

Sundays between 28 August and 3 September, Ordinary 22 Year B

We are now in 'Ordinary Time' again – that time of the Christian Year when (so we might believe) nothing extra-ordinary happens. Is it time for God's summer break? Or ours? In fact it's neither, of course.

Being in Ordinary Time means that we have both Continuous and Related Old Testament readings.

Continuous

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

This strange little book needs some explanation. On the face of it, we have here an extended and erotic love-duet. What place can there be in Holy Scripture for such a poem?

Almost uniquely in the Bible, here is a window into the private, domestic, affectionate lives of ordinary people, the way they saw themselves and each other. Its perspective is remarkable feminine, and nowhere does God get a mention.

It might be helpful to see Songs of Songs (as it is alternatively known) as a feminine counterpart to the very masculine stance of the book that immediately precedes it – Ecclesiastes.

Who wrote this book? It seems rather unlikely that Solomon was responsible, given his strongly masculine outlook on life. But as he sponsored a large court including a considerable number of wives, it is quite possible that one of his female retinue created this contribution to his library. On the other hand, this might be a case of honorific attribution: here is a work that was valued by the scribes; why not link it to the name of the king whose reputation included generous sponsorship of the arts?

Whatever lies behind the book, we have no difficulty in reading this as an eagerly anticipated assignation between lovers. But it is not simply a saucy story. Hidden here are hints of the tension between human and divine love in our lives. Love is fun, no doubt, but there is also a summons to commitment. One commentator talks of people who 'play hide and seek with God's calling'. One question that we might ponder is this: what is the relation between the rising sense of excitement at the prospect of the lover's coming, and our mood as we turn our thoughts to God?

Psalms 45:1-2, 6-9

There are fleeting glimpses here of the same sentiments we have found on the Song of Solomon. The King is being praised in terms that are close to the erotic. And there is the clue, for this is a royal psalm, composed in celebration of the wealth and personal attributes of Solomon.

Related

Deut 4:1-2, 6-9

The book of Deuteronomy can be viewed as a collection of addresses by Moses to the Children of Israel as they begin their settlement of the land of plenty. Historically this is improbable, but it may not be far from the truth, in that this book consolidates the commandments of God into a form appropriate for a settled people, as opposed to a nomadic tribe.

The writer reminds the people of the inner integrity of the commandments; they are not open to human variation (verse 2). They are not about reasoned legal arguments; rather they are the directive of God.

Complete obedience to these commandments will signal to the world at large the integrity of God's own people. They will be seen to take God with the utmost seriousness in all aspects of their community life. And the watching world will surely take note of the intimacy of the relationship between Israel and her God.

The final paragraph reminds the people of the possibility that their commitment to this project might waver. Is this a hint of disasters and apostasies to come? Or is it simply a reminder that sometimes the journey of faith takes a level of commitment that isn't always convenient. Are there not, here, echoes of the Methodist Covenant Service? *Christ has many services to be done; some are suitable to our own inclinations and natural interests; others are contrary to both.* When they are 'suitable', discipleship is easy. When they are 'contrary' – that's when commitment takes on real meaning.

Ps 15

There is a resonance here with the sentiments of Deuteronomy. *Who may rest upon your holy hill? Who may spend endless time in God's intimate presence, on the spiritual mountaintops?* The psalmist is in no doubt. The life of transparent honesty, truth-speaking and faithfulness to his word – neglect of these will certainly make the life of holiness and holy delight unattainable.

Epistle Jas 1:17-27

The letter of James resembles in many ways the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. It is full of practical advice and guidance. It is about doing rather than being, action rather than high-flown thoughts.

James enjoins generosity (verse 17) and reticence (verses 19, 20). The life of pure contemplation does not figure in his scheme of things. To ponder the word is fine *so long as it results in lifestyle commitment.* That is the way the implanted word saves souls (verse 21).

Gospel Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

One of the characteristics of Jesus' ministry was impatience with the purely formal. Much later in history, ritual cleanliness turned out to have immense practical benefits, when hand hygiene was discovered to ward off cholera.

Even now, as we face a pandemic of swine flu, hand hygiene is understood to be of critical importance in limiting transmission of disease. But that is not the agenda here. Rather, the concern with hand-washing was about meeting certain strict requirements of ritual purity before doing anything. The particularly religious people of the time observed these rules as if their lives depended on it – because in their understanding that was indeed the case. Jesus, however, was deeply troubled by the way this obsession with the formalities of religion could sit comfortably with a blatant disregard of simple humanity, helpful neighbourly conduct towards others whose life-circumstances did not afford them the luxury of time to give priority to these arcane matters. So it was a central part of his teaching ministry to lay siege to this ‘purity’ obsession, to challenge it and redirect energies and creativity towards care and mutual helpfulness.