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Epiphany 2C

Sermon notes on Isaiah 62.1-5

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The prophet Isaiah declares to the people Israel:

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 Married;

The people of God are to be given a new name
which will reflect a new standing before God.

For the most part, names tend not to matter a
whole lot to us. We tend to use names for
ourselves and for others simply as a way of
labelling, or distinguishing between ourselves.
What my name is generally does not matter so
much as that I simply *have* a name because,
whatever my name is, you will eventually learn it
and refer to me with it. There might be a bit of a
history to my name – perhaps a family tradition
or a deliberate abandoning of a tradition – but
these things don't matter much in our actual use
of our names. While we might come to value
saying or hearing a particular person's name, it is
not the name but the person we value – the
name simply marks him or her as the one I love
or who loves me.

What then, is the significance of the prophet's
declaration of a *changed* name for the people of
God? Why change a name if the community itself
remains the same? The clue is given in what this
community's names are and what they signify,
for, unlike our usual naming of ourselves, the
names the prophet uses here for God's people
are not merely labels but in themselves describe
a relationship. "Forsaken" speaks not of *who* the
people are – but of *what* they are – and the same
goes for the name "Desolate". These describe the
experience of the people of Israel – in particular
their experience of God. This part of Isaiah was
written long after the period of Israel's exile in
Babylon and their return to Palestine. But things
had not gone as they had hoped. There was still
much to be desired of God. It seemed as if,
indeed, God was silent, that the people had been
forsaken, and for that reason the land seemed
desolate.

All of this, of course, was a long time ago. Our
question is, what is *our* name as a community of
God's people? Not, of course, how do we label

ourselves (Kew, Auburn Uniting Churches) but
how would we name ourselves in such a way as
to describe our relationship to God? And this is
not a "theoretical" question calling for a carefully
qualified theology of the church. If, for example,
we were to consider the names Isaiah gives to
the people of Israel, would they work for us? Is
there a sense in which we find ourselves
"forsaken" or "desolate"? These don't seem to fit
– not at least if we are to take our immediate
surroundings as any indication. Certainly, such
language seems quite ridiculous when compared
to what tens of thousands of souls are suffering
in Haiti at the moment, and dozens of other
places with less spectacular but no less tragic
problems.

But, at the same time, neither are we those who
would be well named according to what the
prophet promises: "my delight is in her" or
"married". As in a number of other places in the
Scriptures, the prophet contrasts the sense of
forsakenness and desolation with the experience
of rejoicing in marital love. But, as a people, do
we feel "delighted in" or celebrated by God?
Again, I suspect that this seems not quite to fit.
For while it hardly looks as if we are forsaken or
desolate, neither does it look as if we are
delighted in or celebrated by God. To draw on the
imagery of verse two, there is not evident any
particular "vindication" of God's people before the
kings of the world.

Perhaps we don't even want such a vindication,
at least in the exclusivist sense which might be
read from what the prophet promises. But it still
leaves the question: what does it feel like to be
one of the people of God, here and now? Is there
a sense that the good things have come already
come to pass, and the kingdom has indeed come,
and we now enjoy its fullness? Or is there a
sense that this is not yet good enough, that we
have been forgotten, that God is taking too long,
that we want more? Whichever way it is, what
would be an appropriate name to take for
ourselves, describing our relationship with God,
and what that relation was or will be? It's a
serious question: who are we, as a community of
faith – locally, denominationally, and the church
as a whole? We can *do* lots of things, *believe* lots
of things – but who does that *make* us? There is
sense in which even being called "Forsaken" is an
honourable name, for at least it implies that
there has been something enjoyed which is now
lost. And, of course, there would be much to
celebrate if we knew *and felt* that our name was

"My delight is in her". But if neither of these fit – and I suspect that for us as a community this is so – then what is our name? How would we best speak ourselves in our relationship to God?

This question matters, because if we don't know who we are, or where we are in relation to God, then we will not know how to pray. That is, we don't know *what* to pray for, because we don't know what we lack, or what we have, or what we might yet have. And we will not know when and how to give thanks. Fervent prayer for ourselves or others arises from a real sense of absence. Real thanksgiving arises from a real sense of having real needs met.

Desolation and delight stand as two poles of experience, and we stand somewhere along the line which stretches between them. These ways of naming the people of God are strong ones, and perhaps names which overstate the experience in order to push home the point. As I indicated before, this part of Isaiah was written after things had sort of gone Israel's way, and yet not completely. The captivity had ended and it was possible for the Israelites to begin to return to Palestine, but the dream had not been realised – or not completely. They are, in fact, neither completely forsaken nor yet obviously a joyous bride to the divine bridegroom.

And yet, the emphasis falls on the negative: a little is not enough; a joy halved is not yet a joy. Half a promise fulfilled is a promise unfulfilled. And so what good *is* experienced – the homecoming, the freedom to begin to rebuild Jerusalem – is still a kind of forsakenness, still a kind of desolation. A God not *fully* with his people is a God who is not *yet* with his people. And so, in the next few verses which we didn't hear today but which we heard on Christmas day, the prophet exhorts:

Isaiah 62.6c "You who remind the LORD take
no rest,
7 and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the
earth.

The reference to Jerusalem might sound strange to antipodean believers but, if we believe that it is the same God addressed in this text as we ourselves seek to address today, then this will also be our prayer – for it is God's faithfulness to the people of Israel which is our hope, and not some general idea that God is love or that things should all work out in the end.

But the important point here is the call to prayer itself – to "giving God no rest" – until the promise is fulfilled. For if *we* perhaps do not feel wholly desolate or forsaken, neither is this yet

heaven, and earth-as-heaven is what we need if the fear and the suffering is to end, and if love and freedom are to be experienced. What makes *this* God's people in fact God's people is a spirit of prayer which sees where there is desolation and forsakenness and looks to God to provide wholeness. For such a people lives from a vision which is beyond our ability to achieve but which is within God's power to provide.

Let us, then pray for such a world – naming where there is desolation and forsakenness even when it looks as if things aren't going too badly – and seeking the full experience of God's delight in us.

Hear the last two verses of today's chapter, which we also heard on Christmas day:

¹¹ The LORD has proclaimed
to the end of the earth:
Say to daughter Zion,
"See, your salvation comes;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him."

¹² They shall be called, "The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD";
and you shall be called, "Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken." (NRSV)

Our calling is to see this vision, to hear this promise, and to watch and pray until it becomes the reality of all God's beloved children.

By the grace of God may our eyes and ears be so opened,

and our hearts extend to such prayerful work. Amen.