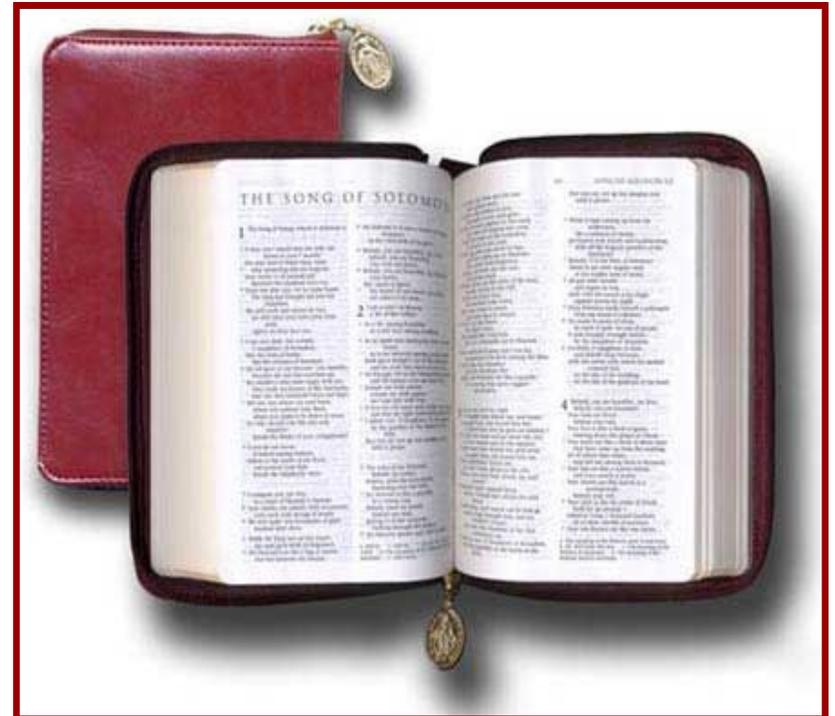




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SONG OF SONGS—60

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE REASON WHY
THE BRIDEGROOM SAYS:
'IN OUR LAND'***

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.

The Reason Why the Bridegroom says: 'In Our Land'

'The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.' I can no longer hide the fact that for the second time he who is from heaven speaks of the earth so agreeably and intimately, as if he were someone from the earth. He is the Bridegroom who, when announcing that the flowers had appeared in the land, added 'our [land]'. And how again he says: 'the voice of turtle-dove is heard in our land.' Can this statement, so unusual, or even, if I may say it, so unworthy of God, lack significance? Nowhere, I think, will you find him speaking like this of heaven, nowhere else like this of earth. Notice then the utter happiness of hearing the God of heaven say: 'in our land'. 'Listen, all inhabitants of the earth, all peoples', 'the Lord has done great things for us.' He has done much for the earth, much for the bride, whom he has been pleased to take to himself from the earth. 'In our land', he says. This is clearly not the language of domination but of fellowship and intimate friendship. He speaks as Bridegroom, not as lord. Think of it! He is the Creator, and he makes himself one of us? It is love that speaks, that knows no lordship. This is a song of love, in fact, and meant to be sustained only by lovers, not by others. God loves too, though not through a gift distinct from himself: he is himself the source of loving. And therefore it is all the more vehement, for he does not possess love, he is love. And those whom he loves he calls friends, not servants. The master has become the friend; for he would not have called the disciples friends if it were not true.

10. [The text] continues: 'The fig tree has put forth its green figs.' Let us not eat them; they are unfit for eating because they are unripe. They resemble good figs in appearance, but not in flavor, and perhaps signify hypocrisy. We should not throw them away however, perhaps we shall need them at another time. In any case they will fall prematurely of their own accord, 'like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it is plucked up'. I take this to be a reference to hypocrites. They are not mentioned in this wedding song without reason. Even if not fit to eat they can serve another purpose. Many things besides eatables must be provided for a wedding feast. This is a matter I think must not be passed over, but whatever its significance I do not want to confine its discussion to a short space at the end of this sermon. I defer it to another day and a freer time. It will be up to you then to decide whether it has been necessary; may your prayers gain for me the opportunity and the competence to express what I feel, for your spiritual well-being, for the praise and glory of the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, 'who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen'.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 60

'You who teach others, will you not teach yourself?'

