

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE – SUNDAY 18 DECEMBER 2011 – MORNING SERVICE.

Sing beforehand: Psalm 24:1+2+3

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 24:4+5

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 Psalm 18:12+14.

Law

Psalm 18:12+14

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 85:3+4

Scripture reading: Luke 1:26-56

Text: Luke 1:42 and 46-49:

In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ...” (42)

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His name. ...” (46-49)

Theme: A biblical *Ave Maria*.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Today we celebrate the last Sunday of Advent, the time when we pay particular attention to the events leading up to the coming to earth in human form of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The text for the preaching of the Word now may appear to be unsuitable. It would appear to be all about Mary: And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” And, connecting with verse 48, which is rather surprising, “from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Now, you all know that in the Roman Catholic church Mary is held in high esteem. The Roserary contains an important prayer which runs: Hail, Mary, filled with grace, the Lord is with you. You are the most blessed among all women and blessed be Jesus, the fruit of your womb. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and in the hour of our death. Hail, Mary – Ave Maria. So well known to us who undoubtedly have heard a song with those words at some time.

But we wish to listen to the Biblical *ave Maria*.

It strikes us that Mary does not sing about herself, she knows her place before God and among her neighbours. She glorifies the Lord for what he has done and will do. She professes that her place in the Lord’s ministry is only that of a link in a wonderful historical chain of grace.

We hear the beginning in verse 46 – “My soul glorifies the Lord”. And – “My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” Why? “For He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant” (v 48) and also “from now all generations will call me blessed”. Why? “For the Mighty One has done great things for me.” (v 49) and then she adds thereto “Holy is His Name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation.”

In the passage we have read we heard what caused this song. We then see that this song is a glorious song of faith and a confession of faith. And not because her circumstances were so wonderfully rosy and comfortable. But precisely because she, in the midst of uncertain circumstances, continued to build upon and to trust in the reliable words of the Lord God.

Which reminds us of the troubling question that remains so acutely actual throughout the centuries: “What is faith?” More pointedly – “What is a TRUE faith?” In my uncertainty or irresolution and human lack of faith and doubt I then fall back onto the pious work done by believing predecessors called by the LORD my God, He who is my faithful God of the Covenant and the Ruler of my heart and of all that He called into being and through all the centuries upholds by His divine providence, called giants in faith who in childlike faith also compiled the document of confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and therein provide me with all the answers I need. A true faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for true all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also **a hearty trust** which the Holy Spirit works in me by the Gospel ...(question and answer 21).

A hearty trust ... that is what Mary had. And the sign she received with it was like a sacrament to her.

When, shortly thereafter, Mary crosses the threshold of the house of her relatives, Zecharia and Elizabeth, it immediately sounds from the mouth of her host-aunt: “Ave Maria – blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you bear!” The Holy Spirit moved her to say this expressly because this was not just an everyday meeting of or visit between relatives. Who is this standing in the doorway? “The mother of my Lord!” Immediately the aged, highly respected wife of the priest places this meeting on the level it should be on, for what occurs here is much more than the common

horizontal human occurrence – sharply defined the horizontal is determined and governed by the vertical – the work of the Heavenly Ruler.

Why does Elizabeth greet Mary in this particular way? The Holy Scripture provides the answer. The Holy Spirit is here at work. Elizabeth knew this, felt it clearly. Mary learns it because Elizabeth tells her. We know it because we can, simply?!, read: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, (Elizabeth felt this clearly) and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed – Ave Maria, blessed are you among women ...”

That was the lesson from the Holy Spirit that Elizabeth learnt and that Mary heard and that we read. What Elizabeth felt she told – listen to verse 44: “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” Both mothers are living and visible witnesses of how the Lord looks after their redemption and that of His people. Both women are in happy expectation – behold! He comes! Women in advent with advent trust.

