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My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the bed of aromatics, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I to my beloved, and my beloved to me, who feedeth among the lilies.

(*Song of Songs*, Ch. 6, Vs 1-2)

What is the garden? Is it the soul? Is it some other source of nourishment? What are the lilies? Traditional exegesis of the Song of Songs – from Gregory of Nyssa in the late fourth century through to the Cistercian John of Ford in the early thirteenth - has seen the garden as the soul in which the Lord delights, the lilies being the virtues, the bed of aromatics being the fruitful repose of contemplation (Gregory, Sermon 15; John, Sermons 44-5). And yet Ivan Illich’s masterful book *In the Vineyard of the Text* (1993) shows, scripture itself, in this period, was increasingly seen as a garden. Reading was seen as savouring, feeding and gathering. It is “among the lilies” that we find the beloved. St Bernard of Clairvaux, speaking about the *Song of Songs*, says, “Enjoying their sweetness, I chew them over and over, all my internal organs are replenished, I’m fattened up from inside and all my bones break out into praise” (Sermon 16 on the *Song*).

Bernard, in his first sermon on *The Song of Songs*, proposed this poem as the culmination of a threefold *Lectio*. He assigns three books of Scripture to the gathering, feeding and savouring of ‘wisdom’: *Ecclesiastes* teaches us discernment, to know what is wisdom and what is folly, *Proverbs* helps us to put the wisdom we have found into practice, only when we apply it in daily life can we “digest” wisdom, finally *The Song of Songs* shows how that wisdom bears fruit in the love we have for God and for others. This may put people off using the *Song of Songs* for *Lectio Divina*, as there is so much in *Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs* that we may never feel ready or worthy to ‘progress’ to the third. However, Bernard felt that of

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the three the *Song of Songs* was key, even more important than the *Psalms* (which were the staple of monastic practice): “This is a song that by its extraordinary worth and sweetness excels all these others,” he writes, “and with every reason I call it the Song of all Songs, since it contains the completeness and consequence of all others.” He goes on to explain how savouring is what transforms study into experience.

Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning. It is the very music of the heart. It is for those with experience to verify it, for the inexperienced to ardently desire to experience it, and not just know about it. (Sermon 1)

The value of the *Song* for Bernard was that it is all about relationship, and for him, learning, discipline and contemplation are all relational – we learn them in community and under the loving gaze of God. Later, in his Sermons he describes the three ‘fruits of *Lectio Divina*’ – enlightened devotion, ardent practice and contemplative union – as contained within the *Song of Songs* itself. They are ‘the kiss of the feet’, ‘the kiss of the hands’ and ‘the kiss of the mouth’ (Sermon 3). All are movements of the heart in response to God. ‘Kissing the feet’ is to walk in the ways of wisdom (rather than folly), ‘kissing the hands’ is to practice wisdom in one’s life, and ‘kissing the lips’ is to drink from the source of wisdom itself, the Spirit that Jesus breathes on his disciples.

Despite the rich imagery of the Song in his last Sermon Bernard emphasises again that the key to the Song is not in its metaphor or symbolic meanings (of which he saw many) but rather in that it expresses love:

In this marriage-song it is the affections behind the words that are to be pondered even more than the words themselves [...] For love speaks in it everywhere; if anyone desires to grasp these writings, let him love! For he who does not love will hear and read the Song in vain; the cold heart cannot grasp its burning eloquence. (Sermon 79)

Let us jump now to a modern Cistercian: Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain* uses the image of planting and sowing as expressing the effect of reading scripture:

God often talks to us in scripture. That is, he plants the words full of actual graces as we read them and suddenly undiscovered meanings are sown in our hearts, if we attend to them, reading

with minds that are at prayer. (pp. 293-4, in the 1990 SPCK edition)

But later, Merton records how, as an inexperienced novice in the monastery, he jumps in the deep end, taking up *The Song of Songs*, as his *Lectio Divina*: “I [...] devoured three chapters, closing my eyes from time to time and waiting, with rafhish expectation, for lights, for voices, harmonies, savours, unctions, and the music of angelic choirs. I did not get much of what I was looking for” (p. 387). One might ask why he did not get what he expected out of the *Song*? Was he looking for the wrong thing? He may not, at this time, have been aware of Bernard’s advise that really the only things to be looked for, and found, in the *Song* is love.

Lectio Divina is a dialogue with God through the words of scripture. It is not about gathering information but about a heart to heart encounter: “I to my beloved, and my beloved to me.” The poetry of the *Song* is full of finding and separation, of longing and loss. Mystics throughout the ages have found in the *Song* a perfect expression of their own feeling of fullness and absence - sometimes in quick alternation - that was the experiential side of their relationship with God. It is a shame, maybe, that most of our exposure to the *Song* in the liturgy is only at weddings and is of the ‘finding’ aspects of the *Song*. There is as much in the *Song* about letting-go so as to enter a deeper union. The *Song*’s use in Irish monasteries in ninth century *asketikons* was for it to be chanted when a monk was dying or immediately after his death. The mystic St. John of the Cross seems to have spontaneously revived this practice on his deathbed in 1591. John’s disciple and biographer, Crisogono de Jesus, writes that,

John interrupted the prior of the Carmelites who had started to read the prayers of recommendation for his departing soul and gently implored, ‘Tell me about the *Song of Songs*; this other thing is of no use to me.’ And when the verses of the *Song* were read to him, he commented as if in a dream: ‘Oh, what precious pearls!’

