

Extraordinary Music Workshops - Krakow - August 2022

II - The Lover to the Beloved

In the opening paragraphs of *Desiderio Desideravi*, Pope Francis writes: "We may not even be aware of it, but every time we go to Mass, the first reason is that we are drawn there by his desire for us. For our part, the possible response — which is also the most demanding asceticism — is, as always, that surrender to this love, that letting ourselves be drawn by him."

Thus in the Song of Songs, the Bride, the Beloved, sings: "Draw me after you, let us run after the fragrance of your perfumes." (1:2) In my first talk I have spoken of the love song of creation that God creates and holds in being by his love. The Liturgy, too, is God's love song being sung for his Bride the Church. So, although it is tempting and even commonplace to think of the *leitourgias* as the people's work, and therefore as that which we can do for God, which we can give to God, in fact our response demands less active creativity on our part, and more of an actual participation in God's work for us. We are called, like St Mary of Bethany, to choose the better part, and so in humility as disciples to be receptive, contemplative, and ascetical. As the Pope says, we are invited to surrender to God's love, and so to let his Word be done unto us, as the Blessed Virgin Mary said to St Gabriel. And then, at the heart of Scripture is this little text, a love song between God and his Beloved.

So, if the Liturgy and evangelisation is about being attracted to Christ and his Gospel, if it is, as Pope Francis says, about "letting ourselves be drawn by" God, then in this talk today, I invite us to pause and ponder the revelation of God's love in Scripture. Today we consider again God's desire, his thirst for souls, for you, calling us to himself. As Ezekiel revealed, God "desires not the death of the wicked, but let him turn from his wicked ways and live." (cf Eze 33:11) In music and song, we can express something of this desire of divine love, for only the Lover sings. And in our singing, we can stir up devotion, arouse the love that every human soul and every creature has for God.

I recall: One of my favourite pieces by Palestrina is his sublime setting of *Sicut cervus*. I know the tenor line by heart, so at one Easter Vigil in Oxford, I sang it from memory, allowing the music and words to move me and to draw out of me my love and devotion for God. Yes, my soul thirsts for God and desires him! And this realisation, and the knowledge on Easter night of God's love for me, coupled with the flowing lines of polyphony with the repeated "*Ad Te Deus*" simply moved me to tears of longing and desire right there in the middle of singing the motet during Mass!

Fittingly, our singing and our songs respond to the love of God that is enshrined in a little book situated in the middle of the Bible. Only 117 verses long, and consisting of 1251 words – it is shorter than this talk! – it is nevertheless esteemed by saints and mystics and theologians. Origen said that it “lifts to its height the great fundamental image [of divine revelation]”, and Henri de Lubac held that “this little book is in fact taken from one end to the other as expressing the heart of the revelation everywhere diffused in the Scriptures”. Its name, the Song of Songs, speaks of its importance, for this name is a Hebraism meaning ‘the greatest song’.

As we have seen, song implies love, since “only the lover sings”, and so, this greatest song sings of the greatest love of all, and indeed is sung by the greatest Lover, God. And that fact – that God is love and that He loves us – is at the heart of divine revelation. It is no accident that both Jewish and Christian traditions have had such a high regard for the Song of Songs, for in its pages, we catch a glimpse of the divine love of God for the human soul, the Beloved. Origen thus says: “This little book I take to be an epithalamium, that is, a marriage song, written by Solomon and done in the manner of a drama. He sings it as if he were a bride at her wedding burning with heavenly desire for her bridegroom, who is the Word of God. For the bride desired him very deeply – whether she is identified as the soul that is made after his image or as the Church. This very same Scripture also teaches us what words this glorious and perfect Bridegroom used when he addressed the soul or Church that has been joined to him.”

Modern Scripture scholars who are more reticent about authorship tell us that the Song of Songs, attributed to Solomon but probably dating to the 4th-5th century BC, is a collection of love songs or poems that was selected as one of five scrolls that were to be read during the Jewish Passover, which indicates both an early reception as a canonical text and also its importance. The text is also well-known for its sensuality and descriptions of erotic love, and that is certainly the naturalistic reading of the text, but it is not its primary or literal meaning. For, as the Catechism reminds us, the literal meaning of a text gives due attention to “what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.” The Song of Songs’s place in the canon of Scripture indicates that fairly early on, the text was read symbolically, and this is a fact that several modern Scripture scholars have problems with, so that there is a tendency to disregard “traditional interpretations” of the Song of Songs. But that would be a grave error, for Vatican II reminds us of three criteria for interpreting Scripture. The first is to be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Bible. The second is to read Scripture within the living Tradition of the whole Church and finally we should be attentive to the coherence of the truths of our faith. Therefore, the fact that virtuous Jews and saintly Christians have consistently read the

Song of Songs as an poem of God's love is crucial to an authentic appreciation of the inspired text.

