in the Bible if we're to get the best out of it.

Today we're going to have a look at some of the poetry in the Bible. And poetry always seems to be a bit of a problem – even poetry that has nothing to do with the Bible. Different people have different ideas about what poetry actually is – does it have to rhyme? does it have to have a particular rhythm? how do we cope with all the imaginative stuff? and so on. For many of us it is stuff we had to learn off by heart at school and it's nothing more than a jumble of sounds – everything sounds like Lewis Carroll's *Jebberwocky* and means about the same. For others it is pages of words you have to pull apart and analyse for exams. And for yet others it is a load of soppy sentimentality about things that no right-living individual ever has anything to do with.

Our old friend Boswell once asked Dr Johnson, “*Sir, what is poetry?*” and the grumpy old sage replied, “*Why, sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.*” For some people, poetry is the greatest way to express yourself that there is. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that prose was putting the best words in order but poetry is “*the best words in the best order*”. But for others it's a waste of time and breath. In *Henry IV Part 1*, Shakespeare has Hotspur say that his teeth are set on edge by “*mincing poetry: 'tis like the forc'd gait of a shuffling nag*”. I love poetry, but I know others who cannot abide it.

Really, it's all to do with language and imagination. In whatever language poetry is written it involves some kind of linguistic technique. For many people in the West, poetry is all about rhyming words and rhythmic lines – what we might more properly call verse. But poets have done all kinds of amazing things with rhythm and by no means all of them use rhyme. There's alliteration and assonance and all that kind of thing too. In other cultures it may be to do with the way the words are put together – the strictness of Japanese *haiku*, with its thirteen syllable structure. In Hebrew – the language of the Old

Testament – poetry is to do with the repetition of ideas, often in couplets (like, for example, *Psalms 1:1-3*), and clever techniques like acrostics (*Psalms 119*, for example).

And imagination plays an important part, too. The poet paints pictures with words, fashions landscapes and dreamscapes as the words pile up. Often the words are used in unusual contexts, bringing different perspectives to bear on a subject. There are similes and metaphors, different ways of seeing a situation, and we need to be very careful that we don't take it all literally. Many of the things written in poetry are not factually true, but they convey truth in another way, as we shall see in a moment.

And there is plenty of poetry in the Bible. Many books of the Bible have sections of poetry in them – especially in the Old Testament – and there are whole books of poetry. Some of the prophets express their messages from God in poetry – *Micah*, *Nahum*, *Habakkuk* – for example. And most of the story of Job is written in poetic form. Then there is the book of *Psalms*, which is a collection of songs – praise, despair, complaint, worship. And that's when we start to struggle with the real meaning. Because it's not all literally true, we find problems knowing just how to respond to it. Here's a few sections of poetry from the Bible, which will show you what I mean. We'll all form our own ideas of what the writer is getting at, but I doubt if any of us will picture it all literally.

- The Song of Moses – *Deuteronomy 32:1-4, 10-14*
- God's reply to Job – *Job 38:8-14, 22-30*
- David's praise of God – *Psalms 19:1-6*
- Isaiah's vision of God's perfect creation – *Isaiah 55:12,13* (Think of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*)
- Paul's outburst of praise – *Romans 11:33-36*

Now, they're all wonderful bits of poetry and the wonder is not diminished, I hope, by the fact that they're translated out of another language and that we don't fully understand every nuance. That's true, as well, of the book from which we read a few moments ago. It's the only book of the Bible that, in over thirty years of preaching, I have never preached from. Partly that's due to the nature of the material in it. Partly it's due to the many difficulties that there can be in interpreting it. And partly it's to do with the fact that it is a book of such beautiful poetry that any attempt to analyse it will probably spoil it. But what we're celebrating here with John and Val this morning gives us a great excuse to dip into it.

This book is entitled (in most translations) *The Song of Songs*. Some call it *Canticles* (another word for "songs") and some call it *The Song Of Solomon*, because of the first line (although, for a variety of very good reasons, most scholars don't think it was actually written by Solomon). *The Song of Songs* is a way of saying that this is the very best – it's the greatest song ever written. And it is indeed pretty good stuff. Probably few of us have ever sat down and read it through, but it's worth it. It's a good idea to read it in

a version (like the NIV) which suggests with its headings who is speaking – those headings are not there in the original.

