

## THE LORD DELIGHTS IN HIS CHURCH

Isaiah 62. 1-5

1 Corinthians 12. 1-11

John 2. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

This morning, I would like to focus briefly on the first reading given for the Second Sunday of Epiphany, the text from the prophet Isaiah. In order to appreciate this beautiful passage from Scripture, it is important to understand its context.

This part of the book of Isaiah was written after the Jews had returned to Judah from their period of captivity, that long period of nearly sixty years in the sixth century B.C. when they had been forced to live in exile in Babylon.

As chapter 62 of Isaiah opens, the Jews have returned to their homeland and have resolved to start their lives all over once again. Yet even though they had returned to the land that God had given to them, the Jews still felt very keenly the effects of the Babylonian destruction. As God's people looked around, they saw that some precious symbols of Jewish theology – the Temple and the uninterrupted reign of kings descending from King David – were in ruins; as were the walls surrounding the holy city of Jerusalem. This is the reality that the prophet addresses in Isaiah 62. God's people have lost their self-rule; their symbols of spiritual and physical security are absent; and somehow, all this suggests that God is absent.

Significantly, Isaiah's response to this reality is not to provide a word from God to his people; rather, the prophet's words are written on behalf of Zion and are directed (implicitly at least) to God. In these five short verses, the prophet stands in stubborn solidarity with the people of God; he refuses to budge until they are vindicated.

Through the rich imagery of his poem, Isaiah calls his people to see how Zion will live again in the future. He calls his readers to look beyond the rubble of Jerusalem to see the powerful reality that God will bring about one day.

Isaiah proclaims, ‘the nations shall see your vindication (or your righteousness), and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called “My Delight is in her”, and your land (will be called) “Married”; for the Lord delights in you...For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.’

On one level, of course, this text is a beautiful prophecy for the people of God, the people of Judah who had returned home after a very difficult time of exile. But on another level, it is also a prophecy for the greater people of God, those of us who make up his church today.

Just as in Isaiah’s time, Jerusalem seemed to be a sacred place forsaken by God’s sacred presence, so today, many human beings feel abandoned and cut off from the love of God. They feel that they have been cast off by the divine.

As we look at these verses that provide encouragement for such people, we see that Isaiah uses two metaphors. The first is a metaphor of land: ‘you shall no more be termed Forsaken, and *your land* shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called “My Delight is in her”, and *your land* (shall be called) “Married”; for the Lord delights in you.’ For those of us who may feel like a *deserted piece of land*; for those of us who may feel that our lives are like a *desolate place*; there is hope. Things will change.

In his prophetic poetry, Isaiah also uses the metaphor of marriage. In ancient Israelite culture, a woman who was not married had no way of having an income of her own. If her parents died, or if her brothers were dead or would not take her in, she was left without any way to survive but to beg.

To those of us who may feel as if we have been left at the altar (so to speak) with no-one to marry us, Isaiah offers words of hope. He is not speaking literally, of course, to those of us who are single; he is addressing the plight of those who feel deserted by God and desolate. To these people, the prophet says that God will actually come and claim them for his own. He will come, as it were, to marry them, and in doing so will give them a new name. No longer will they be called 'Desolate'; they will be called 'Hephzibah' (that's the word in Hebrew), which means 'My Delight is in Her'; and their land will be called 'Beulah' (that's the word in Hebrew), which means 'Married'.

These are not the only verses of Scripture where God talks about marrying his people. In the New Testament, the metaphor of marriage is used to describe the relationship that we are destined to have with God. In the gospels, our Lord is described on several occasions<sup>1</sup> as the bridegroom; and the Church of God is described in St Paul's letter to the Ephesians<sup>2</sup> and in the book of Revelation<sup>3</sup> as the bride, the one whom Christ loves and the one for whom he gave his life.

To those of us in the Christian Church who may feel deserted or desolate, the message of both the Old and New Testaments is clear: our God comes to us and says, 'you may feel unlovable. You may regret all of your sins, faults, bruises and past mistakes. But my delight is in you. Your name is Hephzibah. You will be married to me. Your name is Beulah.'

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mt 9. 15, Mk 2. 19, Lk 5. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eph 5. 22-33.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rev 19. 7.

And as we take in the enormity of this news, we can be changed. No, it is more than that. *We will indeed be changed*, as God gives us his righteousness in the place of our own sinfulness; as he gives us salvation that will shine like a burning torch and rescue us from the darkness of evil; and as we receive his Holy Spirit and begin to reveal his glory. Those of us who feel deserted and desolate will be changed. Those of us who feel insecure; those of us who feel as if people have stopped paying attention to us; those of us who feel as if our dignity has been damaged; those of us who feel left out by our group of friends; those of us who feel ignored by our families; those of us who are trying so hard just to be recognised: we all will be like a crown of beauty and a royal diadem in the hand of our God.

In some parts of Africa, when a young man wants to marry a girl, he will pay the girl's father one cow. The story is told of one girl, for whom no-one was willing to pay a cow. Perhaps she wasn't attractive; or perhaps she did not have winning personality. Anyway, one day a man unexpectedly insisted on giving her father ten cows for her hand in marriage. On her wedding day, that girl's face beamed so brightly. She had gone from being a 'nobody' to being the most distinguished woman in the village, because she was a ten-cow bride.

Today, no matter how we are feeling and no matter what we have done, our God comes to us in love; and he comes to claim us for his own. His desire is that our faces will be beaming with 'ten-cow joy'; for he delights in us.

Amen.