

MUSINGS

Some reflections by Sandy Butzow on *The Song of Songs*
after the course by Sister Mary Aquin in Fall 2008

Hesdin of Amiens, c. 1450-55



The Catholic women's college that I attended in the 1950's prescribed reading *The Song of Songs* as part of our senior Old Testament class. I guess they thought we were finally mature enough to grasp the meaning of the graphic love images without harm to our psyches, an odd solicitude given that a quarter of the class were going to be married the summer after graduation and were hopefully at least initiated into the mysteries of intimacy! The good old priest who taught the class had us, with no preparation, take turns reading the verses aloud. Very few of us had any acquaintance with the poetry and, unfortunately, we broke down in fits of giggles and embarrassment. The poor man's explanation that the poems were an allegory of God's love for his creatures and the Church in particular served to settle us down, but seemed to me another palliative take on some tremendous mystery. I recognized the gorgeousness and passion of the words, but I was so used to inadequate and anemic commentaries on religious subjects that I just shelved the whole experience for later meditation.

The time for this particular meditation didn't come for another twenty years. I had met and was getting ready to marry my true love, a pious Christian gentleman, very well versed in biblical matters. He suggested that we use *The Song of Songs* as the basis for the readings at the ceremony. I had wanted poetry to be part of the wedding but was leaning romantically toward Browning or mystically toward Rabindranath Tagore. Upon re-reading *The Song*, however, I was so struck with the images, the fervor, the frankness of the expression of powerful emotions, the elegance of phrasing, the cadence of the music, that we decided together to read a large part of it as part of our vows. Our homilist emphasized that "love is strong as death, harsh as the grave; its tongues flame, a fierce and holy blaze," but Jim and I through our long years together have had fun remembering how we thought of ourselves as gazelles and doves and leopards and horses adorned with pomegranates and jewels and silk and shells. We still on occasion read these passages to each other, and they still elicit the most exotic perceptions of nature and human affection. I am beginning to understand the allusions to God's infinite tenderness for his creatures as I understand a little more of who God is. I have only to see a crystal of sunlight or the line on a leaf or an aged tear duct under a microscope to be moved beyond feeling by the Silence beyond and her care for the sparrow.

"Yes, I am black ! And radiant!" sings the ancient poetess. She may have been a black woman from the Nubian deserts or from even farther along the rivers and sands of those times, and she was scorned by her neighbors but beloved by her king. I have reflected recently that she could be singing a triumphant psalm to the gradual erasing of gender and racial barriers in our society. There is much to give us hope after this last election in the realms of equality and possibility. Could we not read that God is saying that those formerly despised are my beloved people whom I bring now to my inmost chambers. God is asking all of us to join in this loving celebration. And who could not look on Barack Obama and his lovely Michelle and their obvious delight in each other and not be able to say with them:

*"O for your kiss! For your love
More enticing than wine,
For your scent and sweet name –
For all this they love you."*

So I think God is saying very clearly that the ways of love and understanding, of openness, of passion, of sexual maturity, are the ways to the kingdom. We are still seeing the road through a cloud darkly, but we can be enlightened by the composers of *The Song*. These people of old may have known more directly than we what God's love entails.