

# Purity Culture Needs a Lover

The Revd Andrew Rampton

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22B) | 1 September 2024

## 1 Vice Lists and Purity Culture

A few weeks ago someone asked me if Solomon's Song of Songs is ever preached on in Anglican churches. Probably very seldom, I replied. Today's six verses are the only portion of that book that ever appear in our current lectionary and they are only scheduled twice every three years.<sup>1</sup> Both of these appearances are tucked away in summer months, not part of the high seasons where we tend to have stronger memories for particular biblical texts. I think it's a brilliant book of the Bible and worth a lot more time than most of us give it and I'm going to share some of why with you today. But, to better understand why it's so good, we must start with Mark's Gospel passage.

Once again, Jesus is having an argument with Pharisees about correct interpretation of the Law. These arguments shouldn't be understood as entirely personal. These question-and-answer exchanges are how questions about religious observance get settled in Jesus's community. Not unlike our own arguments about doctrine and practice in the Anglican Church's synods and meetings, this format for analysing and criticising ideas is part of their tradition. Today's question is about why Jesus allows his disciples to eat without washing their hands. Religious rules about hand-washing before meals seem to be variable in the broader Judean culture but this closely parallels the Pharisees' critiques of Jesus spending too much time with the sick, with unclean spirits, and other polluting influences.

Mark 7:15 Jesus rebuts the Pharisees by saying that it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out of them. He goes on to say that the behaviours which are truly defiling, truly sinful, are all those that have their origins in our hearts, providing a "vice list" as an example. Jesus is offering these behaviours as examples of activities that defile those who do them. They are evidence of an infection of sin and the symptom is these sorts of destructive, divisive, selfish behaviours.

Mark 7:21-22

In some Christian communities, the idea that Jesus has put forward here gets twisted. The message stops being that your behaviour is indicative of the character of your heart and begins to be that you are responsible for the behaviour of your neighbour. The wickedness of assault stops being the fault of the assaulter and becomes the fault of the assaulted because they provided an opportunity. Or that something they did planted the seed of the sinful idea in the mind of another; we have all heard the vile idea that women who dress a certain way are seeking unhealthy attention from men. In this kind of culture that obsesses over certain forms of so-called modesty or purity, the motivation is almost always to reinforce a set of identity politics and power structures. Always a set which benefit the community's leadership. In this warped version of actions that reveal character, somehow it is the choice to go out with one's ankles showing which is the sin, rather than the assault.

---

<sup>1</sup>Proper 14A and Proper 22B.

These kinds of communities with extreme behavioural rules are not what the Pharisees are about. In spite of their frequent clashes of opinion with Jesus and how this makes them look in the New Testament, the Pharisees are not generally regarded as bad guys in Judean society. They are helpful and contribute in important ways to the understanding of how the people of God might best relate to God. The Pharisees worry about arguing the minutiae for the benefit of everyone. They want people to understand the Law as thoroughly as possible to make sure that every person and their community as a whole have the best possible relationship to God. This is the opposite of purity cultures in our world, where every word, every action, every stitch of clothing is the potential for an existential crisis over loss of access to God and community.

Black and white lists of absolute rules seem to be easy to follow, but they often don't fit every situation. If we have the rules and find ourselves in a place where the rules don't fit or we are convinced that the right thing to do means breaking a rule, we're left in an impossible spot. Even looking at the vice list Jesus provides here, we can imagine situations where certain prohibited activities might fall into the grey zone where morality and sin are concerned. Some activities are almost always bad ideas, such as murder. But the intention matters. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is remembered on our calendar of holy people but he was part of a committed plan to topple Nazi leadership, which included murdering Hitler. This is a classic question given to students of theological ethics: Had the plan succeeded, would Hitler's murder have been a sin? (To be clear, I'm not advocating one side of that question or the other. This is an example of a situation where we can imagine that a simple yes or no rule is difficult to apply.<sup>2</sup>)

## 2 God as a Lover

Solomon's Song of Songs is a very long poem with three main voices: The lover, the beloved, and the chorus of the women of Jerusalem. On the surface, the poem celebrates sexual intimacy and love between the lover and the beloved with the chorus providing some narration and a crowd within which the reader may stand and be present to the story. The poem is usually read as an allegory where the lover is God and the beloved is God's people. Much of the Song is written from the beloved's point of view, giving a strong female voice which is not much present so consistently elsewhere in scripture.

