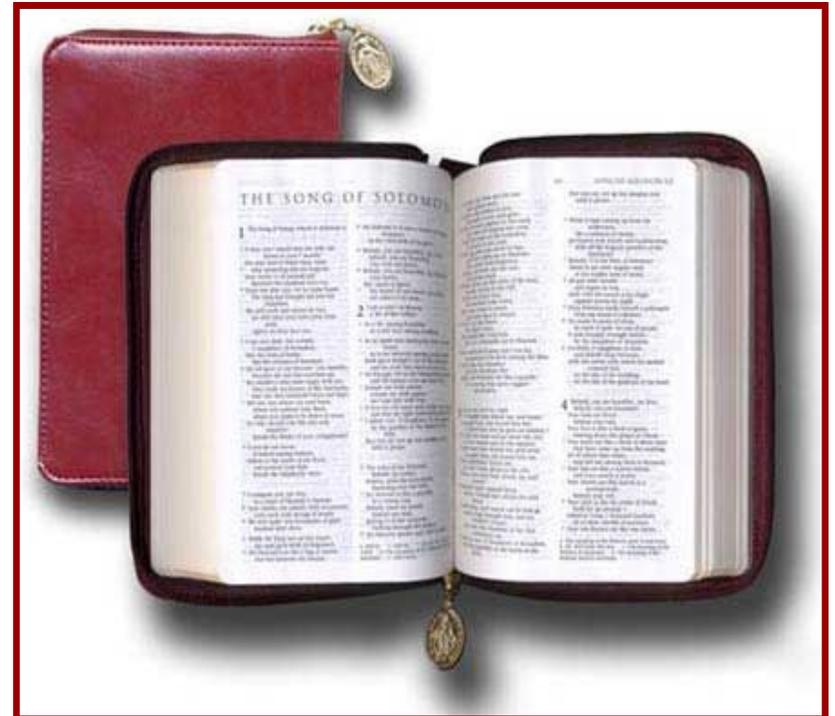




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SONG OF SONGS—71

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



HE FEEDS AMONG THE LILIES

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.

He Feeds Among the Lilies

“My beloved is mine and I am his; he feeds among the lilies.” Who would now accuse the Bride of presumption or insolence, if she says that she is admitted into the company of him who feeds among the lilies? Even if she said he fed among the stars, the very fact that he is said to feed would make it seem a very ordinary thing to enjoy his friendship, for the act of feeding sounds a commonplace and humble thing. And when she says he feeds among the lilies she introduces a note of abasement which takes away and dispels any accusation of presumption. For what are lilies? According to the word of God they are ‘the grass of the fields which today is and tomorrow is thrown into the oven.’ What then is he who feeds on grass like a lamb or a calf? He must be a lamb or a fatted calf! But you may have been sufficiently alert to notice that the lilies are mentioned not as his food, but as his place of feeding: he feeds among the lilies, not on them. That is the point. He does not eat grass like an ox, but walks in the grass, lies down on the grass like one of the herd; and what claim to greatness can there be in that? What glory can there be for the Bride to have as her beloved someone who acts like this? To take it literally then, the modesty of the Bride and her prudence are shown in her speech, as she directs her words with judgment and tempers the glory of her state by the modesty of her speech.

The Bridegroom has many other lilies in his garden besides those the prophet has mentioned to us: truth, clemency, and righteousness.

It will not be difficult for each of you to find other such lilies in the garden of so delightful a Bridegroom.

2. Nevertheless she knows that he who feeds and he who gives food are one, lingering among the lilies yet reigning above the stars. But she recalls the humble deeds of her beloved very willingly because of his humility, as I said; but even more so because he began to be her beloved from the time he began to feed. And not merely from that time but for that reason, for he who is God above is the beloved below; above the stars he reigns and among the lilies he loves. Even above the stars he loved because he who is love can never anywhere do other than love. But until he came down to the lilies and revealed himself feeding among the lilies his love was not returned and he did not become the beloved. 'But,' you say, 'was he not loved by the patriarchs and prophets?' Yes, but not until he was seen by them feeding among the lilies. You must admit that they saw him whom they foresaw, unless, that is, you are so lacking in perception as to maintain that one who sees in the spirit sees nothing. Why were they called seers (for the prophets were thus called) if they saw nothing? Surely because they desired to see him although they did not actually do so, but they could not desire to see him in the flesh if they had not seen him in the spirit. Were all those who wished to see him prophets, then, or did they all have faith? Those who saw were either prophets or followers of the prophets. To have believed is to have seen. Not only is it possible for him who sees by a spirit of prophecy, but also for him who sees by faith. And if a man claims to see in the spirit, I think he may well be right.

