

God is Love

Deus caritas est - God is love. With these words Pope Benedict 16th on Boxing Day 2005 opened and entitled his first encyclical - or pastoral letter. The topic caught many - even close friends - by surprise. Here was the former strict watchdog for the purity of church doctrine [known by some of his critics as God's Rottweiler] - speaking not only about God's unconditional *agape* love but also about human erotic love. No other pope has ever made this a subject of an encyclical.

Benedict himself knew that this, his first important message to the world, would surprise many. So he immediately explains that in a world where there is violence in the name of God, it is important to re-affirm that God is love. In a world where a suicide bomber cries out *Alahu Akbar* [God is Great] before indiscriminately killing dozens of innocent bystanders and wounding many others, it is important to pause and consider the church's teaching on divine and human love.

There are two things that surprised me about Benedict's letter. The first is that in the entire encyclical he never mentioned his namesake Benedict of Nursia. Young Benedict, who lived in the 6th century, abandoned the affluence of his aristocratic home in Rome and moved into a cave. For three years, he lived only on bread, water, and whatever food people would bring him. In the cave he meditated and when he left it he founded a monastery where people lived as in the early church by sharing everything they possessed. Inspired by the earthly life of Christ, Benedict devised rules for regular silent meditation, chanting of prayers, and also for ministry to society's outcasts, to granting of hospitality to strangers, for working for the benefit of surrounding communities. Thus, Benedict then and the Benedictine monks today daily strive to live that God is love.

The second thing that surprised me in *Deus Caritas Est* is Pope Benedict's use of and interpretation of the Song of Song's. He does not spend much time on the book but spins its ancient but still very relevant message throughout his encyclical.

My first introduction to the Song of Songs came when I was in grade 8 in a Christian School in Edmonton. I was surprised because my father had the custom, after every family meal to read one chapter of the Bible and then say a prayer of thanksgiving. He would start at Genesis 1 and when he reached Revelations 22, he would start all over again. As far as I then knew there were only two exceptions. Since Psalm 117 had only two verses he would also read Psalm 118. But even the 176 verses of Psalm 119 were too much for him. He split them into tolerable sections. In grade 8, I found out that he also skipped the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon as it was then called.

One day, however, in our grade 8 Bible class, we boys noticed that the girls were passing around an open Bible and doing a lot of whispering and giggling. It was not long until one of the boys intercepted the Sacred Book and showed the rest of us the interesting passage where the lover describes his beloved's breasts.

Today, the Song of Songs still remains an obscure, seldom used book. I am sure that is because it just does not seem to fit into the sacred Canon. On the one hand, that is odd because the Old Testament is full of violence, sexual assault, and adultery. On the other hand, the Songs and their explicit approval of pre-marital sex and their vivid descriptions of the human body do not provide much material for the average Presbyterian sermon. Unless of course we do what the Hebrews did and what many Christians have done. We can spiritualise the Songs. We can explain the Songs by saying that they are an allegory - poetic language for something else than human love - for example, God and the people of Israel in the Old Testament and Christ and His Church in the New. This approach is useful in that it explains why the Songs are in the Bible in the first place.

But the failure to acknowledge that the Songs are erotic love poems means that we miss much of the beauty of the collection. Not only will we have to explain away many contradictions, but we may overlook the central message of the poet.

Today, most Biblical scholars prefer to take the Songs for what they really are. Simply put, they are a collection of love songs. Similar songs had been used in Canaan for centuries. Such love songs were either sung or recited at weddings. The Biblical Song of Songs is a collection of folk songs with many references to similar songs and even myths of Canaan. Viewing the Songs as a collection of poems celebrating human *eros* - erotic love - in this instance the love of a woman for a man - opens up a much wider appreciation of the poems than does a strictly allegorical interpretation.

First of all, the Songs feature a dialogue between a lover - a man who is a shepherd and a beloved - a woman. Neither are identified by name. In most of the songs, the lovers tell how much they love each other or they describe in lyrical terms each other's bodies.

Viewing the Songs as folk poetry means that we can reject the notion that the Songs were written by Solomon. Too many references indicate that they were written at least a century after Solomon's death. Many Biblical scholars argue that the Songs were dedicated to Solomon, although they admit that may be in order to make the book fit better into the Sacred Bible.

Currently, a consensus appears to be emerging that the Songs were written by a woman. Certainly, the point of view of most of the songs is that of a female. And, to use modern language, the most important voice is that of a woman. There may be a dialogue between the two genders but one suspects that parts ascribed to the male or the lover were also composed by the poetess, the beloved.

The passages I have just read, are probably the strongest indication that a woman wrote the Songs. And what a woman she is! In the context of her time, she is most unusual. In the first place, she owns a vineyard. Few women at the time would be allowed to own property. Unfortunately, she was not allowed to work it. Her brothers made her tend the family vineyard so that her own is neglected.

Secondly, she lives alone in her own apartment. Again, this would not have been a common practice in ancient Israel. Had she been living at home, those brothers would have been watching her every move and certainly would not have allowed a male to visit their sister's bedroom in the middle of the night.