So, although it is commonplace nowadays to think that the primary meaning of the Song of Songs is a celebration of human love and nuptiality, I would contend that this is not its primary or literal sense as Scripture. The experience of the Jewish-born scholar, André Chouraqui is interesting because he places the Song of Songs in its Jewish context. He says: "Since early childhood, I heard the Song of Songs chanted on the ancient rhythms that inspired the Gregorian. While I was a child, I was imbued, every Friday night, with the fervour that filled our beautiful synagogue... during the evening office as it started with the recitation of the Poem introducing the liturgies of the Sabbath. Men, women, children were singing this text or listening to it as if in ecstasy. It was indeed a sacred text, a transcendent song. Nobody ever imagined that there could be in it anything obscene, trivial or even carnal... Being transparent it was welcomed into the transparency of pure hearts. It was understood in reference to the Bible, to the love of *Adonai* for creation, for his people, for each one of his creatures. We were too carried away by the great and powerful current of Hebrew thought to see in the poem anything but the song of absolute love, on the heights of loftiest revelations. Strange as it is, it remains true that for over two thousand years, the Jews never saw in the Shulamite anything but a symbol, that of Israel; in the King, anything but a reference to God; in the love uniting them, anything but the revelation of the mystery of divine love."

Similarly, St Gregory the Great argued that "allegory... devises, for the sake of the soul that is far removed from God, a stratagem that will elevate it to God... For in the simple act of not rejecting what is familiar and known, it apprehends something that is unknown. The divine teachings, after all, are clothed in things that are familiar to us, the things out of which allegories are made; and as we consider the exterior words, we achieve an interior discernment. Hence it is that in the Song of Songs... words are set down that pertain to bodily love, so that the soul, wakened anew out of its listless state by language to which it is accustomed, may heat up and may by the language of a lesser love be aroused to a higher. For in this book kisses are mentioned, breasts are mentioned, cheeks are mentioned, the loins are mentioned; and the holy picture these words paint is not meant for mockery or laughter. Rather ought we to focus our minds upon the greater mercy of God. We must notice how marvellously and mercifully, in making mention of parts of the body and thus summoning us to love, he works with us; for he reaches down to the vocabulary of our sensual love in order to set our heart on fire, aiming to incite us to a holy loving. Indeed, by the act in which he lowers himself in words he also elevates our understanding; for from the words associated with this sensual love we learn how fiercely we are to burn with love for the Divine."

St Gregory was well aware that some people might not be elevated to the higher, spiritual meaning of the words, and that they might be bogged down by the sensual love described in the Song of Songs. Certainly, there are many in our time who refuse to see the more profound allegorical meaning of the text, and they consider it to be simply a celebration of marital or even simply sexual human relations. St Gregory warns against this: "We must come to these sacred nuptials of the Bridegroom and the Bride with the understanding proper to interior love—come, that is, dressed in a wedding garment: lest if we are not attired in a wedding garment, we be cast out of the wedding feast into the outer darkness, the blindness of ignorance... For it is the same with the words and meanings of sacred Scripture as it is with the colours and subjects of a painting; and anyone who is so intent upon the colours of in the painting that he ignores the real things it portrays is immeasurably silly. For if we embrace the words, which are spoken externally, and disregard their meanings, as if knowing nothing of the things that are portrayed, we are clinging to the mere colours. "The letter kills," it is written, "but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6)."

