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## Epiphany 2 2010

I am preaching today on our Old Testament Lesson, Isaiah 62 vv 1-5, which you can find on p748 of the pew Bibles.

*For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.*

Zion and Jerusalem are of course effectively two names for the same place – the capital of Ancient Israel and the site of God's Temple. They stand also for the people of God, for the Church. So try to apply the message of the prophet to ourselves, to the Church here in England today and to God's Church throughout the world and in

all ages.

At the time of the prophecy, Jerusalem was in a pretty poor state. The Holy Land and the surrounding territories were caught up in the wars of several powerful empires – Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Median and Persian, all fighting for riches and domination. The result was that the holy city was several times besieged and twice sacked. The Temple and the city wall were reduced to ruins and the principal citizens were deported to a foreign land. Many had died in battle or as a result of hunger or disease. Those who were left in the holy land struggled for existence and there were tensions when at last the exiles were allowed to return. All these troubles had happened because the people had been faithless towards their God.

We might well feel that God's Church in our own generation faces many problems. We may feel that the glory of former times has passed away and that even survival is a struggle. The flame of faith flickers feebly in our own land.

*For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.*

The prophet will intercede for Zion. He will not give up on prayer. He knows that the promises of God are certain. John speaks of God's *grace and truth* revealed in Jesus. These are the **חסד ואמת** of the Old Testament – God's loving-kindness and faithfulness. The prophet prays for God's people in the knowledge that God will hear his prayer. Some commentators even think that it is God Who will not keep silent. The word of the prophet is the Word of God. The prophet's prayer is God's prayer. Jesus ever lives to intercede for us at God's right hand. We therefore pray for God's Church in Christ and with Christ in the certain knowledge that God hears and acts on our prayers.

*Until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a light that burneth.*

The prophet's prayer, God's prayer, is that His people will be filled with burning light. Warmth and light! What a difference they make. How important they are. God's people dwell in the warm glow of God's love. Jesus is the Light of the world and in Him we see light. Light cheers us up. It makes us feel safe. It enables us to see where we are going and what we are doing. God's prayer is that His people may be filled with the Light of Christ.

*And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory:*

Light also attracts. Maybe there is a sense here that the Gentiles – those who do not yet know God – will envy Israel – the people of God. *See how these Christians love one another*, the ancient Romans used to say. It is right that there should be a glow in the life of the Church which those outside envy. But they can have it too. The door is open. Anyone can come in. Anyone can join. People only have to repent and believe the Gospel and they too can join the people of God. Jesus is both *a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*.

*And thou shalt be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD shall name.*

A new name signifies a new beginning, a new you. Zion had been called *desolate* and *forsaken*, given her ruined condition after so many wars. She would receive a new name worthy of her new status as the redeemed of the LORD. We receive a Christian name when we are christened because we make a new beginning. We are born again in Christ.

*Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.*

God's people are precious. We are glorious. God's love for us is so great that He gave His Son to die for us. That is how much you and I matter to God. That is what the Church is worth to God – the Death of His Son. The glory of Jesus is that His love was such – His love for God the Father, His love for the human race, His love for you and me – was such that He offered His own life on the Cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, effecting the Atonement so that we may live in Him and He may live in us and so that we may partake of His glory and reign as kings and priests in life eternal. That is our calling, what we pray for, what the prophet prays for, what Jesus prays for.

*Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken, neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah:*

(Hephzi-bah means *my delight is in her* and Beulah means *married*.)

The prophet prays in the Will of God. Jerusalem is desolate and forsaken, but the prophet believes in **חסדואמת** – God's loving-kindness and faithfulness, what St John calls grace and truth, revealed in Jesus Christ, Who is full of grace and truth. The holy city, in the prophet's time, is desolate and forsaken, but the prophet knows that he is praying with God and God's Word will not return to Him void. The city surely will become *Hephzi-bah* and the land *Beulah*. If you ever feel that the Church – our Church here in Cuxton and Halling, the Church in England and the West, the Church anywhere in the world – is desolate and forsaken, pray with the prophet, pray with Jesus. It is God's Will that His people shall be called *my delight is in her* and their land *married*. It is God's Will that His Church should flourish and be fruitful. This is the prayer of the prophet and the prayer of Jesus. It can be our prayer as well. To pray is to align ourselves with the Will of God, to will what God wills. When we pray in accordance with God's Will we become part of the answer to our own prayers. We trust in the **חסדואמת** of God. We trust in Jesus.

*For the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.*

Right at the beginning of the Bible, God creates human beings in His own image. He sets the man in a beautiful garden where all his needs are met – except the need for love. *It is not good that the man should be alone.* Wonderful as they are, none of the animals is a *help meet for Adam*. Only the one who is *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* is so much the one who is right for him that *a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be one flesh.* This wonderful Sacrament of marriage is a type of the believer's relationship with God, of Christ's love for the Church, the people of God. When we are christened, when we receive our new Christian name in Baptism, we leave behind our worldly attachments and cleave to Him so that He and we are one in all eternity. What an amazing depth of love! What an incredible status bestowed upon us! What a tremendous privilege it is to be a Christian!

*For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee.*

*Thy sons marry thee* is a very odd image, but don't forget that the *thee* in this passage is the city of Jerusalem. This is metaphor. I think *thy sons marry thee* probably means that those who had gone out from Jerusalem (as exiles or refugees) will return and dedicate themselves to the rebuilding of the city. They will be one people. In the long run, they will be one with the people who never left Judah and one with Northern Israel from which they had been separated since the death of Solomon centuries earlier. In the longer run still, they will be one with the Gentiles in the new people of God created by the Life, Death and Resurrection of Him Who is both *a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.* In the longest run of all, in the ultimate run, we shall all be one in Heaven in the eternal presence of God.

Marriage is an exclusive relationship and adultery is a serious sin. Similarly God is a jealous God and idolatry receives a terrible punishment. But the exclusive relationship of marriage is the foundation of many other loving relationships within the family and beyond: children, brothers and sisters, in laws, mutual friends, shared service to the community. In the same way, the exclusive relationship between the Christian and God is the entry in to a whole host of loving relationships: with other members of the Church – at home and abroad – and in the wider world. God is love and an exclusive relationship with Him is a participation in universal love, love which necessarily includes all people and all things.

*So shall thy God rejoice over thee.*

What an amazing depth of love! What an incredible status bestowed upon us! What a tremendous privilege it is to be a Christian!

*So shall thy God rejoice over thee.*