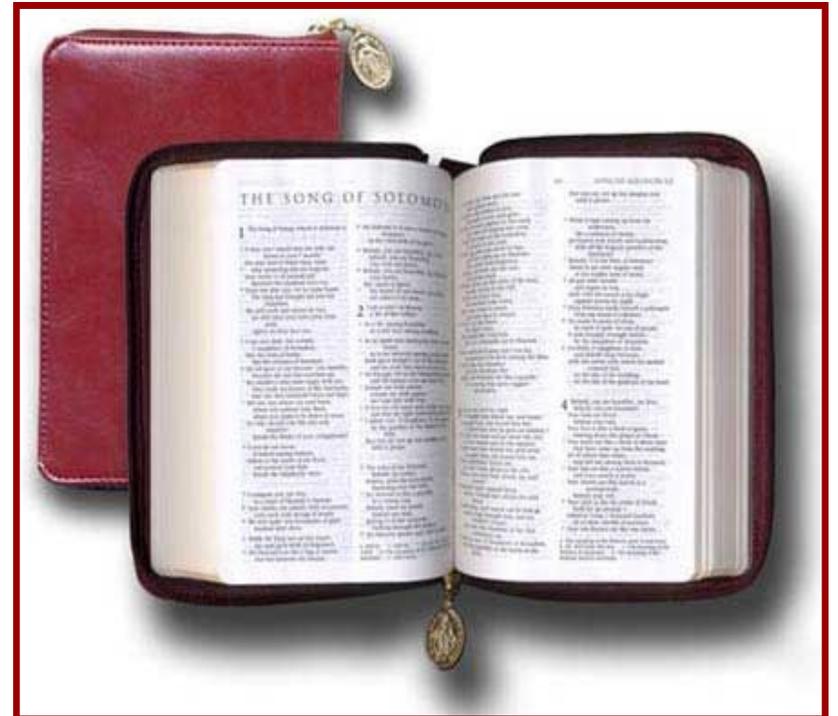




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SONG OF SONGS—26

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***WHY THE BRIDE
IS BLACK
BUT BEAUTIFUL***

The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

Why the Bride is Black but Beautiful

I mentioned in the previous sermon that the bride was compelled to give an answer to her envious assailants, who seemed to be physically part of the group of maidens, but alienated from them in spirit. She said: "I am black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem." It would appear that her dark skin is the object of their slanderous taunting. But we cannot help noting her patience and kindness. She not only refrained from hurling back curse for curse, but gave them a friendly answer, calling them daughters of Jerusalem when for their wickedness she might properly have called them daughters of Babylon, or daughters of Baal, or any other disreputable name. She had learned from the Prophet, and from Christ himself, the teacher of gentleness, that the crushed reed must not be broken nor the wavering flame be quenched. Hence she decided not to provoke to further outbursts people who had already so upset themselves, nor to add fuel to the fires of envy that tormented them. Conscious of her obligation even to the foolish, she took pains to be peaceful with those who hated peace. She preferred therefore to soothe them with a kind word, because she felt it her duty to labor for the salvation of the weak rather than gratify personal spite.

8. This being so, how aptly the bride accepted as an enhancement of her glory the insult hurled by those who envied her, rejoicing not only in her loveliness but even in her blackness. She is not ashamed of this blackness, for her Bridegroom endured it before her, and what greater glory than to be made like to him, Therefore she believes that nothing contributes more to her glory than to bear the ignominy of Christ. And hence that note of gladness and triumph as she says: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." The ignominy of the cross is welcome to the man who will not be an ingrate to his crucified Lord. Though it involves the stigma of blackness, it is also in the pattern and the likeness of the Lord. Listen to St Isaiah, and he will describe him for you as he saw him in spirit: "A man of sorrows and afflicted with suffering, without beauty, without majesty." And he adds: "We thought of him as a leper, struck by God and brought low. Yet he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins, and through his wounds we are healed." This is the reason for his blackness. But think at the same time of those words of St David: "You are the fairest of the sons of men," and you will find in the Bridegroom all the traits that the bride, in the words of our text, ascribes to herself.

