

THE SONG OF LOVE

A COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THE CANTICLE

LET *him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.* How greatly must the soul feel the need of God's love if, without any provocation on his part or any preliminaries on hers, she breaks out intemperately into this appeal for love! What effrontery she has! What brazen boldness! That she entertains such desires interiorly or that she utters longings in private is not surprising; but to give public expression to her instinctive yearnings and in such outspoken terms is startling and embarrassing. Yet, without pausing to consider her lack of restraint, without reflecting on the suitability of time, place or words (for where there is love there is neither timidity nor shame), she openly and frankly cries out to be kissed. It seems as if she had lost all control over herself; as if convention, prudence, worldly wisdom were thrown to the winds and she were now left to the mercy of her natural impulses. She prefaces her request with no flattery or ingratiating remarks: she asks for no mercenary favour. Abruptly and without ceremony, from the abundance of her heart, she bursts out incontinently: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth'. How imperative must be her craving for happiness, for union, for the embrace of love! Her whole nature seems to express itself in that cry. Apart from God she can find no rest. The rivers flow back to the sea: the catapulted stone falls back to the earth: the dove confronted with the flood returns to the Ark. The soul is irresistibly impelled to seek the tranquillity and peace in the embrace of God. Oh how strong is the power of love! How completely absorbing is her desire to be one with the Beloved!

These profound yearnings teach her intuitively what later experience, disillusionment, sorrow and disappointment tend to confirm: there is no contentment and permanent satisfaction to be found in any other. Let *him* and no other kiss me! She may seek to cool her ardour in the enjoyment of other loves; she may experiment with all that beauty and

power and honour can bestow; but, eventually, she will be forced to acknowledge that her thirst is not slaked, that her longings are not assuaged. If she cannot attain the bliss of God's embrace, then all else serves but to increase and inflame her desire.

I tempted all his servitors but to find

My own betrayal in their constancy:

In faith to him, their fickleness to me;

Their traitorous trueness and their loyal deceit;

Naught shelters thee who wilt not shelter me,

Lo! naught contents thee, who contentest not me!

What the soul primarily and ultimately longs for is the *kiss* of the Beloved. She knows well that his glance is pleasing, his touch comforting, his words reassuring. She takes delight in his promises, feels secure in his protection. For all these favours she is not ungrateful. But what is all this compared to the thing she most desires? Let him *kiss* me! Nothing but the highest token of affection, nothing but the supreme embrace can satisfy her deepest needs.

Why then does she not hasten to his arms? Why must the initial step be taken by God? For she says: Let *him* kiss *me*. Because the soul can desire and ask, she can prepare herself by prayer and action; she can hope and wait; but she cannot kiss his mouth. She is able, like Magdalen, to kiss his foot in token of repentance; she can offer the kiss of peace and reconciliation. Like Peter she may kiss his hand as a sign of service and discipleship; she may offer homage. But the kiss of the mouth, whereby God breathes life and inspiration and perfect charity into the soul, cannot be attained by mere desire. She cannot of her own initiative, by her own powers, attain to God; nor can she meet him in the kiss of contemplation unless he first bend down and regard the humility of his handmaid. For God dwells in light inaccessible: no man hath seen him at any time. Between his infinite majesty and her creaturely lowliness yawns an abyss she is unable to span.

It is, therefore, from a feeling of impotence, from a sense of modesty, that she addresses herself not to the Beloved but to his friends. She endeavours to ingratiate herself with them, and without mentioning his name, leads them to

understand that though she may not kiss, she does, at least, sincerely reverence and adore.

But if in her shyness she has opened her heart indirectly to the Beloved through intermediaries, she now turns suddenly to him and endeavours to excuse her temerity on the grounds of her trustful love. She says, as it were: If my desires, O Beloved, appear to be presumptuous, it is your benign generosity which has provoked them. My love and my confidence have taken so complete a possession of my faculties that I have become unconscious of your majesty and only conscious of your affection: *for thy love is better than wine.*

As his love is the need of the soul, so is it also the stir and joy of the heart. The pleasures of sense, like wine, bring intoxication and delight, comfort and refreshment. They warm the heart, renew the vigour of the body and fill the mind with exaltation. Man is exhilarated and enthralled by them and made oblivious of his true self; but their ecstasy lasts only for a time. The effect of such heady wine quickly evaporates, leaving him disconsolate and despondent, a prey to remorse of conscience. The enjoyment of God's love, on the contrary, is sweeter than any pleasure the world can offer. It leaves the sting of regret behind it, but rather enkindles a desire for deeper experience, floods the soul with a more pervading happiness and reinvigorates her with fortitude and endurance. No fleeting delight that earth can offer bears comparison with the abiding serenity and peace produced by divine love. How could it? The senses have but a limited capacity for joy. The eyes are gladdened with light: the ears with melody: the touch with warmth: the palate with sweetness. But if the light be too dazzling, the eyes are blinded and hurt; if the sound be thunderous, the ears are afflicted with deafness; if the heat be too ardent, the skin is burned; if the taste too pungent, the palate is disgusted and sickened. The spiritual faculties, on the other hand, are not numbed but quickened by their contact with the infinite. The memory becomes more conscious of eternity, the intellect becomes illumined with wisdom and the will becomes more and more transfigured by love. The enjoyment of the soul grows rather than lessens; and her sensi-

tivity to the raptures of the spirit is progressively heightened and refined. Never does the sweetness of divine love become cloying, never does it grow insipid. If at times it inebriates with the torrent of divine pleasures (Ps. 35, 9), the soul is not left with a deadened and sated appetite. He who drinks of this shall thirst again (John 4, 13).

