

THE LORD OUR BRIDEGROOM
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 62:1-5

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading read before, Isaiah 62:1-5: ¹ **For Zion's sake I shall not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I shall not remain quiet until her righteousness goes forth like a bright light and her salvation burns brightly like a torch.** ² **The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory. You will be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD will designate.** ³ **Then you will be a splendid crown in the hand of the LORD and a royal headband in the palm of your God.** ⁴ **You will not be called "Deserted" any longer, and your land will not be called "Desolation" any longer but you will be named "Hephzibah," and your land will be named "Beulah." For the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married.** ⁵ **For, as a young man marries a maiden, so your sons will marry you, and your God will rejoice over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Nothing could be truer as we look at the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, for there we see a vast array of vivid word pictures that describe theological concepts about the way the Lord works in the world and how He relates to us, His people, with illustrations borrowed from everyday human life. You may think of these word pictures as extended parables - like the ones Jesus told - which help us understand spiritual truths that the Lord wants us to take to heart. In order to help them really sink in and stick with us, He gives us graphic images to keep in our minds.

The prophet Isaiah is a master of this technique. We see an example of his work today, in which he presents the Lord God as a bridegroom eagerly anticipating his wedding day and the City of Jerusalem as His bride-to-be.

For this to make sense, we want to understand Jerusalem as scriptural shorthand for the *entire collective of God's people*. He intends to marry them - as a man marries a woman - not literally, of course, but the idea is that He's going to come live with His people in a very close, intimate, and personal way. It implies a change to their current relationship: from one that involves Him loving His intended bride at a distance to bringing her into the home that He has prepared for her, and the two of them living together from that point on happily ever after in a harmonious, unbreakable union.

As the passage begins, you can hear how the Lord is exuberant with joy, and He looks forward to the day when He brings her to Himself. It's like He can't wait. **"I shall not keep silent,"** He says, **"I shall not remain quiet until her righteousness goes forth like a bright light and her salvation burns brightly like a torch."**

They say that every bride is beautiful, especially in the eyes of her groom. Indeed, it's on her wedding day more than any other that a young woman is going to do everything she can to look her absolute best. It's her day. She's the centre of attention, and that's the way she is described here. But note that it's not so much her *outward physical beauty* that so delights the Lord; rather, it's her righteousness that shines forth for all to see and admire. Isaiah writes, **"The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory."** The idea is that as beautiful as she is in appearance, her true beauty lies in her inner being. It's her holy innocence and perfect character that make her glorious to behold. Whole nations and their kings have been assembled to witness this grand spectacle, and all are astonished and left breathless by the splendour of her appearance, but she wasn't always this way.

To really understand and appreciate this passage, which comes quite late in the book of Isaiah, it must be read in light of what's come earlier.

Beginning already in the first chapter, Jerusalem is repeatedly described as an unfaithful wife who has become a shameless prostitute. She's an embarrassment to the Lord and a constant source of frustration and disappointment to Him. The prophet writes: *"How the faithful city has become a prostitute! It used to be full of justice, and righteousness used to dwell in it. Now, however, murderers live there! ²² Your silver has become impure. Your wine has been diluted with water. ²³ Your rulers are rebellious and are companions with thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not administer justice to orphans. The legal case of a widow does not come before them"* (1:21-23).

As the storyline continues, there are two levels of accusations the Lord keeps bringing against His people. First, He speaks of their proud and haughty spirits and the way those with power and wealth oppress the poor and take advantage of them. They are greedy, materialistic, revelling in their riches and luxuries; they cheat when they do business, and they use a corrupt legal system to rob and destroy those who try to play fair. Then there's the second level of accusations, and that is

that they do all these things even while going through the motions of worshipping the Lord. They come to the temple, offer their sacrifices, sing their psalms of praise - and they turn right around and continue doing all the rotten things they've been doing all along. The result is that their worship rings hollow. They don't mean it, and the icing on the cake is that they also worship other gods. Besides going to the Lord's temple, they find time to worship the false idols of their pagan neighbours.

In the language of Isaiah's picture, the Lord is like the hard-working husband who comes home after a long day at work, and what does he find? The house is in shambles. His children are naked, dirty, unfed, and uncared for. And where's his wife? She's been busy shopping for herself all day, blowing the family grocery budget on fancy clothes, sweet perfumes, expensive cosmetics with which she intends to attract the attention of her other lovers - the ones she's going to meet when she's out on the town all night. And this doesn't happen just once; it's the daily routine. And when he finally corners her and presents his accusations against her, she pours on the charm. "*What's wrong, dear? Don't you love me anymore? You said you always would, just like I always love you. Look, I know I've done a few things to upset you; but I'll try to do better. Really, I will.*" And he relents. Again and again, he concedes because of his recklessly blind love for her. And she, who never has any intention of changing, only becomes increasingly more brazen in her offences.

