

## REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE – SUNDAY 8 JANUARY 2012 – MORNING SERVICE.

**Sing beforehand:** Hymn 20-1: 1-7

Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. Beloved, grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. By the powerful operation of God the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

Song of praise: Psalm 105:1+2

Confession of faith: Apostles Creed

*I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell: The third day he rose again from the dead: He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead: I believe in the Holy Ghost: I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints: The forgiveness of sins: The resurrection of the body: And the life everlasting. Amen.*

*After the law we sing of God's love and forgiveness of our sins with Hymn 17-1:6.*

Law

Hymn 17-1:6

Prayer

- *Doxology:*
- *Worship:*
- *Confession:*
- *Supplication (for pardon of sins):*
- *Thanksgiving:*
- *Intercession (for the need of the congregation, the church, authorities, sinful world and appeal to the promises of God)*
- *General supplication:*
- *Illumination of the Holy Spirit (necessary for the ministry of the Word):*

**Amen.**

Psalm 105:10+11

Scripture reading: GENESIS 50:7-21

Text: GENESIS 50:19-21:

**Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.**

**COMFORT IN GOD'S COUNSEL OVER EVIL.**

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Can we ever say that your and my sin is also covered by God's Counsel? It is a worrying question that has often troubled the children of God. For, we profess that God's almighty encompasses everything. We receive everything from out of His Fatherly Hand, the good as well as the bad, as we profess in Lord's Day 10. But does this apply also to the sins in my life that often still have unhappy consequences many years later? Does it also apply to the evil others have done me and which has injured me personally with all the sorrow that accompanied it and the suffering that sometimes is irreparable?

Is sin not a trespass against God's Law – and does the Confession provide any comfort? Are those modernists, who say that Christ's words about the hair on your head all being counted, should not be taken literally, perhaps correct? God can not be bothered with such ridiculous trifles – all it means is that God cares for us even if we must, revolutionary, help Him now and then.

God is love ... and then He cannot be part of infidelity and treason, cruelty and greed, of misery that people pour out on their fellow man. That all appears to be very acceptable and, in any event, modern, although rabbi Kustner has already said years ago in his book that God will not allow good people to suffer – that is the work of the devil who actually is stronger than God because He is unable to stop the devil's work on earth. The adherents to the prosperity-faiths in effect profess the same.

Besides the fact that even all the hubbub and concerts at their gatherings are unable to drive away the emptiness when one is almost super-humanly tested, it is despite the deluge of pious arguments nothing else but a jettisoning of the Word. No, thank you, rather give my share of that faith to my dog. If I am unable or unwilling to recognise the true government of God in ALL things in my own life and in the lives of my beloved and brothers and sisters and hold onto that in faith, how can I then find shelter with the God of ALL comfort?

In our text we hear Joseph speaking to his brothers. Well, when we speak of Joseph and his brothers, the first thought that springs to mind is the crime of the brothers towards their younger brother Joseph. That occurred about 40 years ago, but one does not forget something like that. And now, with the death of their father Jacob, the circumstances of the family have changed drastically. Suppose that Joseph now decides to repay them in the same coin ... after all, at the time he was only a spoilt brat, and an unbearable little tattletale of his father. The anxious brothers decide to make the best of it and send a message to the second most powerful man in the great Egyptian realm – brother Joseph, in which they beg forgiveness and, rather diplomatically, call on their common religion. Joseph's reaction was to weep on hearing the message – possibly because this motion of no confidence showed that in the hearts of the brothers and in their experience of the community of the saints little had changed.

Worse – even after learning of Joseph's tears they did not come to realise that Joseph's attitude towards his fellow man had changed radically and bore the fruits of faith, such as forgiveness, love, joy, peace ...see Gal 5 ...

With the death of their old father the way was free to Joseph to, at least, tell his brothers the "truth" and to give their dirty heads a thorough wash. Their conduct had been disgracefully dirty. But nothing happens. Why? Because the second most powerful man in the world of that time fears His faithful God of the Covenant and knows that He governs everything and guides it to His purpose, his whole life he has surrendered himself into the hands of the Almighty and he childlike trusts in the LORD's promises. In his own life he experienced personally how the LORD made His promises to

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob come true and also made them come true in the generation He had chosen, the church-family of the Old Testament.

