

Joy can be a complicated thing and isn't always so obvious. This past month we've participated in the joyous celebration of Christmas and Epiphany. We've read of the joy brought to the whole world in very dramatic and obvious ways. God has broken into creation as a helpless child. A brilliant star has called the whole world to come and see and to worship Him. I'm sure everyone read the gospel from their sofa last Sunday morning. But in case you didn't, it describes Christ's baptism by John in the Jordan River. A dove descends and the voice of the Father is heard proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. This Sunday at the Wedding at Cana, we begin to hear the stories of Jesus' earthly ministry. At first Jesus is reluctant to follow his mother's suggestion to perform a miracle. But the party has run out of wine and from a human perspective, this could be a disaster. So Jesus changes course and decides to perform his first miracle, which shows his divinity and also makes the marriage celebration even more joyous by changing jugs of water into wine. So in the past few weeks we have concrete ways of how Christ is revealed to Israel. He is their long awaited savior and the Son of God. He is with them, and us in the most intimate and powerful way and this is something to be joyful about.

But so often we find in Scripture, that God is joyfully present in times that to us, seem to be the opposite of joyful. In today's first reading from Isaiah there is a definite sense of joy and yet it is a little more complicated. Many scholars actually refer to these verses as a lament. But its spirit seems to be one of pure joy.

It is generally believed nowadays that the entire book of Isaiah was written by three or three sets of authors who represent three distinct theological and historical perspectives. First Isaiah had warned the people that they needed to change their ways in

order to avoid the imminent destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah. In the sixth century, as predicted the Babylonians did sack and destroy Jerusalem and its temple and took the cities most elite citizens away into exile. While in exile Second Isaiah gave hope to the community by proclaiming that God promised to end their exile and to rebuild Jerusalem. And it would be a glorious rebuilding. In chapter 54 he writes that the city and temple will be rebuilt with foundations of sapphires, it will have ruby towers, gates and walls of precious jewels. The Israelites would return home and enjoy the rich life that they had before.

After seventy years in exile they did come home. The Babylonians had been conquered by the Persians and around the year 539 Cyrus, king of Persia, announced an end to the exile. He allowed the Israelites to return home to Judah and Jerusalem. He returned the sacred vessels and other objects from the plundered temple. He even encouraged them to rebuild the temple with funds from the royal treasury of Persia. The Israelites had much to be joyful about.

As they began their long journey back to their homeland I would imagine that they were full of hope that things might return to the way they were- a restored temple and restored social order. A comfortable and familiar life where there would once again be wealth and prestige and full autonomy with God at the helm. After all this is what Second Isaiah had promised them and what they had dreamt of. But things didn't turn out the way they hoped for.

When the exiles returned, they encountered a city and temple in ruins and there was also remnant of people who had remained and moved on with life in their own way. Non- Jewish groups had also moved in, living alongside the remaining Jews. And both

groups had taken over the old homes and farms that had belonged to the returning exiles and there was intermarrying between Jew and gentile. You can imagine the level of tension and resentment. It seemed impossible that they could ever organize themselves enough to rebuild the temple and it became clear that it would never match the glory of the original. Their disappointment, frustration and fear must have been intense. Some might have believed that life was now worse than while in captivity. Where were the things promised—the wealth and joyous feasts and the glory they once had? The city felt like a desolate, forsaken place. Where was God who had sustained them throughout the exile? Even after maintaining their faith while in exile, were they still being punished for their sins of the past? And who was more righteous in God's eye, the Jews left behind or those who had returned?

This is where this morning's first reading comes in. It generally believed that another prophet—Third Isaiah writes the words we hear today. The prophet speaking for God fully acknowledges that things are tough, he seems to understand the people's disillusionment and pain, but he knows that God has not forsaken his people and that the disappointment they experience is not because of their past sins. Things might not be exactly as they were before or how they remembered, but God still loved them all in the same deep and intimate way. Isaiah writes: *For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn.* God is on their side and will vindicate them. Reestablishment might be slow, but light was on the horizon.

This story reminds of many disappointments we all inevitably face in our own lives when we've hoped and been given reasons to hope for something important-- maybe

seemingly crucial, only to be brought close to its reality and then somehow unrealized or taken away. It can be an awful feeling and we might feel desperate or feel betrayed by others or even by God. We might blame ourselves as if we've done something to deserve it or that there is some kind of deficiency in us or even worse something deeply wrong within us. We might get angry, depressed and desperate that life has little point.

The good news that Isaiah points to is that God will take what is and make it right. He loves us without condition and has a plan for each of us. He never stops standing with us. For the Israelites, they returned expecting certain things, which included a return of their old status and power. But the reality was that they had to share that power with those Jews who remained and with the gentiles- the nations around them. God uses this new reality to emphasize what really matters. It's not about a great earthly kingdom or a grand temple. It's about his never ceasing Covenant with them, which existed before, during or after the exile. Whether they sinned or not, his steadfast love was what mattered and all that was required was that they promise to love and serve God above all else with their whole being. Now that Covenant would be witnessed by the other nations that they shared their land with. So God was standing firm with the Jews while also showing himself as creator of all the people.

And God takes the Covenant to another level. Even as the Israelites feel forsaken, God remains *delighted in his people* and uses the metaphor of marriage to show how deeply he loves them, in love with them, faults and all. *For as a young man marries a young women, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.*

So even in the most desperate and difficult moments there is reason to have hope and find joy. God loves the Israelites that much. God loves us that much. Even in the worst conditions where we might feel abandoned, ugly or down on ourselves he keeps on loving us. He holds us up and restores us in the love of his incarnation, ultimately vindicating us through the cross and resurrection. Restoration has come and will keep coming. And if we honor the covenant of our baptism and keep our hearts open to him and his will, we will share in his joy and in his delight in us.