It is a wonderful poem of love, written in a dramatic fashion as a conversation between two lovers, with odd interjections from a chorus of “Friends”, probably the young women of the village. It’s obviously very stylised (you don’t normally get followed around by a little choir when you’re meeting your lover). And that’s true of the language, too, which uses all kind of amazing word pictures to describe the emotions, the setting and, indeed, the bodies of the two lovers. There are all kinds of *doubles entendres* in the poem, some of which are fairly obvious and others of which you really need to get to grips with Hebrew to appreciate. And some of those things don’t necessarily transfer all that well into English – I suspect that any lover who called his wife “*a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh*” might get fairly short shrift these days! But that was a very flattering comparison in the ancient world – even Helen of Troy was described in such terms by Theocritus.

But what’s it really about? Why’s it here in the Bible? Well, on the face of it, this is about love – about the love of a committed, married (or soon to be married) couple – expressed in fairly vivid physical and erotic terms. The physicality and eroticism of the subject and the language in which it’s expressed have caused some scholars to seek a much deeper message in here – surely this can’t mean what it appears to mean! And when you consider that many of the early interpreters were people who lived alone and had taken vows of celibacy, you can imagine that they might have got very hot under the collar (or whatever) as they tried to make sense of it.

So some of them assumed this was all allegorical – it’s actually about God’s love for us. That has been a very popular interpretation down through the centuries. And in the Christian era many people have seen it as an allegory of Christ’s love for his Church. That’s possible. I suppose, but the underlying story and the graphic language seem to suggest that it’s not an entirely appropriate view. Others have suggested that it has some kind of liturgical use – songs used in worship or at a wedding celebration. Well, that may well be akin to saying that you could sing some of Donna Summers’ greatest hits in a church service so long as you keep in mind that you’re addressing God, or that the congregation could launch into Donny Osmond’s *Puppy Love* in a wedding service. Maybe not!

My own way of looking at it brings together two other interpretations that have had some currency down through the years: this is an erotic celebration of human love, but it does (as do all the biblical books) tell us something about God. It is an amazing love poem which highlights just what a pleasure committed human love can be. And commitment is an integral part of this. The climax of the poem comes in 8:6,7 where the language is that of covenant. The girl is asking for a “*seal*”, some kind of recognition that this

is a love that will last until death, a love that cannot be destroyed or diminished. And that love will have its ups and downs, no doubt – in the poem the girl thinks she’s lost her lover at one point – but it’s well worth it all. One of the e-mail magazines I get each week had a list of things that young children had written in their RE exams and one of them said, “*A Christian should have only one spouse. This is called monotony.*” Well this poem knocks firmly on the head any idea that the physical side of marriage is monotonous!

So how on earth has such erotic poetry found its way into our Bible? Isn’t it a bit out of place? Well, as we’ve already said – and as we’ve remarked each week as we’ve looked at the Bible – all that we read in the Bible tells us something about God. Apart from the underlying message of commitment and covenant in human love, the inclusion of this book here reminds us that God is interested in every aspect of our humanity. Philip Larkin famously wrote in his poem *Annus Mirabilis*: “*Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty-three/ (Which was rather late for me)/ – Between the end of the Chatterley ban/ And the Beatles’ first LP*”. But it actually was there from the very beginning. It was God who created us as physical beings and gave us the resources to enjoy each other in loving relationship.

If you look back at the first couple of chapters of *Genesis* you’ll read an account of how God created the world (expressed in fairly poetic language, as well) and once he had created Adam, he realised that he needed company and fun, and he created Eve (so the story goes). When Adam woke up from the sleep into which God had put him and saw Eve there he said, “*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man*” – the first poetry! (The elderly chaplain at my theological college always said that if he’d been Adam and woken up to find Eve standing before him in all her beauty, his first words wouldn’t necessarily have been the same as Adam’s!) Now, whether you read the story of creation literally or not, the clear implication is that God created male and female to enjoy one another’s company and to love one another.

What is more, we are told that God created us in his image – we bear his likeness and we share something of his character. So this great love which he has put within us and which is such a great gift to us, is also in some way a reflection of his love for us. The love described in *The Song of Songs* is a mirror image (admittedly imperfect, but a reflection nonetheless) of God’s love for us – totally committed, wholly consuming and greatly to be celebrated. It’s not exactly an allegory of God’s love – we don’t have to try and find equivalents of all the different things mentioned in this poem – but it is a way of expressing that we worship a God who has love at the very heart of his relationship with us. John and Val have celebrated their forty years of loving commitment this morning. As those who follow Jesus Christ, we can celebrate the love of God in our worship, in our lives and in our own relationships, because his love (as our final hymn will affirm) is a love that excels all other loves. Enjoy it!