Of all the Scriptural images concerning God's relationship with his beloved People, those whom he has chosen and called to himself, the one with the most venerable lineage is the nuptial image. The image of Israel as Bride was, as the English Dominican fr Geoffrey Preston OP notes, "rooted in the Old Testament and developed in the New Testament and by the Fathers" and thus they came to apply it to the Church, the new Israel of God. And so, following in this Jewish tradition, the Fathers of the Church and the mystics understood that the primary meaning of the Song of Songs was not the glory of human love, as such, but the glory of God's passionate love and desire for the human soul, and consequently the reflection of this divine love seen in the love of man and woman, husband and wife. It is this fundamental revelation that St Paul came to reflect upon and which led him to say to the Ephesians: "'A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church". Therefore, when we speak of the revelation of the Church – that is, the chosen People of God – as Bride and of Christ as Bridegroom, it is this divine love and marriage relationship that comes first. Following on from God's love is our love so that Christian marriage is a symbol of the Church and her marriage bond with Christ; marriage, as we know it, depends on the love that God has for humanity and is an image of that revelation of love. Pope Benedict XVI puts it far better than I when he says in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est* that "From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfil its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship

between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love."

The Song of Songs, then, is about God's love portrayed in the vivid colours and striking language of human bodily love. In a sense, it points to the incarnation of Christ who is God's love made human, bodily, so that he could communicate with us in our human language. In Jesus Christ, God and humanity is reconciled, united and the love of God and humanity is consummated. For the incarnate Son of God is the living sign of how much God loves and desires humankind. As St John says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

The Song of Songs, then, is ultimately about God's love for the individual human soul, so it is a song God sings to each of us individually and which invites our personal response. We are invited to make our own the words of the Beloved. I have only been able to quickly skim over the fundamental theology that underlies the Song of Songs and how it has been understood in Jewish and Christian tradition. At this juncture, I ought to move on and draw your attention to a few select passages from the Song of Song, so as to give you a taste of how the Fathers have read this sacred text, and hopefully it will encourage you to use this text for your 'lectio divina'.

The Song of Songs opens with the following words uttered by the Beloved, or the Bride: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth". And so, it starts with desire, longing, passion. It is the passion of the soul for the Lover, for God. St John of the Cross considers that the first verse contains "all the waiting, all the desire, of the Old Testament ardently expecting the messiah." Origen says, that while the Jews received God's messages of love through prophets and kings, now in our time, the Bridegroom himself, Jesus Christ, has come, and so he exclaims: "No, let him not speak to me through his servants, angels or prophets! Let him come himself and kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" The Fathers of the Church have read in this passage a glimpse of the Trinity. The one addressed and implored is the Father, for he is the source and origin of love. The mouth is his only Son who is the Word who reveals the Father. The Holy Spirit is the kiss that the mouth of the beloved Son imprints forever on our hearts, for the Spirit is the love of Father and Son which is poured into our hearts. 4th-century Fathers of the Church went on to say that the longing of the soul is fulfilled or consummated in the Eucharist. St Cyril said that "when the body of Christ will touch your lips, then the wish of the Bride will be fulfilled for you: let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! The unity of love in the Spirit is then consummated."

Charlie Cleverly, who was Rector of the Anglican church of St Aldates in Oxford, has written a beautiful book-length meditation on the Song of Songs, and he observes that

“all eight chapters of the Song unfold the implications related to the divine kiss. Her lover’s kisses are the theme of the Bride’s life; it is also the theme of everyone who seeks God, to know him deeply and to be known.” To be kissed by God, then, is to long to be made whole by God, to be united to him in love. St Bernard of Clairvaux says that the kiss of God is thus “a fertile kiss... a marvel of self-abasement that is not a mere pressing of mouth upon mouth; it is the uniting of God with man.”

We kiss God in return when we love and adore him. For if, through the Eucharist, God loves us and kisses us, then in the beautiful practice of Eucharistic Adoration, we love and kiss God. I recall fr Timothy Radcliffe OP saying somewhere that we can think of the English word ‘adore’ as being made from the Latin phrase ‘ad ore’, to the mouth, and so when we adore the Eucharist, we are going, so to speak, mouth to mouth with God, kissing him. It is a striking image even if the etymology is somewhat fanciful. Nevertheless, it makes the point well that the One whom we encounter and receive in the Holy Mass, who kisses us, should be kissed in return through adoration. Hence, I have stressed to the musicians at my church in London that the aim of sacred music and our liturgical actions is to lead people to adore the Lord God. Thus we have daily Adoration in the Rosary Shrine to give our people this opportunity to kiss God, and indeed, to be enveloped in the silence that, as I noted in the first talk, signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit. So Pope Benedict XVI says: “In life today, noisy and dispersive, it is more important than ever to recover the capacity for inner silence and recollection. Eucharistic adoration permits this not only centred on the ‘I’ but more so in the company of that ‘You’ full of love who is Jesus Christ, ‘the God who is near to us’.”