9. Does it not seem to you, in accord with what has been said, that he could have replied to the envious Jews: "I am black but beautiful, sons of Jerusalem"? Obviously black, since he had neither beauty nor majesty; black because he was "a worm and no man, scorned by men and despised by the people." If he even made himself into sin shall I shirk saying he was black? Look steadily at him in his filth-covered cloak, livid from blows, smeared with spittle, pale as death: surely then you must pronounce him black. But enquire also of the apostles in what guise they found this same man on the mount, and ask the angels to describe him on whom they long to gaze, and the beauty you discover will compel your admiration. Beautiful in his own right, his blackness is because of you. Even clad in my form, how beautiful you are, Lord Jesus! And not merely because of the miracles of divine power that render you glorious, but because of your truth and meekness and righteousness. Happy the man who, by attentive study of your life as a man among men, strives according to his strength to live like you. The Church in her loveliness has already received from you this blessed gift, the first fruits of her dowry; she is not slow to pattern herself on what is beautiful in you, nor ashamed to endure your ignominies. All this we must recall when she says: "I am black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem;" to which she adds the comparison: "like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon." This dictum is obscure however, and beyond the reach of those already wearied. But it is a door on which you are given time to knock. Those who are sincere will there encounter him whose light illumines mysteries; and he will open at once, because he invites you to knock. He it is who opens and no man shuts, the Church's Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

7. It is with good reason then that the saints find no time for the glamour of jewelry and the elegance of dress, that lose their appeal with the passing hour; their whole attention is fixed on improving and adorning the inward self that is made to the image of God, and is renewed day by day. For they are certain that nothing can be more pleasing to God than his own image when restored to its original beauty. Hence all their glory is within, not without; not in the beauty of nature nor in the praises of the crowd, but in the Lord. With St. Paul they say: "Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience;" because the sole judge of their conscience is God, whom alone they desire to please, and pleasing him is their sole, true and highest glory. There is nothing mean about that inward glory, for, as David points out, the Lord of glory takes his delight in it: "All his glory is with the daughter of the king." Each one's glory is all the more secure when in his own keeping, and not in another. And the saints glory not only in their inward light but even in the unsightliness of their outward appearance; nothing in them is without its use, "everything works for good." Sufferings are their joy equally with their hope. St Paul says: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." How desirable that weakness for which the power of Christ compensates. Let me be not merely weak, then, but entirely resourceless, utterly helpless. that I may enjoy the support of the power of the Lord of hosts! "For virtue is perfected in weakness." And Paul adds: "It is when I am weak that I am strong and powerful."

2. Perfection of this kind is commendable for all, but is the model for prelates who wish to be worthy. Good and faithful superiors know that they have been chosen, not for the vain prestige of holding office, but to take care of ailing souls. And when they detect the presence of inward discontent by the voicing of complaints, even to the point of insult and contumely, they must see themselves then as physicians, not masters, and rather than retaliate, prepare a medicine for the fevered mind. This is why the bride addressed the scornful and malevolent maidens as daughters of Jerusalem; her soothing words would captivate the malcontents, calm their anger and banish their envy. It is written: "A peaceful tongue appeases strife." Nor did she give them a false name, for in a certain sense these are truly daughters of Jerusalem. For whether because of the sacraments of the Church which they carelessly receive with the good, or because of a communal profession of faith, or the bodily unity of all the faithful, or even the hope of future salvation from which they are never wholly excluded as long as they live and of which they must not despair here below however recklessly they live, they are not unfittingly called daughters of Jerusalem.

3. Let us next examine what was meant by saying: "I am black but beautiful." Is this a contradiction in terms? Certainly not. These remarks of mine are for simple persons who have not learned to distinguish between color and form; form refers to the shape of a thing, blackness is a color. Not everything therefore that is black is on that account ugly. For example blackness in the pupil of the eye is not unbecoming; black gems look glamorous in ornamental settings, and black locks above a pale face enhance its beauty and charm. You may easily verify this in any number of things, for instances abound in which you will find beautiful shapes with disagreeable colors. And so the bride, despite the gracefulness of her person, bears the stigma of a dark skin, but this is only in the place of her pilgrimage. It will be otherwise when the Bridegroom in his glory will take her to himself "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing." But if she were to say now that her color is not black, she would be deceiving herself and the truth would not be in her. So there is no reason to be surprised that she said: "I am black," and yet nonetheless gloried that she is beautiful. How can she be other than beautiful since it is said to her: "Come my beautiful one"? Since she is invited to come, she has not yet arrived. So no one should think that the invitation was addressed to a blessed one who reigns without stain in heaven, it was addressed to the dark lady who was still toiling along the way.

