

**SERMON: 2 September 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Hearts Captivated by Divine Love Learn to be Free”  
(Song of Songs 2:8-13, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)**

I wonder what you think God thinks about you.

According to the poster outside, God thinks you're amazing, and he rejoices over you with singing.

Trouble is, we rarely believe it. I wonder why? Are we too often blind to the truth? Have we not yet seen the true depth of God's love for creation? Have we not gazed deeply into the mirror of his love and seen our true identity as his beloved who belong to him eternally and whose very being is part of Being itself.

I read something Richard Rohr wrote this week along the lines of 'God is your life, yet your life is still yours to live'. In other words our true identity is found in the God who made us in his image, yet that image has such infinite variety that we are each unique expressions of his love and being.

At least part of the difficulty that we humans have is in our incomplete understanding of who God is. Here's what Richard Rohr says about that,

“For most of human history God was not viewed as having a likeable, much less lovable, character. That’s why whenever an angel or God breaks into human life, the first words are invariably, “Do not be afraid.” We need to be reassured, not only that God is loving, but that we too—made in the image and likeness of God—are good and relational beings.” (RR)

That fear must be cast out by perfect love. And this song from God gives us insight into how his Love does that.

Our assurance to take God at his word and learn to trust him fully, takes time. Life is a journey into love. A journey where the heart learns to be captivated and to be delivered from all fear. A journey into intimacy with God, the Divine Being, the Source of all that’s good. It’s not that God changes but that our understanding of God and how he works changes. I

think that's what Paul meant when he said we are to grow up in our salvation (1 Peter 2) and to even grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Because of human beings' fallen nature, it takes a lifetime to learn how God loves us and what that freedom means for us in how we live.

When we first experience God's love we think its limited to a few, maybe to just those in our tribe! Then we might move on to thinking that love is dependent on how we respond, that God will love us and reward us **if** we are good.

Its only as we practise giving and receiving love that we begin to understand God's love as infinite and unconditional but we might still believe that God only does that from a distance and that somehow we're not really involved in the process.

But the end of our growing up is that we realise that grace and love are present within us and through us. That's what incarnation is all about. God truly with us and within. Loving from within. And we see that our bodies are really temples of God's Spirit of Love and we are caught up in the flow of that love, in us and through us.

Again, let me quote from Richard Rohr. "The Bible shows a relentless movement toward intimacy and divine union between Creator and creatures. For this to happen, there needs to be some degree of compatibility, likeness, or even "sameness" between the two parties. In other words, there has to be a little bit of God in us that wants to find Itself." (RR)

We can see this idea of sameness right from the opening words of the Bible. In the creation of people, Adam is formed from the dust and Eve is taken from the rib of the man, bone from bone, dust from Dust.

We can see too it in Song of Songs.

**I have gathered from your heart,  
my equal, my bride,  
I have gathered from my garden  
all my sacred spices—even my myrrh.  
I have tasted and enjoyed my wine within you.  
I have tasted with pleasure my pure milk, my honeycomb,**

**which you yield to me.  
I delight in gathering my sacred spice,  
all the fruits of my life I have  
gathered from within you, my paradise garden (5:1)**

And we can also see the idea of a movement or progression towards intimacy and union between the Creator and his creatures in this song. Its really a poem about love and wisdom. It begins with the first discovery of a passionate attraction between two people who become lovers. The one finding their true identity in the other who calls them to come up higher. And then there is the dark night of the soul, where the Lover appears to be absent and it looks like Love is lost.

Then, on the other side of the darkness, Love is found again and there is a more mature understanding of how the beloved is seen by the Lover, how the King sees his Bride to be.

**Arise, my love.**

**Open your heart, my darling, deeper still to me.  
Will you receive me this dark night?  
There is no one else but you, my friend, my equal.  
I need you this night to arise and come be with me.  
You are my pure, loyal dove, a perfect partner for me.  
My flawless one, will you arise?  
For my heaviness and tears are more than I can bear.  
I have spent myself for you throughout the dark night (5:2)**

The beloved says yes to that Love which she is beginning to see more deeply and she realises that Love is not just found out there but lives in her heart, as she lives in his heart.

Here's chapter 4 verse 6:

I've made up my mind.

Until the darkness disappears and the dawn has fully come,  
in spite of shadows and fears,  
I will go to the mountaintop with you—  
the mountain of suffering love[d]  
and the hill of burning incense.  
*Yes, I will be your bride. (4:6)*

My lover has gone down  
into his garden of delight,  
the place where his spices grow,  
to feast with those pure in heart.  
I know we shall find him there.  
He is within me—I am his garden of delight.  
I have him fully and now he fully has me! (6:2-3)

Then towards the end of the poem, there is the the marriage feast, where the Bride is radiant and shares her song with the Lover Shepherd King in a Divine Duet, where they forever dwell together united as one.

Commentators have suggested that the poem is an allegory which shows us the journey that every passionate lover of Jesus takes. It's about the passion of the Bridegroom Christ for his radiant and soon to be perfected Bride, the Church.