And so Mary discovers that which she already knew, the visible sign confirms the heard message. The angel Gabriel had already told her. Although she had many questions. That we read in the factual narration of the history – “Ave Maria, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.” Why? “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and engender life in you .. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age ...” No word of God will ever be powerless. Actually, Mary’s song of praise started there already – “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”

That was Mary’s attitude towards the LORD - Thy will be done!! And when in Elizabeth’s home she then sees the confirmation of the Word the song of praise falls from her lips. Her song is a reaction, answer to heard Word. The Word that is trustworthy and acknowledged as trustworthy. For – My soul glorifies the Lord ... I rejoice in God my Saviour!

God, the Redeemer, the Saviour, he sends salvation for His people. He keeps His Covenant unto eternity. The heavenly bliss comes in the form of His Son who is to become flesh in the crib in Bethlehem. Yes, God does mighty things. In verse 49 Mary says that God did great things for her, we hear the same on Pentecost when everyone hears in his own language the proclamation of God’s great deeds.

To us the advent of the believers of the time before the first Christmas is past. The promise was gloriously fulfilled, Jesus the Christ was born.

For us another advent has come in its place. We no longer await the child of Bethlehem. We cannot turn back the clock of God’s history of salvation. We await a man who is to come on the clouds accompanied by countless warriors. We expect him on the last day of the world’s history. The moment when it shall be the hour 24 point zero zero. We live in the period between Mary and the twenty fourth hour. No-one knows what the exact time is. But we must be wide awake knowing that it will become the 24th hour in God’s time. The clock of salvation continues to tick along and this ticking becomes louder the more we read the signs of the time. It calls to us – be vigilant, take note, your salvation is unstoppable because your Saviour is coming!

Not as a baby but as Judge!

For that you must prepare yourself. Indeed, the whole of life is “preparation”. It is very clear that this preparation is closely tied to Holy Communion.

For at the institution of it Jesus Christ said, yes, instructed, us to do this until He comes.

How terribly important!

When we go to meet the Judge it is terribly important that we meet Him as someone who knows us. And for that you and I need the message of the Lord's Supper.

In Lord's Day 19 of our living document of confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, we ask ourselves the question: "What **comfort** is it to you, that Christ shall come again to judge the living and the dead?" And then the Oh, so comforting words based on and only on the indubitable Word of God: "That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head, I look for the **selfsame** One, who has offered Himself for me to the judgment of God and removed from me all the curse, to come again as Judge from heaven;"

How wonderfully glorious that this advent does not bring me to the "Ave Maria" of this earthly creation but to the "ave Maria" that comes from Above. Through the irresistible ministry of the Holy Spirit Mary was brought to the knowledge and confession that she was a servant. She points away from herself just as Elizabeth did by pointing away from her as the mother "of my **Lord**".

Advent does not speak of her but of and about Him.

So it remained. So it was throughout Mary's life. But in this way she could also continue her life.

She who sings about herself in her song of praise as someone in the humble state of a servant, a slave. That was already to be seen from the fact that she was from Nazareth. Well, she was a distant relative of the house of David and in about six months she was to go to Bethlehem to be inscribed there. But meanwhile the fame and glory of David's house had long ago disappeared. The worldly might of Rome now calls the tune and it is a matter of submission or death. Subsequently it will be seen that there was no room for the great Son of David in Bethlehem because all space was taken up by the army of occupation. Those simple words "and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn," say it all.

But when Mary sang her song of praise, her "Magnificat", her "My soul glorifies the Lord", she did not yet know this.

Her humble state was painfully clear in all respects. What was left of the mighty, strong and shadow giving tree of the royal house of David? A dry, withered stump. Nobody wasted any thought on it.

But Mary sees farther with trusting eyes of faith.

