

SERMON

Some of you may have been to see the Frederick McCubbin exhibition at the Art Gallery. These are paintings done late in McCubbin's career and show a much lighter, happier approach to life than so many of his earlier paintings. The early paintings included those rather gloomy sentimental portrayals of lost children or death in the bush. His later paintings reflect a change in his approach to life. He wanted to show the beauty that he saw around him. The colours are lighter and happier. Gone are the all pervading greys and dull greens and instead there are light and happy colours.

McCubbin was a man who loved life and was a gentle family man with a good sense of humour. The Catalogue quotes a contemporary as saying that "love is the key to his whole life". If you stand and look at the paintings, you can see that they are indeed the work of someone who loved. The portrayals of his family members are affectionate. His back garden has chooks pecking around in the grass and his industrial scenes show his respect for the work being done. He loved life, family and the areas around Melbourne which he painted. He loved passing on to his students his own love of art. Presumably he had his faults like any one but he was generally known as a good man. None of the paintings show cruelty or evil but rather show the best of life. It seems to me that these paintings show something of God's plans for the world – especially the love and enjoyment of life.

The poet or poets who wrote the collection of poems making up the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, were also people who saw the importance of rejoicing in the good things of God's world. She or they wrote of the love and exuberant physical joy of young lovers and of happiness in springtime. I say she because they are written taking the woman's part. She wrote of the hope that we can all have when there are new beginnings. Her poetry speaks of love and peace and beauty as it must have been in the Garden of Eden and how it will be when God's kingdom once more reigns over the earth.

Throughout the centuries, both Jewish and Christian scholars have debated the significance of this poetry but all agree on its value in the canon of the scriptures. A first century Jewish scholar, Rabbi Aqiba, said that the Song of Songs is the 'holy of holies' among the holy books of scripture. For your interest, commentators say that the Song was probably written quite late in Old Testament times as it uses language that echoes some of the later books of the Old Testament. It was clearly not written by Solomon or even by a contemporary of Solomon despite the name often given to it. Most commonly, the lover is taken to be an allegory for God and the woman stands for Israel or, in Christian times, the church. At the same time, it can be read as purely and simply love poetry – love poetry depicting romantic and physical love between a man and a woman. It says that all that is good in love is part of God's plan for the world.

In the section of poetry that we have heard today we see in our mind's eye the lover, leaping over mountains and hills, fit and active like a gazelle or young deer going to visit his girl. Young men have always needed to show off their

prowess to their girlfriends. It is springtime. The winter rains have watered the earth and now it is sunny, there is green grass and flowers. The trees and grape vines are in blossom promising a good harvest later and turtle doves, birds known for affectionate cooing towards their mates, are calling. There are no predatory animals like lions around. There is nothing to fear. The lover is likened to an herbivorous deer not a carnivorous lion so he is one who has honourable intentions towards his girl. Her parents would welcome him.

It is an idyllic setting that we might all like to dream about. We would dream or imagine what might be in a better world. Dreams are not just confined to the young. We can all hope and plan for a better future.

Such dreams are can result in good. Martin Luther King had a dream and by speaking about it he was able to promote momentous changes for good. We can dream of what might be in the ideal world and then work towards it. We can dream of a beautiful and just society and with that in mind, challenge others to see the dream too and together work towards it.

Read as an allegory, let's see what it says to us. God, the youth, comes to his people. We don't have to go searching for God. God comes to us and wants us to love and worship him. When we worship God, we are approaching the Kingdom. The Kingdom is something to look forward to on earth. It is not something otherworldly but is meant to happen here where we are now. We get glimpses of that intended life when we are in love, when we experience joy at seeing, hearing and touching God's world, when we see good art, listen to good music, create or visit beautiful gardens. If we were to read on a few verses we would see the poet say: My beloved is mine and I am his. This is the covenant formula used between God and Israel. Israel and the church are the poet and they have a strong bond with God. They each claim the other as belonging to them.

What doesn't appear in God's ideal world is evil. This poem has no wild animals representing predators who will seduce us into doing wrong. And we will not allow ourselves to harm others. Of course, in the real world, people do harm themselves and others over and over again, sometimes with the best of intentions. Other times they use the system to their own advantage.

Listen to the gospel reading. Mark spoke of cleanliness. Jewish laws and practices insisted that people wash their hands in a particular way before eating any food. On the surface it is a good hygienic practice but in the way they insisted it made it very difficult for ordinary working people to do regularly. Then there were the laws about clean and unclean foods. But the evil or wrongs that people do come from within them. What makes people do wrong is their own value system and their own thoughts. Eating the wrong food may make you sick but it doesn't make you murder or steal.

Some people used the laws to their own advantage as people always will. In the verses omitted from today's reading there is a comment on a particularly miserly way in which some used the laws. There was a regulation which allowed a person to declare that their property belonged to God. In that way,

they no longer had to give any of their income to support their ageing parents. It was a loophole like modern tax loopholes but in this case it meant that the people they were hurting were their own parents. And this was in opposition to the commandment to honour your father and mother. It must have been a well known practice for Jesus to use it as an example of what he was trying to say. We can say how could they? But any nursing home in Canberra today could tell you of the residents whose children rarely if ever visit. I mean genuinely don't visit – not the cases where the parent's mind has gone to the extent that they can't remember the frequent visits of daughter or son. People do decide to selfishly take care only of themselves.

These cases, both in biblical times and now, are cases in which people misused human laws against God's laws. How often have we in the church suppressed human expressions of love?

God created a world in which there is sexual reproduction. God created men and women to be companions. Love and marriage and nurturing families are all good and part of God's plan for the world. What isn't part of God's plan are abusive relationships in or out of marriage. Abuse of children is not part of God's plan.

Enjoy God's world and the relationships that are good. Nourish those relationships just as the poetry of the Song of Songs does. Take part in work that is productive and helpful for society. Encourage the development of children. Help to create a world that has something of the spirit that McCubbin shows in those paintings. Bring to all life a purity of motive so that something of God's wishes for the world come about. Be open to God coming to us.

The Song of Songs talks of young love and passion. The young often make the mistake of thinking that only they can have passion and romance. The old know better. How else did Abraham and Sarah become parents in old age? People of all ages can feel passion for their loved ones and for God's world too. Passion to right wrongs and work for a better world. Passion with wisdom - how powerful is that? What can be achieved?

On that note, I'll conclude using words of the romantic poet, Tennyson in his poem about the ageing Ulysses. Ulysses decided not to settle into a dull old age to 'rust unburnish'd'. Rather, Ulysses decided 'some work of noble note may yet be done', that it was 'not too late to seek a newer world' and called to his friends 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'.
Amen.