How clearly the soul knows all this by intuition! But her purpose and determination are reinforced by reflecting on it, and she finds ever deeper and deeper reasons for clinging tenaciously to her fundamental convictions. That is why she adds:

Thine ointments have a sweet fragrance. She sees in divine love, as in an ointment compounded of various and precious ingredients, many constituent elements. God's love expresses itself not in infinite power only, but also in infinite truth and infinite goodness. He is her wisdom, her justice, her sanctification and her redemption. His love operates in a variety of modes. It enlightens and fosters, feeds and invigorates, moulds and transforms. It guides back the erring, directs the upright, supports the weak, encourages the strong, rewards the perfect and gives ultimate bliss to the saints. The sorrowful find in it comfort and solace, the depressed pluck from it renewed hope and strength. It is, in short, an ointment that heals, that soothes and that mitigates the pains of life.

And as perfumes not only gratify the sense of smell and awaken the emotions, but possess a remarkable power of reviving, by association, the memory of bygone scenes and distant friends and of re-creating affections connected with these persons and places, so God's love stirs the memory by the recollection of his past mercies, illumines the understanding to see more clearly the significance of his all-pervading action and arouses the will to emulate and pursue what it feels to be so eminently desirable. How fragrant and delicious it is! How attractive it makes the soul who is bathed in it! It has a diffusive quality that pleases all who encounter it. Mere contact with a soul fragrant with divine love is sufficient to evoke a vibrant response to spiritual realities. Such love scatters its sweetness athwart the world, bringing hope and salvation and life to the weak as well as

to the strong, and affects even the remotest peoples.

And so beneficent is it in its effects that the mere mention of the name of the Beloved, who is its source, affords joy and consolation and encouragement. It is *as ointment poured out*: for it provides light and food and medicine. When it is preached, it enlightens the mind; when it is meditated on, it nourishes the soul; and when it is invoked, it softens and alleviates the wounds of soul and body.

Let St Bernard explain what it means: 'Is any of you sad? Let the name of Jesus come into your heart. Is any man falling into crime, or in his despair rushing upon death? Let him call upon that life-giving name: does he not speedily begin to breathe again and to revive? In the presence of that saving name, who has ever remained bound by hardness of heart, ignoble sloth, rancour of mind, or cold indifference? Who, when in fear and trembling in the midst of dangers, has called upon that name of Power, and has not found a calm assurance of safety and freedom from apprehension? Where is the man who, when labouring under doubt and uncertainty, has not had the clear shining of faith restored to him by the influence of the name of Jesus? Nothing is so powerful as the name of Jesus to restrain the impulse of anger, to repress pride, to cure the wound of envy, to bridle the impulse of fleshly desires. For when I utter the name of Jesus I set before my mind not only a man meek and humble in heart, moderate, pure, benign, merciful, and in short conspicuous for every saintly quality, but also in the same individual the Almighty God who restores me to health by his example and renders me strong by his assistance.'

How is it, then, that in spite of the fundamental need for God and his love, in spite of the soul's rapture in the possession of this love, and in spite of the tranquil happiness it diffuses wherever it is known, the desire for this love is not universal? The answer is to be found in the phrase that follows: *Therefore do the maidens love thee*. It is only the maidens, the pure in heart, who see God and are filled with desire for him. Those who are imbued with intellectual ambition, dazzled by worldly success or enervated by sensual appetites, are unable to conceive the worth, the relev-

ance, the utter necessity of divine love. Their eyes are held. They are shrouded in a web of their own fancies, desires, impulses and weaknesses. They are distracted by distraction unto distraction, torn asunder by a faction of warring fears and anxieties. How can they see God when they lack that single-mindedness which cuts through all entanglements? Because they fail to see, they fail to desire and love; because they are blind to God's beauty, they feel no attraction towards his love. They lie pinioned to the earth. The bonds that fetter them are made of gossamer, easily broken and thrown aside, but because they have no faith, they are without strength. For it is faith that digs the foundation of love. Faith is the knowledge that breeds desire. Faith sees things from the divine viewpoint: it gazes on the universe with the eyes of God: it looks out from the centre of eternity, so that everything in time falls and moves infallibly into its appointed place. Thus, divine love fills the forefront of the soul's vision and all else recedes into the void of immeasurable distance. But who have this penetrating gaze of faith? Who are imbued with this desire and this love? Only the maidens, the children at heart, the innocent. The self-seekers, the worldly wise, the complacent and the pharisaic 'seeing, see not' (Matt. 13, 13).



REVIEWS

A STUDY IN ST MARK. By Austin Farrer. (Dacre Press; 25s.)

The Church's children have for centuries venerated the Holy Scriptures, and they will do so to the end of time. But why do we call them 'holy'? Because through these Scriptures 'holy men of God spoke, borne along by the Holy Ghost' (2 Pet. 1, 21); because the Scriptures contain holy truths, and finally because they are a powerful means of generating holiness of life (St Thomas, *in Rom.* 1, lect. 2). The Scriptures are a library of books of different epochs, origins, authorship, literary build-up, language, etc. Yet all these books are one in that they are inspired scripture. Inspiration is the essence of scripture, the profoundly mysterious reason why these books are not as other books, even though to all outward appearances they may again and again appear as other books. Inspiration