

## Readings for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

1<sup>st</sup> September 2024

### First Reading: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look, there he stands behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;  
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

### Second Reading: James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, and they

do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?" Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

### **A Reflection for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

*From Rev'd David Higgon*

Poets and poetry often have the ability of conveying a deeper spiritual understanding of the mystery of God than the words of theologians, especially in expressing the intertwining of God with God's own creation. So, there is something deeply appropriate in beginning a Season of Creation with a reading from an early poem from the bible, the Song of Songs. This is a sensual song of love, that is utterly immersed in the cycles of seasons, the habitat of animals and flowers, and all their sights sounds and smells. This is Scripture which speaks to our imaginations and experiences as an intoxicating sensory overload.

"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

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and come away."

The Song of Songs is a love song where physical beauty is celebrated with elaborate imagery from the natural world. It is sensual poetry in the sense that all the senses are given full play, sight, sound, and touch, and where the physical world, of nature is exalted. It uses none of the words of religion and worship that you find in that other great collection of Old Testament poetry, the book of Psalms, but like the book of Psalms it overflows with references to nature, to the weather, birds, animals, trees, all expressing the fruitfulness that God commanded.

To the singer of this song, who in this part of the poem is voiced by a woman, the natural world is not used as a means of expressing a love of God or to worship God through an experience of the beauty of nature. Their love for each other is the expression of their worship of God, and the experience of the beauty of God's creation is then an expression of that love for each other that is in harmony with the living world.

It would be an odd thing to say to your partner, or close friend that, "I only love you as a means of loving God". How absurd would that sound. No, the lovers themselves will love God better for having loved one another, with a love that is enhanced with their connectedness with the abundance of the natural world around them.

So, The Song of Songs is an exuberant gift of poetic joyful exuberance, that expresses the togetherness of the lovers with the fruitful seasonality of nature. Contrast this our reading from Mark's Gospel that is preoccupation with "what defiles" human beings. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Everything good which delights us in Creation, is being threatened and 'messed up' on a catastrophic scale by what Jesus lists as evil and 'defiling'. And the source of this defiling lies with human beings. Sometimes the language of the bible can become a barrier to our understanding that the evil that Jesus was talking about was not just about our individual human nature, and our human relationships but is also about our relationship with our neighbours in creation. Words like "fornication", might better be replaced with the word "abuse" – to help us understand that the evil that defiles us as human beings, also defiles our relationship with the world around us.

These defiling attributes of humans that Jesus speaks of in Mark's Gospel are found at the heart of the crisis of climate change and global warming, and in the loss of natural habitats. Greed, avarice and deceit underlie many of the challenges we face; thousands of environmental activists who stood up against environmental abuse have been murdered in countries like Brazil, Mexico, Honduras, the Philippines and Colombia, with most of the murders going unpunished.

Natural resources are increasingly owned and controlled by the rich and powerful to the disadvantage of the weak and poor. Water is at the heart of creation, but the acute scarcity of water in places like the Middle East makes the region susceptible to being held hostage to those who control the sources and supply of water – a condition that is exacerbated by rising global temperatures, and this is affecting food security and migration patterns. Water is used to control and subdue people. The terrorist organisation ISIS were able to force people to join their organization through water deprivation; during their occupation of parts of Iraq and Syria, ISIS centralised the water supply under their command, and distributing them as they saw fit, often discriminated against Christian minorities in the territories they controlled.

Water is used as a form of control and coercion by Israel over the West Bank. By destroying Palestinian water sanitation structures, Palestinians are forced by Israel to accept hugely inflated water prices for water supplied from Israel. It is a strategy that both displaces West Bank residents and forces the remaining to accept Israeli control over the water supply.

While nature is beautiful and mysterious, it is also often menacing. It can be beautiful and terrifying at the same time, as those who in our world who know too well the terrifying forces of tropical storms and of the hurricanes season, and to the millions who are increasingly living with the uncertainty brought on by climate change and harmful pollution.

Yet in the midst of climate chaos, we are reminded of the beauty of Creation and of the love that is at the core of our relationship with creation. At the beginning of our Creation season, we can delight in the love of two lovers that is at the heart of the Songs of Songs. It is something that is worth defending. Love, after all is the best motivation for prayer and positive action.

Never be afraid, as a follower of Christ, to follow Jesus' advice to 'look at the birds'. We should never be embarrassed about relishing and savouring the joys of creation whether by immersing ourselves in the natural world or through poetry and music. After all, not one of us is strong enough to face today's challenges without some beauty, some comfort, some delight.