It is worth noting, too, I think that God kisses us not only in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For God has “sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins”, and as I said earlier, the kiss of God is the Holy Spirit. So, in the confessional, God kisses us and the Holy Breath of God, as it were, gives us mouth to mouth to spiritually resuscitate us and raise us up from the spiritual zombie state that is life in a state of mortal sin. Or consider the Father embracing the Prodigal Son when he returned to him. Did he not embrace and kiss his lost son?

Moving along to 2:4, we read: “He has taken me to his banquet hall, and the banner he raises over me is love.” The banquet hall is literally the house of wine (*Beth-Hayyain*) and we are reminded perhaps of the wine of the Eucharist, of the wedding banquet of the Lamb, of which the Mass is a foretaste. So, the Church Father Theodoret of Cyrillus says: “In consuming the flesh of the beloved (symbolized by the fruit 2:3) and his blood (symbolized by the wine), we enter into nuptial communion.” And so, the language is not only eucharistic but also linked to marriage. The banner in 2:4 is a translation of the word *degel* which is military standard or even an army, just as the colours of a military

regiment stands for the regiment itself. St Jerome's Latin Bible translates this word *degel* as 'exercitus' which is an army. More interestingly, he says that the army is not set 'above' or 'over' me but 'against' me. And so, we have "his army against me is love".

What could this mean? St Bernard says that the Bride who has been brought into the banquet house and drunk the wine of love has become intoxicated and succumbed completely to love. And so, the Jesuit exegete Blaise Arminjon says that "The God of the armies has, in the last analysis, only one weapon. It is neither thunder, nor the sword of justice... It is love. God does not conquer our hearts except through the excess of love", which intoxicates us. And so in 2:5, the Bride says that she is "wounded with love".

And so, we find that because God has made us drunk on his love, his goodness, his wisdom, so then, we are wounded by his love. One who is so wounded by love longs for and desires God. As Origen says: "If anyone, one day, has been pierced with the dart of love to the extent that later on, day and night, he sighs with desire and knows nothing else, wants nothing else, is attracted by nothing else except to desire it, want it and hope for it, such a one can rightly say: 'I am wounded with love'". Thus we are recalled to the opening words of the Song of Songs. This notion of being wounded by love reminds me of a wonderful lecture given by Joseph Ratzinger back in 2002 at Rimini. He spoke of the power of beauty, and specifically music, to awaken the soul and to rouse it from its existential slumbers, and to give us an insight into the truth of the Christian Faith by filling the soul with longing and desire. This he called being wounded by the arrow of beauty, an image he takes from the 14th-century Byzantine theologian Cabasilas. Ratzinger, citing him, says: "'When men have a longing so great that it surpasses human nature, and [they] eagerly desire and are able to accomplish things beyond human thought, it is the Bridegroom who has smitten them with this longing. It is he who has sent a ray of his beauty into their eyes. The greatness of the wound already shows the arrow which has struck home, the longing indicates who has inflicted the wound'" (cf. *The Life in Christ, the Second Book*, 15)." So, says, Ratzinger, "the beautiful wounds, but this is exactly how it summons man to his final destiny", which is union with God who is Beauty. So Ratzinger says: "True knowledge is being struck by the arrow of Beauty that wounds man, moved by reality, "how it is Christ himself who is present and in an ineffable way disposes and forms the souls of men" for "Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction." Ratzinger then makes a plea for beauty in our time, and if we consider much of the sacred art and architecture of the Church in recent times, we can see how necessary his words are. He says: "Of course we must not underrate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought; it remains absolutely necessary. But to move from here to disdain or to reject the impact

produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time." Sacred music, therefore, which must be beautiful, plays an important part in the Sacred Liturgy. It has the power to wound us with beauty, and indeed, with love which leads to adoration. Thus Pope Francis said in *Desiderio Desideravi*, "Beauty, just like truth, always engenders wonder, and when these are referred to the mystery of God, they lead to adoration."

