

Mother Church

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] Now let's turn to Isaiah chapter 66. I'm going to look today from verse 10 through to verse 14 at some of the features of that passage.

And particularly noting how the Lord here describes his people or the church or Zion as a mother who cares for her children.

And in various ways we find that detailed through these verses. The mother as someone who bears and gives birth and nurses and then nurtures and looks after and cares and protects the children that she brings into the world.

And the Lord is using that or Isaiah is using that, the Lord through Isaiah is using that to convey a very important message to those that are mentioned in Isaiah frequently as the remnant or the godly remnant.

Because in Isaiah's day the godly were an exception to the norm. They were an exception to the majority. And so he is addressing this in verse 5 for example.

[1 : 08] In other words, God is sending encouragement through the prophet to that minority who in his day were holding to his truth and living godly lives.

But surrounded by massive defection on the part of the majority of the people for which eventually exile came upon them in the days of the Nebuchadnezzar who came to take so many into captivity and to destroy the temple that was placed in Jerusalem.

Well we owe so much, don't we, to good mothers. Especially to godly mothers. Strong bond that we have with our mothers, especially with mothers that have been so caring to us as we've been brought up by them.

That bond is something that we are so conscious of, particularly when our mothers come to leave this world and are taken from us. It's the mother very often that teaches us so many principles for life.

Our mother teaches us words, behavior, to distinguish right from wrong, wisdom, love, compassion. All of the things that mothers in their care and nurture for their children pass on to us.

[2 : 38] And that follows up into adulthood. And how we miss mothers once they're taken from us. Even after many years have elapsed. Many of us, if not all of us, can look back and look back with affection and gratitude to God for the mothers we had.

That are now gone sometimes, some of us long gone. Nevertheless, our memory of them is rich and precious. And we continue to hold what they taught us precious in our hearts as well.

That's really the kind of thing that Isaiah is using to convey this message to those that he is addressing here, as the minority, as we've said. Describing, Zion describing, the way that God has provided for his people.

Things which are represented, if you like, by a mother caring for our children. So we're looking at mother church, if you like. You know that sometimes the church is regarded in some Christian traditions as more than what scripture warrants.

And that the church really takes over from the scripture itself. Or from God's presence through the scripture. That we come to rely upon the church rather than upon Jesus Christ and upon God.

[3 : 58] And that's obviously taking things too far in the sense of church being a mother to us. But there's a very legitimate way in which we can think of the church as our mother. Now of course, we are the church, the visible church.

The church is made up of people, people like ourselves. So there's a bit of tension, I know, between thinking of the church as our mother, as if that was something other than ourselves.

But the imagery is there so that all that God has given to the church, and the church as a spiritual body, if you like, or an institution, I use the word reluctantly, but you know what I mean.

When the church is organized in the way of people coming together to be related and bonded together, and worshipping together, worshipping God. The church in that sense, that collective sense, and all that God has given to the church, as we'll see, provides spiritual mothering for us, for which we should continue to be thankful.

That's the first point we're looking at today, the church as a caring mother. Secondly, we're going to look at the children's relationship or life with their mother, the church.

[5 : 13] The church as a caring mother. Well, here in the passage, you find the church is represented and pictured as giving birth to children, and bearing children, giving them birth, and then nurturing them.

It's not that the church converts people. It's not that we're converted by the church, not even by simply belonging to the church. Only God can convert. Only God can change lives.

But that actually doesn't actually do away with the importance of belonging to the church, of being found within the confines of the church as a spiritual body.

And in fact, the church, some of the early church fathers, right down through to the time of the reformers, and even nearer to our own time as well, spoke of the church in very similar fashion.

Let me give you two examples. A church father called Ciprian of Carthage, who wasn't reliable in everything that he wrote. He lived about 251. That was a couple of hundred years after Christ.

[6 : 14] This is what he said. He said, He cannot, and that means he or she, cannot have God as a father, who does not have the church as a mother.

We cannot have God as a father, without having the church as a mother. And then John Calvin, one of the most famous of the reformers, around 1559 or so, wrote, Because it is our intention now to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title, Mother, how useful, indeed how necessary it is, that we should know her.

