

“His delight is in you.” Isaiah 61:10-62:4

**I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.
For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet,
until her righteousness goes forth as brightness,
and her salvation as a burning torch.
The nations shall see 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 Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our meditation we have these elevated words from Isaiah the prophet. The message that the Holy Spirit sent to Israelites stuck in Babylonian exile almost three millennia ago. Yes, pastor, but we live in 21st century Australia, remember?

What has this message to do with us? Is there anything that would apply to us and our situation? Anything that we could learn? Anything that would bring us some comfort and encouragement? The answer to all of these questions is – yes!

We will reflect today on what our similarities with the Israelites living in Babylonian exile are, and how what the Holy Spirit says through Isaiah are good news for us as well. But first, just a very brief historical background.

Back to the Exodus. Soon after God Yahweh had led Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery, He instructed them and warned them about how things will develop in centuries to come. It is a bit scary that someone can do something like that.

You can read it in Leviticus 26 and in Deuteronomy 28-30 how God Yahweh foretells step by step what is going to happen during the next millennia. How Israel will fall away and how their faithful Yahweh will try to bring them back.

And they will fall away again, and He will forgive them again, and they will become more and more idolatrous and, finally, the promised land will vomit them out because of their abhorrent idolatry and they will be sent into exile.

Scary that someone can foretell what will happen during the next thousand years, but even scarier is the fact that even as Israel knew about these prophecies, they still couldn't help themselves but embraced futile idols and rejected the living God.

The time came when enough was enough and God Yahweh sent Babylonians to punish Israel. They destroyed Jerusalem and took all aristocracy, all educated and skilful people to Babylon. As prophet Jeremiah had announced it, this exile would last for seventy years. (And it did).

And it is addressing those people in exile that the Holy Spirit sent the message through Isaiah. And again, as it is customary for our God, He delivered this message more than hundred years before these events even took place.

Now, are there any similarities between us and those Jewish people in Babylon? I would say that there are quite a few and our today's reading speaks to them. They probably were wondering about the similar issues and asking similar questions.

Has our God abandoned us? They were kicked out of their land, their most sacred site, the dwelling place of their God was destroyed. Their God had promised to be with them and to protect them, has He forgotten about them? Is He still faithful?

It was not Yahweh who had abandoned His people. It was God's people who had abandoned their God. He had warned them, again and again. He had sent prophets after prophets calling them back to Himself, He never gave up on them.

But in the hardness of their hearts they just didn't care, they wanted to do things their way, they had broken the sacred covenant with their God Yahweh, and now they were reaping the bitter fruit of their unfaithfulness.

What about us? What about the Church in Australia? We too are withering away, we are divided, has our God abandoned us? Can you guess the answer? No! He hasn't abandoned us; we have abandoned Him. He is faithful, He never gives up on us, He keeps speaking to us, He keeps calling us back to Him, it is us... who don't want to listen to Him, who think we know better, just as people back them.

God Yahweh hadn't abandoned Israel. He had punished them for their sins so that they would repent and turn back to the only true and living God. If our challenges today are God's punishment for us – because of our lukewarmness, because we desire other gods more than the Triune God – then it is well deserved.

Who has feared, loved and trusted our God above everything else? Who has loved Him with our whole heart and mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves? Who? No one... no one! And if someone thinks that they have done it, just re-read the Commandments, or go and re-read the Sermon on the Mount.

We all are guilty. We all have failed. And yet, our Lord hasn't abandoned us, as He hadn't abandoned Israel. This is how He sees our relationships as the Spirit reveals it through Isaiah. Our faithful God looks at His Church as ... His beloved bride.

He is our faithful Bridegroom and we – His bride. He clothes us with the garment of salvation, He covers us with the robe of righteousness. This is how our God relates to His Church, to us. He is the loving and faithful Bridegroom who lays down His life for His bride.

He is the One who washes and purifies us with His precious blood and with His life-creating Spirit. He may punish us, He may let us experience where the following other gods leads, but whatever He does, He does it to bring us back, into His divine embrace. That is why we can gladly exclaim together with Isaiah: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God!"

But can we be assured in His salvation? How do we know that our God has enough power to fulfil His promises? Babylon was such a super-power, no one could stand in their way. Israel might have wondered: "Can our God actually rescue us?"

The Holy Spirit gave to Israel and also to us the most assuring answer. Yes, He can and He will. Because our God is God the Creator. The same One who has fixed heavenly bodies in their places. The same One who has laid the foundation of the Earth. The same One who makes the night to follow day and one season another.

How certain can we be that our Lord will deliver us? "As the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations." No human power, no nation, no empire is a match to our God. "They all like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales." (Is 40:15)

Sure, Israel didn't exactly experience the supremacy of their God, it wasn't reflected in their daily lives, they still lived under the strange power. Similarly, we could say about the Church. Yes, the Lord has spoken all these wonderful promises, but ... we just don't experience this supreme greatness right now.

We are small people, considered irrelevant by the mighty in our society. Instead of acknowledging the goodness of Christ's Church, it has become trendy to blame it for all evils. So, it would not be too surprising if Christians were suffering from low self-esteem. How long can you keep you chin up, if people around you keep sneering down at your heart-felt convictions?

But the Holy Spirit assures us that the day is coming, when, and just listen to this: “The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory.” Our trust in our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit will be vindicated.

Our glory as God’s people, as children of God will be triumphantly revealed to all nations and to the mighty of this age. They will gaze at the beauty of God’s people as at God’s most precious treasure. Because this is what you are for our God.

Listen how Isaiah puts it: “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” Did you notice something unusual? Where does a crown, or a royal diadem belong? On one’s head, that’s right.

But the Holy Spirit says that we will be in God’s hand. What is that about? When would someone take a crown or a diadem in their hand? When they want to see it, to marvel at it, to look at it with delight and to rejoice in what they see.

This is how your God looks at you. With immense delight. As at His most precious treasure. Not because we are so precious on our own, no! but because Jesus has clothed us with the robe of His righteousness. Our Father looks at us and He sees His Son, Jesus, His obedient and beautiful Son with whom He is well pleased.

Finally, that last point. All God’s people need a hope. The land of Israel was desolate. The Temple was destroyed. The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. Those were fitting descriptions that Isaiah used. Forsaken. Desolate.

Christians today may feel this way as well. Not only the Church in the West seems to be collapsing internally, church buildings stand empty, and the walls of God’s Word in so many places are in ruins, but also society despises her – for what we believe, for what we stand, for what we cherish, for what we hope.

Is that how it is going to be forever? “No!” announces the Spirit, both to the Israel of the OT and also to the Israel of the NT, to the Church. The day is coming, and it is near, when “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.”

This is what we are looking forward to. This is our hope. The fulfillment of this sweet promise. When this age with all its trials and testings will be over, when the new age will have dawned, we will see our glorious God Jesus Christ as He is. And then we will know and experience it fully what it means – His delight is in you.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Amen.