But before this longing of the soul for God, do we realise just how much God longs for us and loves us? As St Paul says, "God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our sins, raised us to life together with Christ." (Eph 2:4-5) And so God desires to save us from all that would defile us through his Incarnation and the Sacraments of the Church. This idea is expressed in 1:5, "I am black but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem." Origen says that one is of "low status by birth", born in the state of original sin, but nevertheless, he writes "I possess a beauty that is properly my own. For in me what is most elemental and deep-seated is that which has been made after the image of God; and now by drawing near to the Word of God I have recovered my beautiful appearance." How marvellous is this idea that despite our sinful condition, God still desires our salvation, and so he draws us to himself to restore to us the beauty that was marred by sin. So Origen goes on to say that the Beloved, the soul, is "beautiful because of her faith and her penitence. For I have appropriated the Son of God within myself, I have received the Word made flesh." St Gregory of Nyssa, likewise, says that this line shows that despite our sins, we are still "deemed worthy of beauty; and further that Christ came into the world to make dark ones bright, not by calling the righteous to himself, but calling sinners to repentance".

So, in 1:15 the Bridegroom says repeatedly to the Bride: "Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold you are beautiful", and she echoes this in the following verse: "Behold you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely". Pause and recall that it is God who first says this to you. Very often, we are so conscious of our sins, our unworthiness, our many silly mistakes and infidelities that we cannot believe that God would say this to me. Surely, we think, it is meant for someone else, someone immaculately pure like Our Lady? But the whole point is that we humans are never worthy of God's love, even when our first parents were in a state of innocence. Rather, God simply and, in his own wisdom, loves us and desires to kiss us and draw us to himself. So St Bernard of Clairvaux says: "for the Word to say to the soul, 'You are beautiful', and to call her 'Friend' is to impart that which empowers her to love and to know that she is loved. But for her, in response, to call the Word 'Beloved' and to confess that he is 'beautiful' is to give him, truthfully and sincerely, the credit for her loving and being loved. It is to marvel at his kindness and to

wonder at his grace." Often, if we are lost in our own miseries, which is a kind of self-centredness, we can fail to recognise the kindness, the mercy, the wonders of God's grace. But the one who knows the love of God can break forth into song, for only the Lover sings. Hence in chapter 2:10 of the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom says: "Rise up, hasten, my beloved, my dove, my beautiful one, and come! For already the winter is past... The season of glad songs has come." Yes, for the redeemed of God, 'Alleluia' is our song.

Finally, time permits me just to end by noting a refrain in the Song of Songs that sums it up: "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine." (2:16; 6:3) This is the expression of the covenant that we find in the prophets – "They shall be my people and I shall be their God" – and again in the Gospels – "I know my sheep and my own know me." It is the song of reciprocal love between God and us, although our response will always be inadequate to match the depth of divine love. And this is the wonder of God's love, that he who has no need of us should desire us, as it says at 7:10, "I am my Beloved's and his desire is for me"! And so, we return again to the basic theme of desire and longing, of the passion that God first has for us so that we might love him in turn. As St John put it: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:10)

Origen said about the Song of Songs that, "located in the middle of the Bible, the Song lifts to its height the fundamental image, going from the first chapters of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation: mankind has become the bride of God." This is the heart of God's revelation, a revelation of love and desire that took flesh in Christ, and it is the revelation of divine love that is at the heart of the Song of Songs. It is fitting that God's love is revealed to us as a song, and fitting that when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the angelic choir should sing of God's glory. Indeed, from the moment of the Annunciation, in St Luke's Gospel, the characters break out into song as though in a musical, for they cannot hold back their joy and love for the God who has "done great things for" us. As singers and musicians, we join this great chorus in the musical – the drama – of salvation that is enacted in the Sacred Liturgy. Yet Pope Francis reminds us that "The Liturgy gives glory to God not because we can add something to the beauty of the inaccessible light within which God dwells (cf. 1 Tim 6:16). Nor can we add to the perfection of the angelic song which resounds eternally through the heavenly places. The Liturgy gives glory to God because it allows us — here, on earth — to see God in the celebration of the mysteries, and in seeing him to draw life from his Passover. We, who were dead through our sins and have been made be alive again with Christ — we are the glory of God. By grace we have been saved (Eph 2:5)."

Therefore, saved by the Divine Lover from sin and death, how can we love our Saviour? By singing the New Song. So St Augustine says: "Now it is your unquestioned desire to sing of him whom you love, but you ask me how to sing his praises. You have heard the words: Sing to the Lord a new song, and you wish to know what praises to sing. The answer is: His praise is in the assembly of the saints; it is in the singers themselves. If you desire to praise him, then live what you express. Live good lives, and you yourselves will be his praise".