For there is no other way to enter into life, unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance, until putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angel.

Moreover, he continued, furthermore, away from her bosom, one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins, or any salvation, as Isaiah 37, 32, and Joel 2, 32 testify.

Now, John Calvin didn't mean that it was absolutely impossible for somebody to be converted, unless he was already within the church. But what he's telling us is we have no warrant, we have no sense of expectancy of being saved, if we deliberately place ourselves outside of the confines or the borders of the visible church, where the gospel is preached, where God's people come together to worship.

[7 : 56] That's what Calvin meant when he said there, furthermore, away from her bosom, one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins. Well, thanks be to God, some people are converted who are never in the church, who never belong to the church.

You see that in the New Testament, when the gospel went out, when the apostles preached the gospel in pagan cities, like Corinth, and Thessalonica, and Ephesus, people came to know the Lord. They'd never been in the church, they'd never been part of the church, but as soon as they were converted, as soon as the Lord changed their lives, what happened?

They were baptized, they were brought into the church, they were taken into membership of the church, into the bosom, as Calvin said, in which we are nurtured, in which we are brought forth, in which we are nurtured.

And so, that's what you find, in the teaching of scripture, and in the reformers, and in their thought, and in the early church fathers, the church is such an important feature in their lives.

It is a spiritual mother to us, as we come to know God through the gospel. And that's our evangelistic concern, as well, isn't it?

[9 : 08] Our evangelistic concern, as we seek to witness to the gospel, and reach out with the gospel, is to bring people to Jesus. Absolutely. To bring people to know Christ. To bring people to be converted, by coming, as we're looking at in the evenings, to know an encounter with Christ, in a saving way.

That's our objective. That's what our primary concern is, as a church, with the gospel, to come, to bring people to be saved. But you must never detach that, from bringing people into the church. It doesn't make sense, in the teaching of scripture, you cannot actually detach, or separate people coming to know Jesus, as Savior, from people coming to be part of his church.

Close contact with Christ, means coming to be a participant, in the life of the church. The life of Christ, if you like, through the church, or in the church.

That's why it's so important, that we actually see, that in our attempt, to reach out to people, yes, you maybe have to begin, with steps, that will be less, than actually these people, coming to church, and coming to church services.

[10:18] But that is still your objective. Even if you have to have, some preliminary steps, in order to try, and encourage them towards that. That's still your objective, under the main objective, of being converted, and coming to know the Lord.

We have to actually emphasize, the importance, of the church, in its own right. The church as a mother, the church, where we are nurtured, the church where we're taught, the church where we're brought, to know Christ better, the church where we enjoy fellowship, with the rest of God's people, the church where we come, to know God's promises, where we feed upon his word, where we partake of the sacraments.

See, all of that, is what mother provides us with, the nurturers. We'll see in a minute, that God, gives to the church, for us to be, provided with. And so, you see, these people would have been, encouraged there, by the likes of verse 9, the small remnant, this people struggling, against the majority, who had defected, from the faith.

Shall I bring, God is saying, shall I bring, to the point of birth, and not cause, to bring forth, says the Lord. Shall I cause, to bring forth, who cause, to bring forth, shut the womb, says your God.

In other words, you cannot frustrate, God's purpose, in bringing people, to life, in bringing people, to know himself. And he's encouraging, that remnant, to continue in their faithfulness, and to continue, to regard God himself, as the one, who provides for them, but to continue, also to have confidence, in the ordinances, if we use that word, that God gave, to his people then.

[11:52] The sacrifices, the way, in which God, had built, all of that, for them, in order to convey, himself, and a relationship, with himself. He's saying, don't actually do away, with these things, don't think that, these things are outmoded, it's just that people, have chosen, other things, instead of them, or have added to them, or imported, other things, as you find, there from, in verse 17, for example, or verses 3, through to 4, there, where he describes, the activities, really reverting back, in many ways, to paganism, the people of Israel, and Judah, had actually, allowed themselves, or brought themselves, to import all of these things, into the worship of God, into the church, of the time.