8. One may conclude from this that the preaching of chastity is also the voice of the turtle-dove. From the very beginning this voice was not heard on the earth, but instead that other: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'. This call to chastity would have been to no purpose when the homeland of those risen had not yet been opened up, where men in a far happier state 'neither marry nor are given in marriage', but are like the angels in heaven. Do you think the time was then suitable for that voice, when every barren Israelite lay under a curse, when the Patriarchs themselves practiced polygamy, when a brother was compelled by law to beget children for a brother who had died childless? But when the mouth of the heavenly turtle-dove intoned its praises for those eunuchs who have gelded themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and when that counsel on virginity from another chaste turtle-dove everywhere prevailed, then for the first time it could be truly said that 'the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land'.

9. So then, the flowers have appeared in our land and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard: the truth is ascertained both by the eye and the ear. The voice is heard, the flower is seen. According to our previous interpretation the flowers stand for miracles which, joined to the voice, bring forth the fruit of faith. Although faith comes from hearing it is strengthened by seeing. The voice resounded, the flower blossomed, and truth sprang up from the earth by the worship of the faithful, word and sign equally concurring in witness to the faith. These testimonies have become easy to believe as the flower corroborates the witness of the word, the eye that of the ear. What is heard confirms what is seen, so that the witness of two—the ear and the eye - is validated. That is why the Lord said: 'Go and tell John' - he was speaking to his disciples - 'what you have seen and heard.' He could not have expressed to them more briefly or more clearly the certainty of the faith. In a short time that same belief was spread over the whole world, and by the same condensed reasoning. 'What you have seen and heard', he said. O word abridged, yet living and powerful! I proclaim without misgiving what I have grasped by ear and eyes. The trumpet of salvation sounds, miracles gleam, and the world believes. It is quickly convinced of what is said, borne out by signs of power. You read that the apostles 'went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it'. You read that he was transfigured on the mountain with staggering brightness and yet that the voice from on high bore witness to him. Likewise at the Jordan, you read of the dove identifying him and the voice giving testimony. So these two, voice and sign, everywhere equally co-operate, by divine generosity, to inspire the faith, for by both these windows a wide entrance to the mind lies open for the truth.

2. Do you see that even majesty yields to love? That is how it is, brothers. Love neither looks up to nor looks down on anybody. It regards as equal all who love each other truly, bringing together in itself the lofty and the lowly. It makes them not only equal but one. Perhaps up till now you have thought God should be an exception to this law of love; but anyone who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Why wonder at this? He has become like one of us. But I said too little: not 'like one of us', but 'one of us'. It is not enough for him to be on a par with men, he is a man. Hence he lays claim to our land for himself, not as a possession but as his homeland. And why not claim it? From there is his bride, from there his bodily substance, from there the Bridegroom himself, from there the two become one flesh. If one flesh, why not also one homeland? 'The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men.' Therefore as man he inherits the earth, as Lord he rules over it, as Creator he controls it, as Bridegroom he shares it. By saying 'in our land' he has disclaimed proprietorship over it, he has not disdained participation in it. These thoughts have been inspired by the great goodness of the Bridegroom's words, that he was pleased to say 'in our land'. Now let's look at the rest [of the text] .

3. 'The voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.' This is a sign that winter is past, but also a warning that the time for pruning is at hand. This is the literal sense. Usually the voice of the turtle-dove does not sound very sweet, but it suggests things that are sweet. If you buy the little bird she is cheap, but if you make her an object of discussion, her price is high. With her voice more akin to mourning than to singing, she reminds us that we are pilgrims. I listen willingly to the voice of the teacher who does not stir up applause for himself but compunction in me. You really resemble the turtle-dove if you preach repentance: and if you want your words to be convincing you must depend more on your repentance than on your eloquence. As in many situations but above all in this business, example is more effective than preaching. You will stamp your preaching with authority if you are conscious of accepting for yourself the values you preach. Actions speak louder than words. Practice what you preach, and not only will you correct me more easily but also free yourself from no light reproach. You will not be the target if someone says: 'They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.' Nor need you be afraid to hear: 'You who teach others, will you not teach yourself?'