3. So he who gives food to all has deigned to come down to the lilies and feed among them, and thus become the Beloved, for he could not be beloved before he was recognized. And when the Bride mentions the beloved, she points this out as the cause of her love for him and her recognition of him.

We must find refreshment in the spiritual meaning among the lilies; to understand it physically would be nonsense. We must show, as far as we can, what these spiritual lilies are. We must describe, I think, what the beloved feeds on among the lilies, whether it is the lilies themselves or other plants or flowers hidden among the lilies. This appears somewhat difficult because he is described as feeding himself, not others. Now without doubt he does feed others; anything else would be unworthy of him, but to say that he feeds himself smacks of insufficiency and this cannot be stated of him even in a spiritual sense without lessening his majesty. I do not remember having yet called your attention to the fact that he is mentioned in the Canticle as taking food, although you will remember, I think, that he is mentioned as pasturing the flock. The Bride asked him to show her where he pastured his flock and made them lie down at noon. Now she describes him as taking food, which she has not mentioned before, but she does not now ask him to show her the place, but indicates it herself, saying expressly that it is among the lilies. She knows this now although she did not know before, because she cannot be equally familiar with what is lofty in the heights and what is lowly on earth. It is a lofty matter, and its place is lofty, and not even the Bride has yet been permitted to approach it.

4. Therefore he who feeds his flocks, the shepherd of all, laid aside his glory, even taking food himself; he is found among the lilies. There he is seen and deeply loved by the Church, poor as he is poor, and, being like her in this, he becomes the Beloved; and not for this reason alone but because of his truth, mercy and justice; because in him the promises are fulfilled, iniquities are pardoned. The arrogant demons are judged, along with the prince of demons. Such then he appeared, worthy of being loved, true in himself, but gentle and just to men. Truly worthy to be loved and embraced from the depths of men's hearts! How can the Church hesitate to trust herself completely to one so faithful to his word, so ready to forgive, so just in defending? The psalmist had foretold this, saying: 'Go forth in splendor and beauty to reign.' Whence is this splendor and beauty? From the lilies, I think. Has anything more splendor than a lily? Likewise, nothing is lovelier than the Bridegroom. What then are these lilies from which comes this glorious beauty. 'Ride on to reign in truth, mercy and justice.' These are the lilies - the lilies which spring from the earth, blooming brightly, fairer than all the flowers on earth, sweeter than the sweetest perfumes. So the Bridegroom is among the lilies and it is thus that he is altogether lovely and handsome. Otherwise, seen in the frailty of flesh, he has no form or comeliness.

9. I said 'one', but my mouth spoke out of the poverty of my heart. One will indeed be insufficient; at least two are necessary. I refer to self-control and innocence; the one without the other will not save us. It will be vain for me to invite the Bridegroom to come to either of these, for he is said to feed among the lilies, not to feed on one lily. So I will take pains to have more than one lily, so that he who would feed among the lilies shall not find fault with his servant for having only one lily, and turn away in displeasure. So I must put innocence first, and if I can join self-control to it I shall consider myself rich in the possession of my lilies. But if I can add a third to these - patience - I shall be a king. It could be that the two would suffice, but in times of temptation they might not be enough, for the life of man on earth is a battle with temptation, and patience is necessary, the nurse and guardian of both. And if the lover of lilies should come and find these three, I am sure that he will not scorn to feed with us, and eat the Passover with us; for he will find great sweetness in the first two, and in the third there is great protection.

We shall see later how he who gives food to all is said to feed. But now it is clear that not only does the Bridegroom appear among the lilies, but he cannot be found anywhere else, since even part of him is a lily, and he is himself a lily, the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

8. The friends of the bridegroom have lilies too, but not in great numbers. For they have all received the Spirit in their measure, and in their measure also virtues and gifts, but he alone possesses the Spirit without measure who possesses it fully. It is one thing to possess lilies, and another to have nothing but lilies. Whom can you show me among the sons of captivity so blameless and so holy that he can fill all his land with flowers - and with flowers such as these? Not even a child a day old is without stain upon earth. A man is great if he can grow even three or four lilies on his land among the thickets of thorns and thistles, which are the deep-rooted seeds of the ancient curse. For myself, poor as I am, I am well pleased if I can clear my little plot of earth by uprooting and banishing this evil crop of unrighteousness and wickedness sufficiently to grow even one lily, so that he who feeds among the lilies may sometimes see fit to feed with me.