But he's saying, to the faithful people, don't actually lose confidence, in the means, that God has established. That's so important, for you, and for me, in days, when people, are defecting, from the church, or criticizing, the church, or finding fault, with the church, I'll mention in a minute, something about that.

Don't lose your confidence, in the gospel. Don't lose your confidence, in the preaching, of God's truth. Don't lose your confidence, in what it means, to be together, as a worshipping people. Don't let the world, actually seduce you, into thinking, that some way, or other, these things are outmoded, these things don't belong, in the church, of the modern age, of the modern day, or the present day. God is saying, I have provided, the church, with the means, of nurturing, my children. And you see, that's why, if you take verse 9 again, God is emphasizing, if I bring to the point of birth, will I not cause to bring forth?

If I'm working in somebody's life, if my promise is that I will, I will bless the means, that I've used, who's going to actually, stand in the way of that? Who's going to successfully, reverse that?

[13:43] That's what Balaam found out, isn't it, in the book of Numbers, when Balak hired him, to come and curse, the people of Israel, that he could see, from the heights, he was looking down on them, just like, evil powers are looking down, upon ourselves, as God's people, and Balak had said, come and curse, these people for me.

And God met, with Balaam, this wicked, soothsayer, that he was, and he put words, in his mouth, and he had to speak, the words that God gave him, and the words that God gave him, were words of blessing, to his people.

And when he came to, a very annoyed, Balak, the king was saying, after he heard, Balaam speak, these words, a number of times, what is this, that you have done?

I brought you here, to curse these people, instead of cursing them, you have blessed them. And Balaam said, how can I curse, whom God has not cursed? How can I bless, whom God has not blessed?

Shall I bring to the point of birth, and not cause to bring forth, or go forward to the time of, of Nehemiah, where you find, such opposition, to what Nehemiah was leading, as the people that made their way back, from exile, to Jerusalem, are beginning to build, or rebuild a temple there, as a place, as a center of worship, and building up the structure, of a worshipping people.

[15:05] You can read in the book of Nehemiah, all the opposition, that they then immediately faced. And Nehemiah, many times, had to encourage the people, that what God had begun, these opponents around them, however much they seemed, to be all powerful, they couldn't actually thwart, what God was doing.

And then you find the same emphasis, all the way through scripture, take for example, the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and take the way that, in these early days of the Apostles, as the church was advancing, as God was bringing more people, into the church, as the gospel was making, a real impact, in pagan centers, like these great cities, attempts were being made, by the likes of King Herod, and others, to actually stem this, to actually stand in the way of this, and push it back, and try and stop, what was happening.

Well, Herod lost his life over it. And God demonstrated that, you just could not stop God, when his mind is, to bless his people.

And you remember too, when he wrote to, when God, when Paul, under God, wrote to, to Timothy, in 2 Timothy, in chapter 2, you recall there, what, the situation, that Timothy faced, as God, through Paul, was encouraging him, to continue, faithful in his ministry.

And he was aware, of course then, that people, again, were defecting, from the faith. People were causing others, to leave the faith, and to leave the church. 2 Timothy 2, verses 17 to 19, is Paul's response.

[16:46] He says, do your best, he says to Timothy, to present yourself, to God, as one approved, a worker, who has no need, to be ashamed, rightly, handling the word, of truth.

But avoid, irreverent babble, for it will lead people, into more ungodliness. And their talk, will spread, like a gangering. Among them, are Hymenaeus, and Philatus, who have sworn, from the truth, saying, that the resurrection, has already happened.

They are upsetting, the faith of some. But, and this is, this is Paul's response, God's firm foundation, stands, bearing this seal, the Lord knows, those who are his, and, let everyone, who names the name of God, depart, from iniquity.

The foundation stands, God has, added his seal to it. He knows, those who are his. And that church, is bringing up children, as nourishment, for children.

Look at verse 11, the imagery there, of an infant, sucking the breast, of the mother, being breastfed, and, he's using that, as an image, of the church, that you may drink, deeply with delight, from her glorious, abundance.

