

Today, let us sing the praises of the courageous and fearless warriors of God, those who do their Christian duty and then go one step more, boldly treading the extra mile heedless of the danger or the personal cost. Though today we celebrate the feast of St Mary Magdalene, those women and men of faith the church has declared to be the saints are not the ones I wish to pick out for special praise. Think a little closer to home. And no, not the flower ladies- their praise is constant, entirely merited, and never extracted with threats and menaces. Have I got that right? Will you let him go now? Anyway, not the saints, not the flower arrangers, the brave souls I want to eulogise today are those who have put all thought of personal peril to one side for the greater good and have put themselves on the rota... to read the lesson in Church.

Yes, reading in church is an activity fraught with risk, a ride through the rapids where the hapless orator is only ever seconds away from disaster, teetering on a tightrope, tip-toeing over the abyss.

Step up to the lectern and you are exposing to fierce public scrutiny your funny accent, your verbal eccentricities and the skills of your optician, and believe me, love your neighbour or not, about half of any church congregation is hovering like hawks ready to pounce on any unclarity of diction, any hesitation or perish the thought, failure to speak up. Because of course it's your fault, not the PA system or their lack of a hearing aid. Mispronouncing words is commonplace- I've yet to hear a reading of I Corinthians 13 where somebody actually says prophesy. Saying names wrong can be excruciating (though it's likely only one or two people in church will know the correct pronunciation and even if you did use it, everybody else would think you'd got it wrong anyway); getting the wrong reading happens more often than you might imagine, trying not to giggle can be a Herculean task and bursting into fits of uncontrollable laughter does happen. Even if you enunciate crisply, pronounce everything right, avoid inadvertently saying any rude words, and keep a perfectly straight face throughout, you're a long way from out the woods yet.

It's not just the harsh words of your fellow worshippers and their funny looks you have to fear (and no, they don't *always* look like that): you are often your own worst enemy if you, reader, gentle soul that you are, succumb to embarrassment. As soon as you capitulate to embarrassment you will first revert back to your childhood incomprehensible regional accent, then start to falter and stumble, stutter and mumble. And then the vocal vultures will swoop. Unfortunately, as anyone who has

ever picked up a Bible will know, occasions for embarrassment in the scriptures are legion. Some Bible readings are just immensely embarrassing to read out in public.

Now, mostly the people who decide what we will be reading each Sunday keep the cheek-reddeners out of the limelight: so we usually skip over St Paul's rants about gays or women, Sirach's somewhat archaic ideas of what a good wife should be, or indeed some of the more, shall we say , polyamorous outings of the patriarchs. Those passages tend to stay safely locked away out of public hearing. After all, they're just passages here and there and nobody really notices that we're not reading them. It is more difficult though to pretend that an entire book of the Bible isn't there, and so as any public lector will tell you, when it does come round in the lectionary— as it did today— nothing is more embarrassing to read in public than pretty much any passage from the Song of Solomon.

Now today although the passage we've heard occasioned some mild squirming, we've been let off lightly. Although the language is florid, there were no romping gazelles and young stags, no cheeks like pomegranates and nobody's breasts were mentioned which is surprising because for some reason those appendages do figure quite a lot in this book. Even the bits of the Song of Songs that aren't either too, erm, lyrical or too, aha, physical can be almost uncomfortably passionate. The wedding season is upon us and though it is highly appropriate, rare is the couple that choose the possible reading for their nuptials from the Song of Songs.

*“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it”*

Now, throughout the history of Christianity we have approached the embarrassment of this book by clutching at the prudish straw of saying that this is a poem that talks about the soul's yearning for God. Yeah. Right. I don't think so. The Song of Songs is not a poem about the soul's love for God, it's a poem about human love, and human sexual love at that. Of course it's fine to interpret it allegorically— it's fine and good to interpret all the Bible allegorically— but with this book we have- there's no other word for it- 'erotica' right there pretty much smack bang in the middle of the Bible.

As it should be. Despite being a bit embarrassing to read out in public the Song of Solomon is an important book of the Bible. It's important because its subject matter is one of almost universal perennial human concern, a subject which encompasses everything from some of the strongest, most intense emotions many of us will ever

feel, to how we order our lives and our households; from our position in society to how we perceive and esteem ourselves. And, unlike so many other times when the Scriptures touch upon the subject, the Song of Songs is not about guilt. It's not about what you shouldn't do. It's not about how to punish people who do what you think they shouldn't do. It's not about what's allowed and what isn't, who's allowed to love and who's not. To put it simply it's not about 'not.' It's about love: human, passionate and physical.

So, why is this book in the Bible? It's there because in its exploration of human love, it can teach us something about God.

First, let us get one thing out of the way. The protagonists in the Song of Song are male and female. Most- though not all- of the lovers in the Bible are. That's not because God is especially hung up on binary thinking, but because the human writers of the Bible were limited by their experience (as we all are) in the ways they could conceive of love. They were limited. Happily, God is not.

So, the love poem that is the Song of Solomon teaches us about God by teaching us about God's affirmation of human love, and his affirmation of it in all its fleshy, wobbly, squishy bodiliness. The Song of Songs is not an embarrassed declaration of chaste affection. It's spicier stuff. It reminds us that God stepped back looked at his creation and saw that it was good. It reminds us that when, at the incarnation, God took upon himself human flesh, he took upon himself all the potential that flesh represents- the ecstasies as well as the agonies. It tells us that love that takes a physical expression is very much love and love is always of God. It reminds us that those emotions which can be among the most intense we can experience can be part of being human, part of God's aim for us- that we may have life and life in abundance. We are in the flesh, and the flesh is not something to be hated, but something, sometimes, to be celebrated. It may be that as St Paul says, we will grow into spiritual bodies, but those bodies are sown as material seeds, we are forged in the flesh. The Song of Songs teaches us about God by pointing to his purpose and his presence in his creation, even in the steamier parts.

Christian legend has cast Mary Magdalene whose feast day we celebrate today in the role of repentant woman of negotiable virtue, though she does sometimes seem to be confused with Mary of Bethany- the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears and hair. Perhaps she was the same woman, perhaps they were separate women both from the oldest profession. Jesus was ridiculed by his contemporaries for keeping the

company of 'those kinds of people' so he no doubt knew more than one. And he kept their company. And refused to condemn them.

Now, although the Song of Solomon strongly affirms the potential physicality of human love, whatever else it is, it's not *Love for Sale*. Love can have its physical expression, but not all physical expressions are love; sometimes they are scratching a genetic itch, sometimes they are economic transactions and sometimes they are exploitation, domination and subjugation.

At its finest, at its most noble, and yes, sometimes at its most physical, the love of one human for another is love reaching back to its source, love reaching out to God, love mirroring the love of the creator for his creature, a pale reflection perhaps, in a glass darkly, but still a likeness. It is humanity starting to grasp the length and depth and height of what being made in God's image means, humanity starting to understand the holiness that inheres in God's image, humanity for once rendered speechless by the sheer potential goodness and godliness it has inherited. Human love is an opportunity to glimpse the love divine in a way we can both understand without trying and can never satisfactorily describe no matter how hard we try.

I'm going to end what I have to say with a short passage of the scriptures which is both a two-line summary of the Song of Solomon and the key to understanding the entirety of the scriptures and indeed the whole of the Christian faith. It's from St John's first letter.

*Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

Fr Andrew Fenby 2018