

Trinity - 24 June 2018
Readings: SS 1:1-2:2 & Ge 2:15-25
'True Romance'

A weird book

- *Song of Songs* one of weirdest books in Bible.
 - For start, doesn't explicitly mention God. Though may be implicit reference at end of book, not obvious, and certainly not *clearly obvious*, which kind of weird in Bible, given book not only about God but by God. But at first glance, seems like just decided to sit this one out. That weird.
 - Secondly, not about any of things books of Bible normally about, e.g. history of Israel, life of Jesus, salvation of world, etc. Not even book of good advice: *Proverbs* or *Ecclesiastes*. Doesn't tell to *do* anything. Rather, just love poem, which listen in on. Let tell basically how *Song of Songs* works.
 - Love poem written as duet. Two main characters: man (who seems to be a shepherd, 1:7) and woman (identified as 'Shulammitte', 6:13), and crazy for each other. *Song of Songs* basically eight chapters of back and forth between these two about how much love each other.
 - Other people get referred to: mothers, brothers, watchmen, 'women of Jerusalem', and Solomon. And 'friends' chime in from time to time like chorus, occasionally asking man or woman question which then drives next bit of song forward. But none these figures play anything more than peripheral role. Focus front-and-centre on shepherd and his Shulammitte: for passionate, one-eyed, frankly fairly racy love for each other. This song - greatest song, 'song of songs' - about passion of two lovers. As such, doesn't seem to fit in Bible at all. How get in?
 - Thirdly, *Song of Songs* is tastefully but explicitly sexual. Not just love poem, erotic love poem. Piece of erotica. Put another way: if wrote stuff in *Song of Songs* in love letter to *your* boyfriend of girlfriend, and mum found it, never be able to look at her again. This, combined with fact Bible doesn't normally write love poems and God normally gets mention in own book, done Jewish and then Christian heads in for 3000yrs. Bent over *backwards* to make *Song of Songs* something other than erotic love song. Jewish interpreters got long history of reading as allegory, with man as God, woman as Israel, and love between as covenant love of God for nation. Christians taken same line, just replaced church for Israel. Sometimes, gone to amazing lengths to interpret way. **III - Cyril of Alexandria, 5thC theologian, on 1:13 - 'My beloved to me is a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts' - said one breast OT, other NT, sachet Christ!** Funny, but common way to take it. Because how else do take? Such odd book to be in Bible, hard to know what to make of.
- But actually, want to say *Song of Songs* exactly where belongs, in Bible. Not mainly book about God and Israel or God and church. Mainly, book about man and woman and love for each other. But that love set in context of wider reality of male/female relationships, which in turn points toward wider story of God's relationship to us. In this sense, although in first instance book about two lovers, in wider sense book about gospel, and many interpreters taken this way. Therefore, book for everyone, whether married or single. Let's dive into + get taste for epically romantic sweep.

A passionate romance

- First thing to say about *Song of Songs*: passionately romantic.
- Listen to this selection of raptures for each other:
 - **1:2-4**. Woman leads off: clearly loves guy! Intoxicates all senses: kisses like wine (taste); scent like perfume (smell); even sound of name like fragrance (hearing). **1:12-14**. Loves shepherd so much like king to! When lying down together and head resting on chest, like sachet of royal perfume, like bunch of flowers from vineyard. Got thing for guy.
 - Feeling mutual! **1:9-11**. Now, may not take kindly to being called 'mare' but point here *loves* her: beautiful, like part of royal train; gorgeous, like gold + jewels gorgeous. After while, runs out of puff + all can say, 'beautiful': **1:15**. All she can say, too: **1:16**. One of great love poems of human literature.
- Could go on to give other examples, but get point. Fact is: love each other, and not just in act-of-will-decided-to-set-love-upon-you way. *Passionately* love each other, with butterflies in stomachs. Notice: poetry about this sort of love made into Bible. Almost as if God approves of it. Romantic love good gift from God.
- **App - Christians often bit squeamish about romance, aren't? Especially men. Could be that just repressed males (Aussie or otherwise) and has nothing to do with being Christians. But could be that Christianity does have something to do with. So suspicious of fluffy, vacuous version of romance culture pedals that react by not being romantic at all, instead making love all about fidelity and duty rather than surprise picnics and bunches of flowers. As Christians, have so drilled into that love generally about *deeds*, not just *words*, that often leave out words altogether. But this couple don't leave out words. Can't shut up with words! Words just pour out! Woman tells man with absolute liberty how feels about. And man, who need to wait until 1:9 to hear from - so makes wonder how will respond - does exactly same. Nothing stoic or tough about; utterly open with. For all know, may be strong silent type when out in fields with mates, but all comes tumbling down when he within kissing-distance of her. Giddy as school boy. Notice how book never addresses us directly? As if not there. All lovers' attention directed to each other; just peering in on their intimacy. Lovely. Disconcerting: makes wonder when last spoke like this to wife or fiancé. If woman, may make wonder when last spoke like to husband or fiancé. Men actually like this, too. Always told romance man's job, but not. Both people's job. *Song of Songs* passionate love poem which opens + closes with woman's voice. If love someone, tell love.**
- Now, might say don't need to tell lover that love. 'Course knows love her, take out bins, don't I?' 'Course knows love him, raised four children.' But problem, may well do all those things for, and may still not know love. Because reality, can do all these things for very different reasons. May take out bins, or serve round house more generally, because love; but could be just because in habit or out of duty, or, worse, out of secret and bitter resentment. How will know difference? Tell. Tell them love them, and reason do things because love.
- But romance between man and woman in poem not just froth and bubble, bunches of roses and butterflies in tummies. Through centre of all gushing praise runs iron core of promises, which keep lovers together.
- **Ill - CS Lewis once observed that people in love can't seem to help selves from making promises to each other. Promises naturally gush out from romantic feelings. True, isn't? Listen to trashiest pop song or loveliest sonnet thing got**