Isaiah tells the story this way so that we can relate to it. It's meant to make us think, "*That woman is a disgrace. She makes me sick. And I can't believe how foolish her husband is to put up with her.*" Isaiah wants us to think like that so that, just like the prophet Nathan turned the tables on David¹, he can point at us and say, "*The story is about you. It's about your two-faced relationship with the Lord. It's about the way you lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead. It's about the way you fail to help God's children who are needy and oppressed. It's about the way you worship the false idols of money, culture, and pleasure. And it's about how foolish the Lord must be to forgive you and take you back time and again after hearing your half-hearted confessions of sin that you don't really mean because you have no intention of changing. You just keep getting worse. You just keep taking advantage of the Lord's love and forgiveness.*"

When we come to understand that, the next part of the story makes sense. Because the husband isn't making any headway in moving toward the relationship he wants to have with his wife doing what he has been doing, he finally realises that *he must try something else*. He comes to the sad conclusion that it's time for some tough love. So, he takes away her line of credit, strips her of her fancy clothes and gems, and throws her out into the street where she belongs. He deprives her of access to the children she has so long neglected and abused. She's left naked, shamed, forsaken, and desolate. She becomes the butt of coarse jokes. Passers-by turn their head in disgust when they see her. She has lived like human trash, so it's out with the trash she goes. And without his patronage and support with which to buy her cosmetics and clothes, she's revealed for what she is: an ugly, wretched, wrinkled, old croon.

Historically, *this actually happened*. The Lord had become so frustrated with His people Israel after centuries of their abuse of His love that He had no choice but to *throw them out*. He didn't want to do it. He tried over and over again to call His people back through the prophets, but they wouldn't listen. So, at length, He raised up a powerful enemy nation: Babylon. Their armies came and laid waste to Jerusalem and took away its people in chains. The once-proud city that was blessed by God and had prospered during the reigns of David and Solomon was reduced to a heap of ashes. Jerusalem that was once the Lord's faithful and cherished bride had become a brash, slutty whore. So, she was forsaken by Him, and the land of Israel was left *desolate*.

Fortunately, as this morning's text indicates, that isn't the end of the story. It is the Lord's plan to restore His beloved bride to Himself - and to make her something even better and more righteous than she ever was before. The question is: how is that possible? How does a habitually unfaithful old hag go from being what she is, to become the radiant and righteous young bride that we heard described by Isaiah?

The answer is an extreme makeover. Isaiah writes, "**You will not be called "Deserted" any longer, and your land will not be called "Desolation" any longer but you will be named "Hephzibah," and your land will be named "Beulah."**"

Hephzibah means "my delight is in her," and Beulah, means "married." These names speak of the Lord's love for His people and the joy they experience because of His grace. Through Him, the Lord gives His bride an extreme makeover, working from the inside out. Remember His bride's true beauty is going to be revealed in her righteousness, innocence, and holiness. It's her heart that needs to change. And so the Lord sets out to do just that. How? *By means of His appointed Servant*.

This is another recurrent theme in the book of Isaiah, how the Lord is sending His people a Servant who will save them, set them free from their captivity, and bring them back to the Promised Land. We know Him best as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah chapter 53, the one who "*was pierced for our rebellious acts. He was bruised for our wrongdoings. The*

¹ 2 Samuel 12:1-15

chastisement that brought us peace was on Him, and through His wounds we have been healed" (v.5). Obviously, Isaiah is speaking of Jesus Christ, who has borne the penalty of our sins on the cross. He was forsaken and left desolate *in our place*. He's the One who does our extreme makeover by bringing us into His death for sin and raising us up with Him in His perfect life. In this way, He destroys in us our sinful, cold hearts of stone and gives us warm, living hearts filled with His love.

This is the righteousness that shines forth from God's radiant bride then: not the things we do; but the things Christ has done for us and that He continues to do to and through us.

We see echoes of Isaiah's words in the story of the *prodigal son*², but there are important differences here too. In that story, the wayward son runs away from his father to enjoy the pleasures of sin. In Isaiah's telling, the unfaithful wife wants to *live in sin* even while she's enjoying the comforts and security of her husband's home. She has to be forcibly removed in order for there to be a change. Unlike the prodigal, who eventually figures out that his life in sin is miserable and that he'd be better off returning home, in today's story, it's the LORD who goes looking for His unfaithful wife and who changes her by His love and fills her with His righteousness so that she can be the glorious and honourable woman He yearns to embrace and share his life with forever.

What's the application to us? It's quite simple. All we have to do is substitute the Church for the City of Jerusalem in Isaiah's illustration. After all, the Scriptures describe the Church is the bride of Christ today. It's us collectively and individually that the Lord wants to bring to Himself into a perfect, holy, unbreakable union. He has given Himself as our Suffering Servant to bear our sins and to give us the ultimate extreme makeover - for by His death and resurrection, He gives us a new birth in baptism, He clothes us in the bright glory of His righteousness, and He leads us by His Spirit as if taking our hands in marriage.

