

The Song of Songs is an exquisite collection of love poetry. It presents an inspired portrayal of love. God is Love and the Song of Songs paints a beautiful picture of human love created in the image and likeness of God. “The Song is seen as a beautiful picture of the ideal Israel, the chosen people whom the Lord leads by degrees to a greater understanding and closer union in the bond of perfect love.”ⁱ

“Christian tradition has followed Israel’s example in using marriage as an image for the relationship with God.”ⁱⁱ Jesus was so emphatically in love with his bride the church that he was willing to offer his life on the cross for the sanctity of his bride. “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27).

On this 22nd day of July, we celebrate the Memorial of Saint Mary Magdalene. Jesus had sought her out and drove seven demons out of her. Imagine how grateful she was to have had her life, once tormented by demons, restored to wholeness through the healing power of Christ. She wanted to give back (to reciprocate) the compassionate love of Jesus by doing all she could to respond in love and charity. Mary Magdalene became a benefactor of Jesus and his missionary efforts. She contributed from her own resources to underwrite the work of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

Love often involves suffering and sacrifice. When Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene stood with John and the Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross. On the third day, she went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with fragrant oils and spices. In her labor of love, she was honored as the first recorded eyewitness to the resurrection. Mary was so ecstatic to see the risen Lord that she did not want to let go of him. Jesus had to caution her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (Jn 20:17).

When we lose a loved one it is very difficult to let go. Our loss and grief can overwhelm us and we may even blame God for not sparing our loved ones. Like Mary, we may want to hold on and not let go. At times like this it may be helpful to read some of the love poetry from the Song of Songs. “Have you seen him whom my heart loves? I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go” (Sgs 4b-c).

For as dear as we hold a departed loved one, God’s love is infinitely greater than our own. God wants to reward the just for a life well lived. In our profound loss, we can rediscover Christ and the infinite love he has for each one of us. “‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.’ The one who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new’” (Rev 21:4-5a).

ⁱ Introductory note to the Song of Songs.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.