And in the middle of the night is where the two story songs I have read begin. The first story is briefer than the second. The young woman has gone to bed. She has undressed, bathed, and put on her lotions. And she has just fallen asleep. Then, her lover knocks on the door and rattles the doorknob. Her first impulse is to ask him to go away. Her hair is a mess, she will have to get dressed again and she will get her feet dirty. Very practical understandable objections. So she waffles a while but passion overcomes reason and she gets up and dresses. But when she opens the door, to her horror, her lover is gone. She feels the precious sacramental myrrh, with which he had wanted to anoint her, dripping on the door handle.

As I said, this is a remarkable woman. A woman who wants equality. In the dead of the night, she sets out on a search just like her lover had done moments before. Just imagine in today's Islamic world, a woman setting out alone at night. No wonder the city guards think she must a prostitute going to a client. They beat her and bruise her and further humiliate her by stripping off her robe. Unable to accept a woman who has defied social conventions, they attack her.

This is the only bad event in the Songs. Jubilation of love is ruined by hatred and contempt. This, too, is life. The single most important and recurring question that God's people ask is: "Why does God permit evil to exist?" That was the cry of Job. That was the cry last Sunday evening at the Holocaust Memorial Service. Why does God allow evil to exist? The Song of Songs does not answer the question. But the beloved, the woman, has a reaction.

She is not defeated. The story ends in defiance: "Oh daughters of Jerusalem, you as fellow women, you are the only ones who understand me. So I charge you, what are you going to tell my lover when you find him? I will tell you what you will say. You will tell him, I am not defeated. You will tell him that I am infatuated with him. I am not rational. I am crazy with love."

Despite this one violent scene, the Song of Songs is a Halleluiah. Despite the twisted, sadistic humour of the watchmen who cannot abide a woman who is free, this story too celebrates the erotic relationship of a woman and a man. The love the poet revels in is not the distorted *eros* that assaults us daily in pop songs, television shows, movies, and has become a commodity in advertising. Instead, these songs read simply for their own sake, as folk songs, open our eyes to the unvarnished natural beauty of human love. Of the God-given gift of love, the ability for human beings to love one another with a totally unselfish, even sacrificial love. The lyrical words of the Songs become an ecstatic rejoicing in what the Greeks called *eros*.

Once we have accepted the Song of Songs for what they really are - erotic love poems, we can each on our own and in our own way see meaningful relationships, parallels, symbolisms. For Pope Benedict the horizontal *eros* relationships are possible only because of the vertical relationship of God's *agape*. God's love for humanity and an individual's love for God creates

love among his people.

This is the message of the letter from John. He states it very simply and directly. God is love, not “God loves” but “God IS love.” He is the very essence of love. And then John goes on to say: “All love comes from God.” To quote what we have already read: “We love because he first loved us.” Without that innate, created quality that God gave to humanity, we can not love each other. John does not quote the Song of Songs and the poet does not anticipate John’s letter. Yet, both passages are linked by the beauty of love.

But there are catches. There always are. There is the assurance that God loves us but there is also the command: “Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” Or in more inclusive language we must love the poor, the prisoner, the refugee. *Eros* must combine with *agape*. Not only is God love - he acted. The familiar Gospel passage says it all. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.” God surrendered his Son to the humiliation of the stable, of hunger, of thirst and eventually of death.

Is it possible for a human being to have the *agape* love that God and Christ displayed so clearly? Yes it is. I recall vividly an interview between Peter Mansbridge and Harmeet Sooden on the *National* a month or so ago. You will recall that Harmeet Sooden was one of the peace activists kidnapped in Iraq and ‘rescued’ in late March. I don’t think I will ever forget two moments in that interview. Mansbridge asked Sooden if there was ever an opportunity to escape. Yes, he replied, but it would have meant killing a guard. Doing so would have violated the principle of non-violence for which he stood. His own life was not worth the sacrifice of a principle. Harmeet Sooden was crystal clear on this point. But, he was hesitant, almost evasive, when Peter Mansbridge asked him how it felt to be rescued. Haltingly, he explained that he was grateful to the soldier who snapped his bonds with a wire cutter but then, he slowly added, he was sure that he was not being rescued but that western governments had made a deal with the kidnappers. And, he continued, he was afraid that a large sum of money had been paid to secure the deal. Even though, the only other solution to the problem was either the death of the kidnappers or the death of himself and his fellow prisoners, he thought it would have been better if the money had been spent on the poor, especially indigenous peoples in North America. These were not empty, glibly spoken words but the baring of his soul.

Few of us have the God-given gift for this kind of sacrificial living. Yet we all need to work at coming as close to it as possible. We can shrug off Sooden’s excruciating dilemma by saying we cannot all go to Iraq and stand between the combatants. Somebody has to stay home and look after the kids. True enough. But each one of us has to deal with the opportunities God gives us here in St John’s. We are commanded to love each other, and that includes the people on the margins of society. And, we have to answer to God what we have done with His gift of love.

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