5. Glorious among lilies is truth, radiant to behold, and very fragrant; its radiance and the radiance of the Eternal Light, the splendor and the figure of God's substance. It is clearly a lily which our earth brought forth for a new benediction, and prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles. As long as the earth lay under a curse, it brought forth thorns and thistles. But now truth has sprung from the earth by the Lord's blessing, the flower of the field and the lily of the valley. Recognize the lily by its radiance, which shone in the night for the shepherds when it first bloomed, for the Gospel says that the Angel of the Lord stood before them and the brightness of the Lord shone round about them. Truly the Lord's radiance, because it was not that of an angel, but that of the lily. The angel was present, certainly, but it was the lily which shone, even from Bethlehem. Recognize the lily by its fragrance, by which it made itself known to the Magi when they were far away. The star did indeed appear, but the Wise Men would not have followed it had they not been drawn by the secret sweetness of the lily's bloom. Truth is indeed a lily whose fragrance awakens faith, whose splendor enlightens the mind.

Lift your eyes to the very person of the Lord who says in the Gospel, 'I am the Truth,' and see how fitly truth may be compared to a lily. Observe, if you have not already done so, the golden stamens springing from the center of the flower, arranged with beautiful regularity in the form of a crown and surrounded by the white petals. Now recognize in Christ the gold of divinity crowned with the purity of his human nature, that is Christ wearing the diadem with which his mother crowned him. For when he wears the diadem with which his father crowned him he dwells in light inaccessible, and you cannot yet see him thus. But I will speak of this another time.

6. Truth, then, is a lily; so is clemency. Well may clemency be called a lily, for it has the whiteness of innocence and the fragrance of hope, 'for a man of peace life yet remains.' The clement man has a good hope; even in this present life he is a shining example of fellowship. Does not the lily give off the fragrance of hope as well as the brightness of courtesy? Surely clemency, as well as truth, springs from the earth? Just so the Lamb, who is the ruler of the earth, springs from the earth - that Lamb who was led to the slaughter and opened not his mouth.

Clemency and truth, then, spring from the earth, as does righteousness, for the prophet Isaiah says, 'Shower, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open and bring forth a Savior, and let righteousness arise with him.' You know from Scripture that righteousness is a lily, for 'the just man shall grow as the lily and blossom for ever before the Lord'. This is not the lily which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven; it will blossom for ever. And it will blossom before the Lord, for the righteous man shall be held in everlasting remembrance, and shall not be afraid of evil tidings, that is, the tidings by which sinners are commanded to go into the furnace of fire. The radiance of this lily shines on all except on those who take no pleasure in it. It is the sun, but not the sun which rises on the evil and the good, for those who shall say, 'The sun of righteousness has not risen upon us,' have never seen his light. Those who have seen it are those who say, 'Upon you who fear God the sun of righteousness will arise'. So the radiance of this lily is for the righteous, but its fragrance reaches even the wicked, though not for their good. We hear the righteous saying, 'We are the goodly fragrance of Christ in every place, but to some a fragrance of life leading to life, to others a fragrance of death leading to death'. Who, even the very wicked, does not approve the sentiments of the righteous, even though he may not like his actions? Happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. For a man judges himself if he approves the good but does not love it; he is not happy but wretched, being condemned by his own judgment. Who is more wretched than a man for whom the fragrance of life is the harbinger not of life but of death? Or perhaps its bearer rather than its harbinger.

7. The Bridegroom has many other lilies in his garden besides those the prophet has mentioned to us: truth, clemency, and righteousness. It will not be difficult for each of you to find other such lilies in the garden of so delightful a Bridegroom. It is full and overflowing with them; who can count them? There are as many lilies as there are virtues, and there is no end to virtues with the Lord of virtues. If the fulness of virtues is in Christ, so too is the fullness of lilies. Perhaps he called himself a lily because he is wholly surrounded by lilies, and all the events of his life are lilies: his conception, birth, way of life, teaching, the miracles he did, the sacraments he ordained, his passion and death, his resurrection and ascension. Which of these are not radiant and sweetly fragrant? At his conception there streamed from the fulness of the overshadowing spirit a shaft of heavenly brightness so blinding that not even the holy Virgin could have endured it had not the power of the Spirit given her shade. His birth radiated through the undefiled purity of his mother; his life was aflame with innocence, his teaching with truth, his miracles with purity of heart, his sacraments with the hidden power of his goodness; his passion shone with his acceptance of suffering, his death with the freedom he had to avoid death, his resurrection with the radiance which gave fortitude to the martyrs, his ascension with the glory of promises fulfilled. How goodly also is the fragrance of faith in all these mysteries - that faith is ours, and fills our hearts and minds, although we have not seen their radiance. 'Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have believed.' May my part in these be the fragrance of life which proceeds from them. It is by means of faith that I breathe in their fragrance; indeed, their number is so great that they lighten the burden of my exile, and ever renew in my heart the longing for my true home.