in common promises: 'Only one. Never leave. Always love.' In real romances - ones take breath away - always promises at core.

- Exactly same here. Song come to end and time for woman (again) to deliver verdict on love and what says: **8:6-7** *'Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy as unyielding as the grave. It burns like fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned.'* Woman asks man to confirm undying commitment to; to set as 'seal' upon heart and arm. He is to be marked as hers, inside and out. Why? *Because it's in that commitment that passion finds its power:* it promise-making-and-keeping love that strong as death, hard as grave, hot as fire, priceless beyond all wealth. 'Make this promise to me', says woman, 'set me as seal on heart, and all waters in world won't sweep us away,' and man says, gladly, 'yes.' Romance says, 'Will love forever'. Love then does it. Romance is promise love keeps.
- Romance worth nothing without faithfulness: just bunch of un-kept promises. But promises kept by love - undying, constant, committed love - that worth more than everything own. *'Set me as seal over your heart, for love is as strong as death.'*

A resolute love

- *Song of Songs* passionate romance between two lovers but not *just* about these two lovers. Dig bit deeper, find book about all lovers; about human love generally.
- Over and over, song sets lovers in or compares to garden:
 - **4:12, 15** *'You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride . . . You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water.'*
 - **6:2** *'My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to gather lilies.'*
 - **8:13** *'You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice!'*
- Makes think of another man and woman, who also lived in garden, who also loved each other passionately and vulnerably - 'naked and not ashamed'; Adam and Eve. Makes think that, though *Song of Songs* describing one man and one woman's love for each other, way doing it meant to make think of all human, romantic love; love put together by God's design, just as God put Adam + Eve in garden together. Love has v. source in *God*: word at end of 8:6 lit 'flame of Yah.' Contraction of God's name Yahweh could just be intensifier - 'mighty flame' - but more likely reference to God self, whose love + jealousy - both mentioned in 8:6 - often compared to 'fire' in OT.
- This no accident. Because human romantic love picture of bigger love story whole world caught up in, one between God and people. *Song of Songs* not allegory: really is about man and woman, and men and women, and way love each other. But that reality - romantic love, and life-long, promise-keeping commitment it leads to that call marriage - picture that God placed in world to point towards ultimate reality, final fidelity, of God's love for us. How many times does God describe self as 'lover' towards people Israel? Why is that new creation described as wedding, and church as 'bride of Christ'? Not because God lit. loves romantically. But because romantic love, like all love, sign-post points to his love, love shown fully in gospel, in sending only Son to die for on cross. Just as romance promise love keeps, so gospel promise God keeps. In this sense, *Song of Songs* book for *everyone* because ultimately points to love of God *for* everyone. In that way, truly is *the* song of songs; best song ever.
- **App -**

- **If in romantic relationship - married engaged going out with someone - great! Thank God for that! But not be all and end all of life. Won't give final satisfaction in life, either, because never meant to. Rather, meant to be sign-post to point toward relationship *is* meant to give ultimate satisfaction in life, relationship with promise-keeping and ever loving God, who in romance given us rough sketch of love which in gospel see with photo realistic clarity. People sometimes say of couple, 'made for each other.' No not! Made for God, and will only find real joy - in selves, and with each other, incidentally - when realise that fact.**
- **If not in romantic relationship, let say this. May feel deep loneliness + sorrow at this. Love to have what man + woman of *Song* have, or even something like, with someone, and grieves that don't. What not going to tell: 'Don't feel, because God loves.' What not going to tell: 'Marriage not actually all cracked up to be, so don't feel too bad missed out.' Not going to do that because God doesn't do that. Romantic love good gift from God and when miss out on good thing grief right response. What am going to say loved, passionately, by God made. What am going to say God knows grief and grieves with. What am going to say that what missing out on now in part, will have in new creation in full. Romance is wonderful entrée; Christ is feast. Everyone invited to feast.**
- Let's pray.