4. But let us try to see why she calls herself black, and why beautiful. Is she black because of the benighted life she formerly led under the power of the prince of this world, still modeled on the image of the earthly man, and lovely because of the heavenly likeness into which she was afterwards changed as she began to live a new life? If that were so would she not have spoken of the past and said: "I was black," and not "I am black"? But if anybody wishes to see it in this light, then in the case of the words that follow: "like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon," the tent of Kedar should be understood of her former life, the tent of Solomon of the new. That curtains may have the same meaning as tent is shown by the Prophet when he says: "My tents are suddenly destroyed, in one moment my curtains have gone." Formerly she was black like the wretched tents of Kedar, but later beautiful like the curtains of the renowned King.

5. But let us see how both of these refer rather to her present state of life. If we consider the outward appearance of the saints, all that our eyes may discern, how lowly and abject it is, how slovenly through want of care; yet at the same time, inwardly, "with unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, they grow brighter and brighter as they are turned by the Spirit of the Lord into the image that they reflect." May not such a soul justly answer those who reproach her for being black: "I am black but beautiful"? Shall I point out to you a person at once both black and beautiful? "They say he writes powerful and strongly worded letters, but when he is with you, you see only half a man and no preacher at all." This was St. Paul. Daughters of Jerusalem, do you measure Paul in terms of his bodily presence, and despise him as blemished and ugly because you see only a runt of a man who has suffered hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness, the hardship of constant labor, countless beatings, often to the verge of death? These are the experiences that denigrate Paul; for this the Doctor of the Nations is reputed abject, dishonorable, black, beneath notice, a scrap of this world's refuse. But surely this is the man who is rapt into paradise, who, traversing the first and second heavens, penetrates by his purity to the third? O soul of surpassing beauty, even though dwelling in a sickly little body, heaven's own loveliness had not scorned your company, the angels on high did not cast you out, God's brightness did not repudiate you! Is this soul to be called black? It is black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem. Black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels. The blackness you observe is merely external. Not that it makes the slightest difference to Paul whether you find him worthy or not, you who judge according to appearances. "Man looks at appearances but God looks at the heart." Hence though black without, he is beautiful within, intent on pleasing him to whom he must prove himself; for if he still endeavored to be pleasing to you he would not be the servant of Christ. Happy the darkness that begets radiance in the mind, a light of knowledge and cleanness of conscience.

6. And finally, listen to what God promises through his Prophet to those blemished with this kind of blackness, those who seem discolored as by the sun's heat through the lowliness of a penitential life, through zeal for charity. He says: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be white as wool." The outward blemishes that we may discern in any people are not to be condemned, because they play a part in the begetting of interior light, and so depose the soul for wisdom. For wisdom is described by the wise man as a reflection of eternal life," and brightness befits the soul in which it decides to dwell. If the soul of the righteous man is the seat of wisdom, I may certainly refer to such a soul as bright. Righteousness itself can be called brightness. Paul was a righteous man for whom was laid up "a crown of righteousness." Therefore the soul of Paul was adorned with brightness, and wisdom dwelt there, to enable him to impart wisdom among the mature, a wisdom hidden in mystery, which none of the rulers of this world understood. This wisdom and righteousness of Paul were either produced or merited through the outward impairment of his little body, worn out by constant labors, by frequent fastings and vigils. Hence this ugliness of Paul is more beautiful than jeweled ornaments, than the raiment of kings. No physical loveliness can compare with it, no skin however bright and glowing; not the tinted cheek for which corruption waits, nor the costly dress that time wears out; not the luster of gold nor sparkle of gems, nor any other creature: all will crumble into corruption.