[17:58] What do we have, in the church? What has God provided, for us, in the church? He has provided, his word especially. He has provided, sacraments, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. What are they for?

They are for us, to actually, drink deeply from. To drink deeply from. The resources, that God has given, his church, are tremendous.

Do we really appreciate, I'm sure I don't, and I'm sure you don't, yourself, to the extent, that you'd want to. Do we really appreciate, what God has given us, in the fullness, of the gospel? Do we really appreciate, the abundance, of blessing, that we have, in Jesus Christ?

Look at the way, Paul wrote, to the Ephesians, to say that, God actually, had exalted him, and set him above, in the heavenly places. And he talks then, of being blessed, out of that blessing, that is deposited, in Christ.

What can you, how can you possibly, not see fullness, when you think of Jesus, risen from the dead, and exalted to glory, that is an abundance, of fullness, that God is laying, before us in the gospel.

[19:04] Are we drinking, deeply, of what God has given, to his church? Are we satisfied, with, skimming the surface?

Do we just come, and, dip our toes, into this, ocean of blessing? Or are we going, to be a people, I'm sure you are, a people, who want, really more and more, as you, think of the benefits, of belonging, to the church, of being, within the church, and the provisions, that God has made, for us there?

Well he is saying, to us here, that you may drink, deeply, with delight, from her glorious abundance. Is that not, what we put, before ourselves today, before we came to church, as we prepared, to come, to worship God together?

That we were going, to come to drink, abundantly, of the resources, of the gospel. That we are really, going to delve, into, as much as possible, by the spirit of God, those rich things, that God has given us, and deposited, in his church, for our benefit.

Well that's, what he is saying to us. He has given us, the resources, he has given us, his spirit, he has given us, the sacrament, he has given us, his word, he has given us, to value the word, as it's preached, and explained to us.

[20 : 24] He has given us, to value, fellowship with each other, to actually learn, from each other, to actually know, support, for and from, one another.

Friends, drink deeply. Because if we don't, we are going to be, weak spiritually. We are going to be, easily moved, by, the seductive ways, of the world.

We are going to actually, be taken aside, through, the suggestions, of the evil one. just like Paul, was writing to the, Ephesians again, you remember there, in chapter four, that he spoke, for one thing, about the importance, of the unity, of God's people, and the unity, of the spirit, as he called it, to maintain that, on our part, in the bonds, of peace.

And he then emphasized, the oneness, of the body, one Lord, and one faith, and one baptism. But then he goes on, to speak, about, using the blessings, that God gave, through Christ, to his church. He gave gifts, to men, he ascended up, on high. And he gave, he gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, to equip the saints, for the work, of ministry, for building up, the body of Christ, till we all attain, to the unity, of the faith, and of the knowledge, of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure, of the stature, of the fullness, of Christ.

[21 : 53] That's a really deep, verse to explain, but the important, verse in many ways, is the next one, the purpose for all that. So that we may, no longer be children, tossed to and fro, by the waves, and carried about, by every wind, of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness, in deceitful schemes.

Instead, speaking the truth, in love, we are to grow up, in every way, and that's the church. That's the benefit, of one of the benefits, of belonging to the church. That we are able, in speaking the truth, in love, to one another, not just in preaching, from a pulpit, to grow up, unto Christ, to grow up, to maturity.

And God has given us, all the resources we need, as a congregation, in order to do that. He has placed, His word in our midst. He has given us, the preaching of the gospel. He has given us, the benefits of unity.

May we, indeed, strive, and pray, to maintain, that unity of the spirit, in the bonds of peace. Why? Because, our very progress, depends upon it.

That we may no longer, be children, like infants, tossed to and fro, by every wind of doctrine, by the cunningness, of human beings. You go out there, outside of the church, you'll find, many things, that will draw your attention, that will seek, to draw you away, from what you believe in, from what you're committed to.

[23 : 14] And, in many ways, you find, likes of, Psalm 73, where the psalmist, was, at the point of, slipping away, he was envious, at those he saw, in the world, of the wicked, he says.