Joseph answers the brothers, who are lying before him prone as slaves, that they need not be afraid, “for am I in the place of God? ...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, ... to save many people alive.” In this way Joseph comforts his brothers instead of attacking them.

“Am I in the place of God?” does not mean that he shall not punish them because God will do so later and with interest. It means that he confesses and prophesies: “the LORD governs!” His Almighty Hand is in all that happens. I cannot and may not tell Him what to do but shall follow Him faithfully and humbly.

Joseph says in so many words that the LORD of Hosts has clearly shown what His purpose was in all these things. It was to save many people alive but especially and in particular to save you and your progeny from starvation, to keep you alive. How could I, knowing that, kill you? May revenge stand in God’s way? Am I in God’s place? May I sit on God’s throne? Of course not, never! Because it is precisely in God’s Counsel that I find my comfort. He turned the evil you did into good. Because of that – do not be afraid. Thanks to God’s grace and almighty good came from evil.

The brothers’ terrible crime against Joseph and against God, because they refused to acknowledge God’s prophet, was through and through sinful and, at the same time, the work of God was in it, the always holy work of God that goes in and through everything. To me, as a tiny and sinful man it is not comprehensible or explicable. But that then never gives me the right to deny it!

For it is the Holy Scripture itself that removes all doubt. In Genesis 50 we read in detail what the brothers’ thoughts were, but with it we should read Psalm 105. The poet says: “Moreover He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provisions of bread. He sent a man before them – Joseph who was sold as a slave.” (Ps 105:16-17) Yes, the brothers were responsible for the sale of Joseph, but God SENT Joseph to Egypt. It is written there plainly enough. That is the way in which the LORD fulfilled His Counsel. And in every step along the way of the life of Joseph we cannot fail but to see it in the light of the Word. The path was often difficult and twisting and turning and very lonely but eventually he became viceroy of Egypt, and the Bible calls him the “father” of Pharaoh. The government of the “many people” of Egypt rests in the hands of Joseph - he must keep them alive.

There, too, we discern the unfathomable great wisdom of God and the boundlessness of His power. God places Joseph in the position to save his own family and God’s people from starvation. God the LORD governs – also in the wrongful work of people.

God’s Counsel prepared the road for the saving of Abraham’s seed in Egypt and the exodus from that which becomes the house of bondage and by God’s mighty arm the entry into the Promised Land so that centuries later the Christ would be born there through Whom Abraham’s seed would be a blessing to all people on earth. So that sometime, in God’s time, the fullness of God’s eternal kingdom will come with all the unutterable glory of the new heaven and the new earth. What a magnificent comfort for the faithful of all times that God, in the fulfilling of His Counsel of Salvation, even turns evil to good.

The poet of Psalm 40:12 says: “My iniquities ... are more than the hairs on my head, ...” those hairs of which the Lord Jesus Christ says that each one is counted by my heavenly Father, but likewise all my sinful deeds and words are counted one by one. Therein also lies the governance of God. No creature can move without the will of God. What a comfort it is to God’s people that through faith I may KNOW that ALL my guilt is atoned for, completely and totally paid for on the hill of Golgotha.

But more. In His almight and goodness the Lord turns all the evil in my and your life to the good. In accordance with the Godly Word we confess that our God is the God of ALL comfort. Of course that does not give us a free pass to commit sin as we please. Everyone who does evil in order that good may come from it brings God's judgement onto himself. The same Paul who calls God a God of comfort says this in Romans 3:8. The comfort is there only for those who have a true heart. Everyone who has a grateful eye for the grace of God in Christ, also knows that the command for the children of His people is: flee from evil.

You must not now think that you shall always clearly see this wonderful comfort in your life and the lives of your loved ones. Joseph did see it but only each time after pitch darkness. By his faith he could see it. But in our lives it will seldomly be disposed by God in such a wonderful way. The emphasis is not on the *seeing* but the main issue is the faith. Then the LORD will make you see ... in His time and according to His goodwill, His Divine Will. With our human eyes we most of the time simply are unable to see God's purpose in this life, sometimes we do see it, often many years later we see some of it, mostly only after this life. And this is so in my personal life, the life of the church, the life of a people, the way of the world – so often we ask “Why?” But who can fathom the works of God? Job could not, the Psalmists could not, neither could the prophets nor the apostles. As long as your and my faith rests on the solid Word of God, on His immovably fixed promises which in Jesus my Christ are the “yes” and the “ámen”. Who in Romans 8 assures me absolutely that God makes all things work together for good to those who love God. Then I place all my personal troubles, the troubles of the recent years of the church, the concerns about our country and the countries of our part of the world, yes, all my worries, in the Fatherly Hand of my faithful God of the Covenant. All I may and can do is to look at the present and the past and the future through the glasses of the Word and to discern His deeds therein and to profess childlike trusting, “my Heavenly Father is also the God who in His almight governs everything and leads it on to the last day”.