The thing to see is that this is a work in progress. Looking ahead, the Lord sees the day when we, His bride, shall be everything He longs for us to be. We're not there yet; not by a long shot. But seeing how He longs for us to appear through His eyes, we should capture the vision and make it our goal. Not that we can do the makeover ourselves, but that we can open our hearts to let Him do His work on us.

So, with that in mind, one of the things we can do is to look at ourselves honestly. When we do, we'll see that unfaithful wife who takes advantage of her husband's love that was described earlier. Seeing her, we should be repulsed and realise that the only way to deal with her properly is to throw her out and leave no place for her in our hearts. Then, turning to Christ our Suffering Servant and Saviour, we can receive again His Word of forgiveness, put on His white robe of righteousness, and take a step farther down the aisle that leads to the altar and the final wedding feast of the Lamb in His kingdom.

The Lord longs for that day, and He says He won't be silent, nor will He rest until He brings it to fulfilment. May we long for it just as eagerly so that our extreme makeover by His power and love may begin even now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty and ever-living God, You have given the light of Your truth in Jesus Christ that we may be rescued from the darkness of sin and unbelief, and have life in His name. We thank You that You have made us alive through faith in Him, and lavished on us so many gifts of Your grace. Grant that we may treasure in our hearts the truth that Jesus, Your unique Son, is our revealer of Your will, our sacrificial Lamb, our Messiah, our King, and the Son of Man, who was rejected, crucified, and rose again for us.

Heavenly Father, make us who are Your people shining lights in this world's darkness. Send out preachers and teachers of Your Word, that many more may know Your mercy and love in the gift of Your Son and His Gospel of grace and forgiveness. Strengthen all of us in the fellowship of Your Church to join hands in love and zeal to do the work set before us. We praise you for Your various spiritual gifts. Grant that we may use them for the common good of the members of Christ's body. Make us loyal in serving our Lord, patient in every trouble, and joyful in our promised hope. Make us eager to hold on to what is good, to help our fellow Christians, and be ready to share with all people in need. Free us from the deceptive designs of Satan and every kind of falsehood, and give us the ability to distinguish false spirits. Grant that we who have been called out of darkness into Christ's marvellous light may in this way proclaim His saving love and power.

Bestow a special measure of Your grace on our homes.

² Luke 15:11-32

Give stability, peace, and tranquillity to the nations of the earth. Deliver people everywhere from famine, disease, fire, flood, storm, earthquake, and every danger. In every test that You send, help all people to lift up their eyes to You, and to know Your power and care.

We ask Your mercy on all who are in any special need of body or soul. Show them the comfort of Your love; give them hope instead of despair, joy and gladness instead of grief, and a song of praise instead of sorrow.

Save us all from the dangers that surround us. Defend us, in body and soul, until that moment when we see the ascending and descending angels linking earth and heaven permanently, when You call us from this life to live in Your presence forever. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, Your Son. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 62:1-5

¹ For Zion's sake I shall not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I shall not remain quiet until her righteousness goes forth like a bright light and her salvation burns brightly like a torch. ² The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory. You will be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD will designate. ³ Then you will be a splendid crown in the hand of the LORD and a royal headband in the palm of your God. ⁴ You will not be called "Deserted" any longer, and your land will not be called "Desolation" any longer but you will be named "Hephzibah," and your land will be named "Beulah." For the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ For, as a young man marries a maiden, so your sons will marry you, and your God will rejoice over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

¹ Now concerning spiritual gifts, fellow-Christians, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that you were Gentiles and were drawn away to dumb idols, however you happened to be led. ³ Therefore, I tell you that no one who is speaking by God's Spirit says, "Cursed be Jesus," and no one can say, "Jesus is the Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ There are different kinds of charismatic gifts but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are differing ways of serving but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of activities but the same God, who works everything in all of them.

⁷ Now the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the common good. ⁸ For to one there is given through the Spirit the Word of wisdom, to another the Word of knowledge through the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another charismatic gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ One and the same Spirit works all these things and distributes them to each one individually, as He determines.

John 2:1-11

¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of

Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and His disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother told Him, "They have no more wine."

⁴ Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother told the servants, "Do whatever He tells you!"

⁶ Six stone water-jars were standing there, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing. Each jar held between eighty and one hundred and eighteen litres. ⁷ Jesus told the servants, "Fill the water-pots with water!"

They filled them up to the top. ⁸ Then He told them, "Now dip some of it out and take it to the manager of the dinner!"

Then they took it to him. ⁹ When the manager of the dinner had tasted the water that had been turned into wine and did not know where it had come from, although the servants who had dipped the water out knew, the manager called the bridegroom. ¹⁰ He told him, "Everybody else serves his good wine first and, when people have had plenty to drink, then the inferior wine. You have kept the best wine until now."

¹¹ Jesus performed this, as the first of His miraculous signs, at Cana in Galilee. He showed His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.