

New Year's Day - 2016

Watchword of the year:

God says: **I will comfort you as a mother comforts her child.** (Isaiah 66:13)

Gott spricht: **Ich selbst werde euch trösten, wie eine Mutter ihr Kind tröstet.** (Jesaja 66,13)

James 4:13-15

¹³ Look here, you people who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." ¹⁴ How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog - it's here a little while, then it's gone. ¹⁵ What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that."

After the ups and downs of last year, many people look at the new year with hope. The question is, what you base your hope on.

The Epistle reading for this day reminds us that we have no idea of what lies ahead. People may have their plans for the 366 days of this year - some even have plans that stretch further ahead. Yet James says, **How do you know what will happen tomorrow?**

After all nobody would have predicted that our president would fire the Minister of Finance - and he certainly did not foresee what this act would cause.

How do you know what will happen tomorrow? - we may hope for the best, but it is not guaranteed by any stretch of the imagination. [Perhaps that is why some people usher in the new year with a big bang (or a whole series of bangs) - somehow reality is kept in check, even if it only is an illusion.]

So what do we do, as we look at the year ahead? James recommends: **What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that."** We are to be reminded - for each day of the year ahead - that our lives lie in the hands of our Lord. He alone has the power to change things, and to keep us safe in ever changing times.

God can bring about change while lying in hospital in Johannesburg, when the student nurse who was assigned to care for me said, 'People say that it will only really start raining in March. But God can do whatever he wants'. That

is hope which has a solid basis - and it led to her praying every day for the rain that was and is so desperately needed. Not much later, a heavy thunderstorm developed, and it rained and hailed. It was almost like an affirmation by God, "I hear your prayer, and I will respond."

Looking to God for the year ahead - the words of our watchword offer us a special comfort. They were addressed to a people who had believed that God had abandoned them in their exile. But, as we read from chapter 40 onwards in this extraordinary book of Isaiah, we hear over and over of God's promises to comfort and help his people. There are reminders that they should not turn to man-made idols, but that they should turn to the God who had made heaven and earth, and who knew all the stars. To those who struggled with God's promises and believed themselves to be forgotten, he says, **Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands.** (Isaiah 49:15-16)

That - as far as I know - is the first place God is compared to a mother. A mother who breastfeeds her child cannot forget it - it calls out to her, and her swollen breasts remind her of the fact of having to feed her child. If one could imagine the unimaginable, that a mother in this position would forget her child, God promises not to forget.

It is almost as if God is instinctively reminded of his people. And should that not be enough, he has inscribed the names of his people on his hands. Not only is God compared to a mother (a strange concept for us), but he also has tattoos - albeit a different kind of tattooing, which gives the assurance to each one of us today also, that God remembers us: he knows your name, he knows what situation you find yourself in. [We speak of God being like a mother, yet struggle to change the pronoun - it is him we speak of, although he acts as a she!]

Of course mothers hope that their children will change when things go wrong in their lives - yet they continue loving them in spite of what their child does.

It really is a strange mother, that gives up on her child - yet even if a mother should forget or give up on her child, God promises not to forget us.

It is on this background of comfort and of words of assurance that God says in the final chapter of Isaiah, **I will comfort you as a mother comforts her child.** Nothing against fathers - but when a child really needs comfort, it turns to its mother. When you are down, when you don't know what lies ahead and have your fears for the future, God promises to be there for you, as a mother is there for her child. Mothers never give up hope for their children, and she loves her child, even if nobody else does!

That is God's promise for us - his care for us will not cease. He continues to look out for us - and his love for us is unconditional. So, even if we have no idea what this new year holds for us, there is one thing we may hold on to: that God will hold us, that he will be there for us - not matter what.