Until, he said, I went into, the sanctuary of God. Then, I understood. He then understood, how far, he had slid, away, from faithfulness, to God, from faithfulness, to God's truth.

And, it's here, it's in the church. It's where, the gospel is. It's where, God's people gather. That you and I, are nourished. That you and I, are built up.

That you and I, have strengthening, from God. That you and I, are defended, against defection. That you and I, can appreciate, what it is, to drink, deeply, of these resources, that God has given. So, the church, as our mother, in all of these ways, there are more, we could say about that, and I've said more, than I intended. But, bearing, and giving birth, to children. But, also, looking after, bringing up the children, nourishing the children.

[24 : 31] That's what we have, in belonging to the church. That's what we have, when we are, when we are partakers of, or participants, in the resources, that God has given, to the church.

Secondly, the children's life with mother. I'm just going to mention, three things very briefly. Again, just building, on the imagery, of a mother, looking after her children. First of all, their love, for their

mother.

Just as you love, a faithful, loving mother, so you love the church. You appreciate, all that the church is. All that the church provides, through what God has given us.

What God has given her. You love her, so that you uphold her reputation. So that you commend, this church, to those that have, cause to find, so much fault with her.

You defend, you protect, the church. That's not to say, that you don't also, admit the wrongs, that sometimes, take place.

[25 : 36] Admit there are sins, and defections, and defects. There's all of that. But we have to love the church. We have to love her, as God, actually describes her, in the truth, as a mother, to our souls.

We have to love her, for that. We have to make sure, that we, meaningfully, partake, of all that she provides. Not only do we love her, but, there's also the element, of sorrow.

You see here, how, in verse 10, as he's addressing, these, faithful people, that still remain, in Jerusalem, rejoice, with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her, rejoice, with her, enjoy, all you, who mourn over.

Now he's building, into one verse, the element of joy, and also, as we'll see in a minute, but also, mourning. Why is there, an element of mourning? Why is he, combining these elements, of joy, and of mourning?

Well, because, as a very small remnant, as they're surrounded, with ungodliness, as they're surrounded, with defections, they mourn, over, what's happened, in Zion. They mourn, over, what's happening, to these people, that are in covenant, with God, that have departed, from obedience, and faithfulness, to God, and are doing, all of these things, instead.

[27 : 00] Look at verse 17, those who sanctify, and purify themselves, to go into the gardens, following one, in the midst, eating pig's flesh, and the abomination, and mice, shall come to an end, together, declares the Lord.

You look at the opening, chapter of the book, of the prophet Isaiah, and there's a string, of accusations, there from God, as to how far, the mass, of the people, the majority of them, have departed, from the ways, of the Lord.

He says, it's just like, a body, that's full of, infection, and sores, from the top of the head, to the sole of the foot, there's putrefaction, that's this description, of Zion, this description, of these people, these covenant people, of God, and these faithful people, are mourning, over that, and today you're mourning, today you're mourning, over defection, from the truth, you're mourning, over so much, doctrinal defection, so much, welcome, of two things, that the Bible, calls sinful, that's the church, we're not talking, about the world, at the moment, we're talking, about people, who give themselves, the name of Christians, we're talking, about people, who preach, or who actually, have positions, in the church, I'm talking, about the wider, sense of the church, in our nation, that actually, are recommending, things, which the Bible, condemns, how, have we come, to this, what should we do, about this, well the one thing, one thing we should do, is mourn, bring, our pain, to God, we have a week, of prayer, this week,