Modern biblical scholarship tends to hold that the lovers in the Song are unmarried.<sup>3</sup> This defies cultural expectations. Men and women have different rules regarding sexual intimacy in ancient Near Eastern cultures, but unmarried relations are generally against the rules. We can hear, even in these short passages, the anticipation and excitement of lovers who are often separated by circumstance. In today's verses, we hear of the lover leaping and skipping over hills and mountains to meet his beloved until he is just outside the wall. Near enough to see but not yet to touch. He then describes the beautiful spring garden outside the wall and encourages her to come out and meet him there, where birds have returned and flowers and fruits are beginning to show. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

SoS 2:13

This is as far as today's passage goes, but the intensity of the imagery continues to grow as the Song describes what it is for God and God's people to know one another in every conceivable way. The tradition of using earthy, physical, intimate human love to describe the relationship between God and humanity does not end with the Song of Songs. It becomes a tradition in Christian writing, perhaps best known in St John of the Cross's poem *Dark Night of the Soul*, but continues to this day. Some writers are fond of allegory using gardens, flowers, and fruit trees to describe beauty, fertility, security, and love. Others are much more graphic and describe the relationship in terms I would not quote in a homily. Regardless of the vocabulary and style employed, the

---

<sup>2</sup>The Anglican hesitancy to name as martyrs those Christians murdered by other Christians over theological differences also come to mind.

<sup>3</sup>J.L. Andruska, "Unmarried Lovers in the Song of Songs," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2021): 1-18.

people of God have found it good, holy, and useful to sometimes think of our relationship with God in these deeply physical terms.

### 3 Holy Bodies

To think back to our vice lists, those lists of prohibitions and proscriptions held up by so many communities, we now have complicated questions to ponder. Many of those rules have to do with our bodies and sexuality. Even in mainstream, everyday, twenty-first century, Canadian culture we are told in myriad ways that our bodies and, if not explicitly then by extension, our sexualities are dirty, unacceptable, shameful, and unpredictable. They must be managed carefully to meet some standard. There is a set of implied rules and we are not measuring up. We are told that we should be taller, thinner, fitter, and smoother. Whatever kind of physical intimacy we are or aren't having, we should pretend that we don't know anything about the subject, even while our media is full of ads for products that will make us more successful at it.

Gen. 1:26-31  
1 Cor. 6.19

So often, our physical selves are the point where those purity-obsessed, controlling rules are applied. We are told that our very material existence is somehow dirty and shameful. Something that we ought to spend our lives avoiding and repenting for. These bodies, made by God in God's own image and likeness. These bodies which God called good. These bodies which have become temples for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. These bodies, one of which Jesus himself has, fully God and fully human. These bodies with all of their parts and the opportunity for physical contact and intimacy which are part of having one. These bodies are a place of liberation, not of confinement or imprisonment. These bodies—your body—and the experiences they afford are good and holy. Everything from a comforting hand on the shoulder, a warm hug, to the kind of sensual, erotic connection between lovers described over the eight chapters of the Song of Songs. These are good and holy experiences which are part of being fully human. These are gifts from God who pronounced them very good and cannot be made otherwise by any rules we might create for ourselves and each other.

This is why I believe we would all benefit from more time spent with Solomon's Song of Songs. We must bear in mind Jesus's warning from today's gospel reading: How we choose to act in our relationships with God, our neighbours, and ourselves is what makes us clean or unclean. If our bodies are a place of good, holy, liberating, God-given experiences, then we must take great care with them, both our own and those of others. It means we cannot rely on simplistic black-and-white ideas about what it means to have good relationships with one another. Instead, we must do the hard work of knowing each other, discerning the most loving, gracious, charitable, honoring way forward. We are called to be a people whose words and actions show hearts of goodness, holiness, and love.

God is not interested in rules that claim to strive for purity but which confine, restrict, shame, and oppress some for the benefit of others. God is interested in purity of heart, shown forth in how we speak, act, live, and move through creation. God loves us in every way imaginable. God loves every part of us more than we can imagine. So much that God has given us innumerable ways to experience and know love. And God is so eager for us to know what it means to be loved that God will leap and skip over hills and mountains to show us.