4. 'The voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.' As long as men's reward for worshipping God was only of the earth, even the earth that flows with milk and honey, they failed to see themselves as pilgrims on earth, nor did they mourn like the turtle-dove as if recalling their homeland. Instead they confused exile with homeland, pampering themselves with rich foods and drinking honeyed wine. So for a long time the voice of the turtle-dove was not heard in our land. When the promise of the kingdom became known, then men realized that they had no lasting city here, and they began to seek with all their longing the one that is to come. It was then that the voice of the turtle-dove was first heard clearly in our land. Now meanwhile a holy soul ardently desires the presence of Christ, he endures the deferment of the kingdom painfully, he salutes from afar with groans and sighs the homeland he longs for— do you not think that anybody on this earth who behaves like this is in the position of the chaste and mournful turtle-dove? From then 'the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land'. Why should the absence of Christ not move me to frequent tears and daily groanings? 'Lord, all that I long for is known to you, my sighing is no secret from you.' 'I am worn out with groaning' as you know; but happy is the man who can say: 'Every night I drench my pillow and soak my bed with tears.' These groanings are to be found not only in me but in 'all those who have longed for his appearing'. This is what he himself said: 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will mourn', as if he were to say: then the voice of the turtle-dove-will be heard.

5. So it is, good Jesus: those days came. For 'creation itself has been groaning in one great act of giving birth', 'longing for the revealing of the sons of God'. 'And not only creation, but we too groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, for our bodies to be set free', for we know that to live in the body means to pilgrimage apart from you. Nor are these groanings in vain, for heaven's answer is merciful: 'Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise', says the Lord.' That mourning voice was heard too in the days of the Fathers, but it was rare, and each person's groaning was within himself. Hence one of them said: 'My secret to myself, my secret to myself'. But he who said, 'My groaning is not hidden from you', clearly showed that it was hidden, because it was hidden from all but God. Therefore in those days one could not say 'the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land', because it was the secret of a few and not yet divulged to the multitude. But when the public proclamation was made: 'Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God', that dove-like mourning became of relevance to all, and the reason for mourning was the same for all, because all had knowledge of the Lord, as we read in the prophet: "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest", says the Lord.'

6. But if the mourners be many, what does he mean by speaking of one? The voice of the turtle-dove, he says. Why not turtle-doves? Perhaps the Apostle explains it where he says that 'the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'. That's how it is: he who inspires men to mourn is introduced as mourning. And however great the number whose mourning you hear, it is his voice that sounds through the lips of all. But why not his, since he forms every voice in the mouth [crying] for the needs of each? Indeed 'to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'. A person's voice makes him manifest, and indicates his presence. Listen then to how the Holy Spirit has a voice, according to Scripture: 'The Spirit breathes where he wills, and you hear his voice, but you do not know whence he comes or whither he goes.' Although that dead teacher who taught the dead the letter that brings death was ignorant of this, we know, we who 'have passed out of death and into life through the life-giving Spirit. By the light that he gives us, by a sure experience day after day, we are convinced that our desires and groanings come from him and go to God, to find mercy there in the eyes of God. For when did God make the voice of his own Spirit ineffectual? He 'knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God'.

7. The turtle-dove is commended not only for its mourning but also for its chastity. For it was by merit of this that it was worthy to be offered up as a sacrificial victim for the virgin birth. Scripture says 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young doves'. And though elsewhere the Holy Spirit is usually designated by the dove, yet because it is a lustful bird, it is not a fit offering for the Lord except when it was young and ignorant of lust. But no age is stated for the turtle-dove, for its chastity is acknowledged at any age. It is content with one mate; if he is lost it does not take another, thus arguing against man's tendency to marry more than once. Now, although as a remedy for incontinence this is only a venial fault, still the incontinence that demands it is a disgrace. It is shameful that reason cannot lead man to that uprightness which nature achieves in the bird. During its widowhood you may see the turtle-dove fulfilling with unflagging zeal the duties of holy widowhood. Everywhere you see it alone, everywhere you hear it mourning; you never see it perched on a green bough - a lesson to you to avoid the green but poisonous shoots of sensual pleasure. Rather it haunts the mountain ridges and the tops of trees, to teach us to shun the pleasures of earth and to love those of heaven.