We receive unbelievably much but that also gives us a task in the church and outside it. I receive much but then I must also give much. I may receive forgiveness and must also distribute it. I receive grace and must distribute commiseration. We see that with Joseph. He said that God had turned everything to the good, even his brothers' crime. So that he could now save them as the Saviour of the Egyptians and his own family. His duty now is to care faithfully for all of them. To this end God had taken him through life. Joseph comforted them and spoke kindly to them and set their hearts at rest. But it did not rest there, to his words he added real deeds. He cared for them body and soul.

In His Counsel of Salvation for His church God fulfilled much more in this new dispensation. Our Lord Jesus came as the Great Saviour for His worldwide people. What a terrible crime was committed against Him, by His own church fellows, His brother-Jews. By His own disciple Judas He was betrayed for the price of a slave, by the Jewish leaders, led by the priests, He was sent into the most shameful death.

But in that, too, was the work of God. Isaiah prophesied about it ages before – “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.” (Isaiah 53:10) Precisely in that God's Counsel was fulfilled so that sinners could be saved. Judas betrayed Him so that the Scriptures be fulfilled. And in his sermon at Pentecost Peter explained it: “Him being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.” (Acts 2:23)

So God turned the evil that was done to good. In the atoning sacrifice of our Saviour the foundation of the community of the church was laid, to the forgiveness of sins. So everyone may be comforted today, everyone who believes. Comfort you and I may feel in God's guiding in our lives also along lonely paths through pitch dark nights in which the arrows of the Evil One and our own flesh make us

anxious. But ... within the community of the Church that comfort must be GIVEN, distributed, continually.

Joseph did it.

No matter how great cause he had to repay his brothers hardhandedly for their criminal conduct, he speaks as there should be spoken and acted within the community of the Church. For, in the Church of Christ the forgiveness of sins is professed because there it is discerned in faith how God's Counsel of Salvation is being fulfilled in everyone who loves Him ... against all the odds.

Calvin is so correct when he says that, as soon as the desire for revenge arises in our heart we must direct our eye and heart at God, that God Who governs everything; we must notice His Counsel of Salvation that is being fulfilled in everyone who loves Him, fears Him. Hate then disappears and a peace that exceeds all comprehension then comes into our heart.

Let us continue to pray God that He may keep us from wanting to sit in His throne of judgement. How many ages ago, in a time which is to our mind a "primitive" age, did Joseph ask: "Am I in the place of God?" – to us, in this bright-modern age and in the new year 2012, it remains a direct, personal question.

Of course, God's justice must take its course, evil must be confessed and fought and sin must be put away. For the sake of adherence to the Word and the correct confession we must even risk battle – that is all true, but in our text the issue is that hate and the desire for revenge may not poison our lives. Comfort one another, conquer evil with the good.

Now, we are smooth-tongued enough to come along with all sorts of arguments, such as: in his circumstances on the throne it was easy for Joseph to speak like that. But that is not what it is about. The burning question is whether you believe with heart and soul in the Lord Jesus? In the ministry of salvation that our Heavenly Father worked? Do you live in and out of the practice of the only comfort? For Stephen it definitely was not easy to speak as he did when his enemies were putting him to death by throwing stones at him. But he looked up to heaven and, filled with the Holy Spirit, he saw God's glory and Jesus standing at God's right hand. He was stoned and when he sank to his knees he cried out: "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." (Acts 7:60) He saw Jesus by whom the Father, the Almighty God, fulfilled His Counsel. That is the comfort for the Church of all ages for all ages. Comfort that is received AND given. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Amen.

Closing prayer

Closing song: Psalm 99:1+5.

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.  
**Amen.**

Rev W. Ten Haaf  
Reformed Church Bellville  
Date: 8 January 2012  
Scripture: New King James.