During this past week I was reading an article about the construction of a tunnel under the Bosphorus Sea linking European to Asian Istanbul to enable a subway link for the first time ever between the two parts of that great city. Like similar projects in places like Rome the construction soon revealed all sorts of evidence of former occupation of the site. On the European side of the city, which is the more ancient, the first finding was the Byzantine port area and of at least 25 wooden hulls which lay where they had been moored before an earthquake had caused the whole port area to sink. Each ships’ hull was an archeologist’s dream and each was carefully moved to be preserved and researched and eventually displayed in a museum. Some of the ships had their original cargoes still in them which gave amazing insights into ancient trade and commerce. But of course each discovery set back the building of the tunnel much to the exasperation of the Turkish Government. Already the project was years behind. But just as the work was recommencing the digging revealed yet another layer of antiquity and one that could not be ignored. Ancient utensils were turned up which were thought to be Neolithic, that is belonging to the period 6000 years ago, long before any known settlement in the area. Further investigation revealed a complete Neolithic settlement with primitive shelters and more pots. By this stage the Turkish President was losing his cool and referred to the major project being held up by a “few pots and pans”. Eventually the ancient site was secured and the project completed.

That is rather a long introduction to the fact that our revised three year lectionary every so often turns up an unexplored gem. Today we have the briefest of readings from the Song of Solomon in the Hebrew Scriptures which will be the only reading from that source for the whole year. It follows last Sunday’s reading from First Kings where we heard about King Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. I guess by association we may as well hear part of the Song which bears his name. The Song has had a rather checkered career among the
books of the Bible. It is basically a collection of Hebrew love poetry which neither mentions God or the Lord. For that reason it only made it into the Hebrew Canon (the authorized books) by the skin of its teeth. The rabbis argued that the Song was an allegory representing the love between God and Israel. As the Hebrew Scriptures became part of the Christian Bible the Christians translated the allegory in terms of Christ and his Church. Other interpreters, especially Bernard of Clairvaux, interpreted the Song it terms of the love between the individual Christian and Christ.

It was really only in the late Twentieth Century as a result of the sexual revolution and the rediscovery of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality that Bible scholars and spiritual writers “rediscovered” the Song and began to read it for what it is primarily, that is, an amazing collection of sensual love poetry, rich and beautiful in its imagery, and a far cry from the church’s usual approach to the human body and to human sexuality.

Just as an aside, among the readings in the Marriage Service in the Book of Common Prayer there is a composite reading from the Song of Solomon which is without doubt the most popular reading among marriage couples. It commences with part of today’s excerpt, “Arise my love, my fair one, and come away,” and concludes with some verses from Chapter 8 of the Song, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is stronger than death, passion fierce as the grave.” I would have to admit that the average marriage reader probably has little idea of the sheer passion of those words taken out of context as they are.

If you do nothing else this week try reading through the eight short chapters of the Song of Solomon in your Bibles and hear it for what it is. There is nothing wrong with the traditional allegorical interpretations but it is important to say that they are secondary to the original meaning. The opening verses of the Song are a bit of a giveaway: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out.” Wow! This is no ordinary book but one which opens up a much neglected and most misunderstood area of human and spiritual insight. For so much of Christian history and especially in the Christian West, the human body and human sexuality were often treated very negatively. This was directly related to the poor treatment of women. Sexuality rather than being seen as a God given gift was treated as a
cause for human sinfulness and therefore tolerated at best. Listen to the words of the Marriage Service of 1662 where it says that marriage “is not be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding;” and the second reason for marriage being “ordained as a remedy for sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.”

With such an understanding is it little wonder that the poor old Song was not only treated suspiciously but allegorized to within an inch of its life!

But reading the Song for what it is, a series of love poems, what do we find? First is that human love, the mutual love between two people is something to be honored and celebrated as a gift from God. And secondly that our human loving has a spiritual dimension to it. I was brought up on CS Lewis’s book “Four Loves” in which Lewis enunciated the different words for love in Greek giving top marks to Agape love as being divine love and bottom marks to Eros because it was erotic, sexual love. Somehow this treatment just confirmed that human sexuality was ungodly! The negative stereotype remained. Rather now we would say that all love is ultimately of God and that different types of love, the love of God, the love of others, the love of self and the love between two people, all derive from the one divine source. Indeed we could say that the ecstasy experienced in mutual love making has about it something of the divine, as experienced in spiritual ecstasy in worship or prayer. You only have to read the saints like Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, or Theresa of Lisieux, or Francis of Assissi, or Julian of Norwich, to see that the spiritual ecstasy (being taken out of oneself) and sexual ecstasy have many similarities.

This change of interpretation of the Song mirrors a dramatic change in the area of spirituality and sexuality; even that we can use both words together says a good deal. But these changes in insight have helped the church coming to terms with the role of women in the church and then the ordination of women; and of the treatment of homosexuality in the church and then the ordination of lesbian and gay people; and more recently of the rethinking of marriage itself to embrace same sex marriage.
Well thank God for the buried treasures of the Bible like the Song of Songs. Whatever response you might want to make to this sermon, first please do one thing: Go home and read the Song! Thanks be to God who is love and who made us to love and to be loved. Amen.