

Epiphany 2
14/01/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 62:1 - 5
Psalm 36:5 - 10
1 Corinthians 12:1 - 11
John 2:1 -11

A relationship and a future with God

O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land,
as on the highest rock I stand,
I look away, across the sea,
where mansions are prepared for me...

These are the words of an old song sung by the congregation when I was a small boy. The joy of the people when they sang those words came from an understanding that they had a relationship, and a future, with God. For them, Beulah land was a metaphor for heaven, but originally it meant something else.

“Beulah” is a Hebrew word used in Isaiah where the prophet announces a new relationship is to begin between God and Israel. The giving of new names is the sign of that relationship. Whereas the land had been called Azubah - “forsaken”, now it is to be called Hephzibah - “my delight is in her”. Whereas it was once called Shemamah - “desolate” now it is to be called Beulah - “married”. The context was that God’s marriage to Israel and his love for Jerusalem had been shattered by exile. Israel and Jerusalem had become synonymous with desolation and abandonment. The people lamented the silence and inaction of God, their exile and neglect. But today Isaiah offers a voice to counter their situation. Jerusalem and Israel did not actually receive new names, but a new sense was attached to their name: delight - in place of forsakenness, married - in place of desolation. God has turned back to the people, the relationship is to be remade and the new names embody this proclamation. As a groom claims his bride, delights in her and rejoices, so God claims Zion, Jerusalem, once more. The city beloved of God does not remain forsaken but becomes a place of life, sought out by others. The prophet overflows with joy at what God’s grace has promised. He can hardly contain himself over his subject. A new day will dawn for the people. Zion will be like a beautiful ornament in the hand of God, a source of much pleasure. And this restoration would be the sign, visible to all, of God’s presence and activity in the world.

The graphic today is a picture of the city of Jerusalem because in Christian symbolism the image of marriage is joined to the image of the city. This creates the strongest tangible sign that God seeks to accompany a community in history. And it is with us as community, rather than as individuals, that God seeks ongoing and transformative fellowship. Throughout the bible the image of a wedding is the link between the two. The wedding refers to the joyful union of God with the people, particularly at the end of time. And it includes the idea of the messianic banquet, where wine, a symbol of joy and blessing and new life is enjoyed.

The Jerusalem that God sought a renewed relationship with so long ago was the earthly city. We are very conscious that, currently, the marriage pictured by Isaiah has not turned out very well. Far from being a place of joy and delight, a light to the nations, Jerusalem remains a focus for international conflict: a place of abundant strife rather than abundant life. The time pictured by Isaiah either has not come, or there is something different to wait for.

Everything that is symbolised by Jerusalem, or Zion, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and transposed into a different key. He becomes the place of God's habitation. He is the one in whom God accompanies us, to bring us abundant life. This is what the Gospel points to today. Once again the image of a wedding is used to say something about the kind of relationship God seeks to have with us. Here, in a situation of emptiness and deprivation, Jesus brings a surprising and rich source of joy and new life. Even though Jesus said, "My hour has not come" he provided what the existing circumstances could not. What is more, the wine he brings is good wine. Thanks to him, some of the best there is already here. This story is not about the miracle; it is about who Jesus is, and what it is he brings to our life. The amazing thing is that no one really knew what had happened, apart from his disciples, who believed in him.

The Sundays after Epiphany are concerned with the idea that the light, which came to life in Jesus and drew foreign Kings to worship him, now begins to spread. This could be construed as meaning things should be getting better, but the hour may be not yet. In our grandparent's generation people were generally more churched. They understood the points of reference of this tradition, its texts and stories, and could make some connection between the world of the bible and their own world. Now we regularly experience a gap between our beliefs and values and those of people around us. Some are out-rightly hostile to what we do here. But this does not deter us from hearing four readings each Sunday, and listening for the meaning they have for us today.

From the beginning these texts were shaped by, and for, repeated telling in the community of faith, especially in worship. Each Sunday we come together to "do the text", which does not mean we automatically adopt their world-view or values. But we do seek to enter once again into these images, to be nourished by their imagination. The incredibly positive note of our readings today does not mean that we are naive about what life is really like. It is more likely that, given the pressures of life, we find ourselves like the people in Isaiah's audience: empty and exhausted dried out by all that is demanded of us. Or like the people at the wedding, suddenly faced with depleted circumstances. What we see, in Isaiah and in John, is that it is in circumstances of struggle and deprivation that the word of life is spoken. Being here means we leave ourselves open to the possibility that the story of liberation may surprisingly bring liberation to us, that the story of an unexpected fullness may bring joy to our life, and from a previously unrecognised direction. For what we do here is re-engage with these narratives so that what was given to the world in them, long ago, may become part of us today, and we might know something of what God promises to us and to all people. In this way we connect with the people these were originally written for, and with those before us who have, with great joy, sung of their assurance of God's love for them. And by the grace of God we also may find we too are a city that has not been left desolate or forsaken. There is one who delights in us. We are an ornament in the hand of God, who in the midst of all our struggles has chosen to accompany us in our life. We have a relationship, and a future, with God, and we can be glad.