It is this “letting-go” that John was able to find among the lilies:

*Lost to myself I stayed
My face upon my lover having laid
From all endeavour ceasing
And all my cares releasing
Threw them among the lilies there to fade.*

(St John of the Cross, ‘*Song of the Soul*’, last verse.)

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The richness of the *Song* is that it is a poem that can be intelligible on two registers: Human love speaks of Divine love. *Lectio Divina* is a dialogue with God through the words of scripture but the human side of that dialogue is equally important. As Origen (184-253 CE), a very early Christian commentator on the *Song*, wrote, “Just as a human person consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does scripture” (*On First Principles*, Bk. 4, Ch. 2). Origen felt the *Song* had been transmitted through human and angelic ministration to reveal how God relates to the soul by awakening the spiritual senses. Through these senses the spiritual meaning lying behind the images and language of the *Song* could be savoured. In the *Song* we hear, taste, touch and inhale the mutual longing of the soul and God. These ‘spiritual senses’ awakened in *Lectio Divina*, act as the bridge between the outer and inner person, between carnal and heavenly love.

Bernard took up many of Origen’s themes in his sermons on the *Song* but emphasised that it was not through denial but through the redirecting of carnal love (*cupiditas*) that we come to real affection (*affectus/amor*). The sensual nature of the *Song* was so that God might draw ‘carnal love’ and deploy it toward himself: “so He might draw to Himself the love of those who are not yet able to love save in a carnal manner, and so to lead them, gradually on to spiritual love” (Sermon 20). Nothing is left out of our love of God. In this light, far from being only for the higher stage of mysticism, the *Song* useful for the beginnings of ascetic practice. “The tender, wise and strong affection” of the *Song*, for Bernard, was a valuable tool for overcoming “the sweet enticements of the sensual life”:

Sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another [...] Love affectionately, discreetly, intensely. We know that the love of the heart, which we have said is affectionate, is sweet indeed, but liable to be led astray if it lacks the love of the soul. And the love of the soul is wise indeed. (Sermon 20)

Notice how beautifully the Bride distinguishes spiritual love from the affections of the flesh. She says not merely, ‘Thou whom I love,’ but ‘Thou whom my soul loveth.’ (Sermon 32)

Reading the *Song of Songs* in the context of prayer is the very best place to integrate the human and Divine aspects of Scripture. No better place to start than this poem that is *so* human and yet *so* Divine. And, as grace builds on nature, the spiritual meaning of the *Song* comes out. As it is a meaning we find in relationship it will always be personal. Half of the story is us. When we start reading the *Song* we imagine we are outside, like Solomon at the door of the Shulamite’s house, peering in through what seems the

disconnected lines of the poem. As we pray, however, we realise that the *Song* is lattice-work – it is in and through the gaps between the words that we see within. “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, he stands behind our wall; he is looking through the windows, showing himself through the lattice” (2:9). At times we feel blessed and anointed by the dew of refreshment, at times we feel left out in the night. But if we return to the *Song*, often, knocking, the door only gently opens from the inside. We ponder and wait, patiently, until one day we hear a sound of the bolt opening. Then with the door slightly ajar and we catch a glimpse of the one inside the house. We reach out (from the ingrained habit of trying to understand) but what we catch is not an idea or belief, it is a fragrance, the fragrance of Wisdom that we must follow.

Helping Others. Willie lived his life for other people. Even from his earliest days, he was always putting others needs before his own. He was born into a privileged family in Dublin and had access to many of the finer things that life had to offer. Despite this he had a great interest in assisting those who were less well off. As a boy, he would get up early in the morning and complete work that was typically done by domestic staff. When young Willie was given money for sweets, he would seek out people that were in need and give the money to them. This sense of charity continued into adulthood, where he played an essential part in the life of the soldiers he served alongside in the First World War. Willie, as a chaplain, could have avoided the front lines, but he chose instead to be with the soldiers. On one occasion, he even allowed a doctor to sleep on his back to save the man from having to rest on the wet floor of a trench. Willie’s desire to be with the soldiers in these appalling conditions resulted in his eventual death. He regularly ventured onto the battlefield to try and rescue injured soldiers; it was on such a mission that he lost his life. In today’s world this kind of selflessness is becoming rarer than ever. Willie’s life is a reminder that there is more to life than selfishness – all of the People of God are called to be ‘about the Lord’s business’.

– PATRICK CORKERY SJ, *Willie Doyle SJ*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022), p.51-2