When we stop to look and listen, we can find ourselves on such a journey and increasingly become aware of hearing the Lord's lyrics of love sung over us, from deep within us.

The translator of the Passion translation even said that, when you read through the whole of Song of Songs, you might be shocked to read some of the things spoken over your life and consider them too good to be true.

Let's look at some of the things:

The Shepherd King begins saying this about his beloved,  
**you are so lovely — like the fine linen tapestry hanging in the Holy Place (1:5)**

**My dearest one, let me tell you how I see you—you are so thrilling to me. (1:9)**

**We will enhance your beauty, encircling you with our golden reins of love. You will be marked with our redeeming grace (1:11)**

**Look at you, my dearest darling, you are so lovely! You are beauty itself to me (1:15)**

Then the Shepherd King becomes the Bridegroom King, and in the words we heard read earlier says this, in the Passion Translation:

**Arise, my dearest. Hurry, my darling.**

**Come away with me!**

**I have come as you have asked  
to draw you to my heart and lead you out.**

**For now is the time, my beautiful one.**

**The season has changed,  
the bondage of your barren winter has ended,  
and the season of hiding is over and gone.**

**The rains have soaked the earth  
and left it bright with blossoming flowers.**

**The season for singing and pruning the vines has arrived.**

**I hear the cooing of doves in our land,  
filling the air with songs to awaken you  
and guide you forth.**

**Can you not discern this new day of destiny  
breaking forth around you?**

**The early signs of my purposes and plans  
are bursting forth.**

**The budding vines of new life  
are now blooming everywhere.**

**The fragrance of their flowers whispers,  
“There is change in the air.”**

**Arise, my love, my beautiful companion,  
and run with me to the higher place.**

**For now is the time to arise and come away with me (2:8-13)**

Last thing to say. Part of our growing up into our true identity, in Christ, as beloved people in God, is that we don't keep that to ourselves. Instead we use that truth to fuel everything that we are, and do and think. The Truth is given to us, to share, and become more and more complete.

Like wee channels, we are made to let Love out as much as we have let Love in, knowing that the Source is unfailing and never ending.

Here's Richard Rohr again:

“Planted in fertile soil, the love and presence of God always comes to fullness. By gradually accepting the daring initiative of intimacy with God, the Hebrew people became a true community of faith. It was not so much that God loved Israel more than all the other peoples of the earth, but, *somehow, they learned how to hear and trust God's initiatives and could pass the message to the rest of the world.* Election is only for the sake of passing the same experience on!” (RR)

As our hearts are captivated by God's Divine Initiative, we are free to serve, out of that divine love, without expecting anything in return. And our hearts experience the inner freedom that longs only to return the love it received and pass it on, in everything it does.

As the bride declares at the end of the song:

**But now I have grown and become a bride, and my love for him has made me a tower of passion and contentment for my beloved. I am now a firm wall of protection for others, guarding them from harm. This is how he sees me—I am the one who brings him bliss, finding favour in his eyes (8:10)**

In this sermon I've not yet said anything about the verses we read from Mark's Gospel about Jesus breaking religious traditions. We can see that the hearts of the Pharisees had not yet grown into the truth of love. They were still hard and judgemental and bound by rules that limited any expression of love to flow freely.

Jesus said, “These people honour me with their words while their hearts run far from me! Their worship is nothing more than a charade!” (Mark 7:6).

Jesus wants his disciples to live with hearts free from hypocrisy. Its not what goes in that contaminates. Its what comes out, the words and actions that result from what is in the heart.

Going back to S of S, here's what Jesus has made a reality for us:

**Your inward life is now sprouting, bringing forth fruit.  
What a beautiful paradise unfolds within you. (5:13-14)**

**Your life flows into mine, pure as a garden spring.  
A well of living water springs up from within you, like a mountain brook  
flowing into my heart! (5:15)**

**Out of your innermost being  
is flowing the fullness of my Spirit—  
never failing to satisfy (7:2-3)**

Let's get our hearts on the right path. Meditating further with this Song of Songs is a good place to go to.

This song, this word from God, shows us real benefits to taking the time to listen to what God truly thinks of us. I think he wants us to meditate on that and to live out of that infinite love. And I think he has given us the desire to seek after him in this way and find every longing satisfied in him as he is in us.

Let's finish with the bride's prayer from the end of chapter 4:

May your awakening breath  
blow upon my life until I am fully yours.  
Breathe upon me with your Spirit wind.  
Stir up the sweet spice of your life within me.  
Spare nothing as you make me your fruitful garden.  
Hold nothing back until I release your fragrance.  
Come walk with me as you walked  
with Adam in your paradise garden.  
Come taste the fruits of your life in me. (4:16-5:1)

[Watch the video <https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/kUX-CL7pzfvNOJiBq181?domain=youtu.be>

Imagine God is waiting on a bench for you. What would he be write to you on the sticky note?]