Christian Institute, have a week, of prayer, and they're, calling on us, to join with them, in that week, of prayer, well we are, in a situation, in our nation, and in the church, in our nation, that really, needs us, to pray over, and as you come, to pray, in all of these, ways in which, you recognize, defection, and unfaithfulness, and heresy, and the, and the, recommending, the promotion, of relationships, or personal lifestyles, that we know, are out of keeping, with what God is saying, in verse four, there you find, they did what was evil, in my eyes, and chose that, which I did, in which I did not delight, that is God, speaking to our generation, that is God, speaking to the church, in our land today, in every place, where God finds, what is offensive, according to his own, standard of righteousness, what do we do about it, do we just say, that's another denomination, doesn't belong to us, does belong to us, if it's the church, if it goes by the name, of the church, then we have a responsibility, to mourn, you know, if you're, as I have been, and many of you have been, by the bedside, of a mother, who's dying, a very mournful situation, you'd rather not be there, you'd wish there was something, you could do, to turn things around, but when the medical experts, have told you, don't expect recovery,

I'm sorry, there would just be one outcome, as far as we can see, while you mourn over, the fact that your mother, is dying, how could it be otherwise, is, but what Isaiah, is saying is, should be like that, when the church, is dying, when the church, has marks of death, about her, when the church,

is infected, spiritually, so that to all, appearances, it seems that, she is in dying mode, well he's saying, I'm crying to you, I'm saying to you, who are crying over her, and mourning, to mourn over her, as you rejoice, in my promises, nevertheless, mourn for Zion, mourn over what's happened, be sorry, as you see, the church, in the process of dying, now of course, we know, the promise of God, is the church, will never actually die out, through to the end of time, there will always be people, in the world, who will bear his name, and who will be faithful to him, who will be his people, and that's some consolation, but it's little consolation, if you think of, the church in Lewis, the church in Scotland, the church in the UK, dying, on his deathbed, maybe that sounds extreme, maybe it is extreme, but when you look at things, if it goes on unchecked, what else is there for it, but to say, yes, there will be a faithful people, but, churches in death throes, may it not be, may there be revival, may it be, as we sang in Psalm 126, the Lord restoring, the captivity of Zion, turning things around, coming again, with his mighty power, but meantime, there is a place for mourning, and a place for being, prayerfully mournful, over the church, well thirdly, there is joy, there is delight, in what God has, what God has promised, to his people, verse 14, again, there you shall see, and your heart shall rejoice, there are still days, of great joy ahead, for the people of God, of course, this is really taking, us into the New Testament age, which Isaiah, by God was, by God's, inspiration, if you like, was able to, to speak about, but nevertheless, he is calling upon, this remnant to rejoice, your bones shall flourish, like the grass, the hand of the Lord, shall be known, to his servants, while you mourn, over defection, while you mourn, over departure, from the truth, rejoice, in God's promises, rejoice, in what you have, rejoice, in the abundance, that you still have access to, rejoice, in the fact, that you belong, here, in this congregation, and in this church, to a people, who are committed, to the Lord, rejoice, in the way, that God holds, before you, in word, in sacrament, in fellowship, in prayer, everything, that is designed, to make your soul, rejoice, and to maintain you, in spiritual health, rejoice, over all the promises,

[33 : 40] God has given to his church, even for the future, however dark, the days, presently, may seem to be, and that joy, is a joy, in verse 12, that's spoken of us, extending peace, like a river, and the glory, of the nations, like an overflowing stream, well what you have, in Christ, is something, to rejoice over, whatever you see, around you, whatever you see, in the current age, and the position, and the condition, of the church, widely, rejoice in Christ, rejoice, in the delights, that are in him, rejoice, in the river, of peace, from God, that you find, in Christ, Ephesians, comes to mind, again doesn't it, Ephesians chapter 2, verses 14 to 18, where God, has brought about, this river, of peace, of well-being, that flows, through the gospel, into our hearts, and that's the primary, function of the church, to convey, the truth, of the gospel, to the world, around us, so three things, in conclusion, praise God, that you are children, of this mother, secondly, pray to God, for the well-being, of this mother, because your well-being, depends, to a great extent, on the continuing health, of mother church, praise God, that you are her children, pray to God, for her well-being, and thirdly, progress, your life spiritually, under her care, don't neglect, the provisions, that you find, in mother church, whenever, and wherever, you can be, a partaker, of the gospel, be there, be there, to drink deeply, of her resources, and God bless, these thoughts, to us, let's pray, don't be there, let's pray.