That could not have been easy. To her applied what would apply to many believers through the ages and what is confessed by us as well in the COMFORT that we find in the coming of our Saviour – that in all **my sorrows and persecutions** I await my Judge. How deficient the message shouted out that the so-called "true believers" will have prosperity and money and property in abundance and then it is often said that the quantity of earthly blessings is commensurate to the greatness of faith and ..well..also commensurate with the sums of money contributed to the church coffers. And, from that it follows logically that adversity and poverty is your own fault because of lack of faith or unbelief and too little and irregular a contribution! May the heavenly Judge punish the ungodly harshness of these false money prophets! Throughout the Holy Scripture the faithful God and Father tells us that we shall because of or despite our faith suffer sorrows and persecution but also that through His Holy Spirit He shall protect us in all adversity. How tragic and poor was the remark found in a recent obituary that a christian grouping at the burial asked to be forgiven for not being able to prevent by

their prayers the death of the deceased! How rich are we that we may KNOW that we have a provident God who lets all things come to us by his Fatherly Hand and therefore I can in all adversity be patient and in all prosperity be thankful. And I then confess in childlike faith in the same Lord's Day 10 that for the future I have good confidence in our Faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate me from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move. And in the First Lord's Day I already confessed that it is my only comfort that I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has redeemed me, He makes all things work together for my salvation, He, by His Holy Spirit, also assures me of eternal life. He changed death for me into a door, the door to the eternal life where I may serve and glorify Him perfectly.

We are made to believe that a maxi-faith grows from a mini-confession. Nonsense. Precisely by allowing the richness of the confession to be eaten away and a divide is forced between doctrine and life by sinful people's feelings and cleverness that climb onto the throne the devil's false doctrine becomes so readily acceptable. How is it possible that a church conference of one of our so-called "sister"-churches could even dream thereof to put to the vote the question whether Christ did truly arise from the dead? Suppose the majority had voted that this was impossible? Why do people, who reject the Biblical doctrine as encompassed in the documents of confession, wish to remain in the Christian church? How can we not treat a church, that permits false doctrine, as a false church and not admonish it to repent? False doctrine and especially within our own church, can not and may not be whitewashed with the unctuous brush of so-called love and left alone – without the upholding of the pure doctrine their cannot be a true church. Also with Mary we do not see that she permits her attitude towards her neighbour to be determined by her neighbour.

We do not know whether Mary's parents were still alive when she was betrothed to Joseph. Did she have any close relatives? Possibly not and that is why she had to go to distant relatives such as Zechariah and Elizabeth? What we do know is that Joseph as her "neighbour" had many problems because of her. That we know from the Bible, Matthew 1:18-25.

And what would have been the reaction of the beloved brothers and sisters in the church of Nazareth? Why was she away for three months and on her return clearly pregnant?

Do not believe that for Mary it was all roses and bright moonlight. Yet she sings her Magnificat, her Spirit-inspired and Biblically founded song of praise. There, at the beginning of all the questions and difficult problems awaiting her in the common daily life of men and in the church community. Ave Maria. But that is only possible by God's grace. He gives strength. He holds on with His hand and protects.

Full of grateful joy she can extol the greatness of the Lord because – "I am the Lord's servant, May it be with me as you have said."

What is impossible to men is really possible by and through Him. He speaks and it is, He overcomes all resistance. His work remains unto eternity.

Also today.

Hence I can live and let live, meet my neighbour and allow my neighbour to meet me.

It is that work that brings me to every Sunday.

Advent.

Expectation. Joyful – evangelical expectation.

To be slave of the LORD God and His Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit still is the best of all.

My only comfort is that I, body and soul, from head to toe, am the property of Christ – Lord's Day 1.

That my Heavenly father takes me by the hand and guides me through this gloriously challenging life and turns to my good whatever He sends me. – Lord's Day 9+10.

That Christ is my Lord who has redeemed me and purchased me to be His property with His precious blood. – Lord's Day 13.

That after this life I shall immediately be taken up to Christ and may praise the Triune God for ever and ever – Lord's Day 22.

And these are only a few of the glorious things of my personal confession of faith as summarised in the general and particular documents of confession of the Church of Christ in which the Holy Spirit has placed me.

What a joyous wealth is Christmas because I know and may profess that my Saviour was born as a true human child and that as a mature Man He suffered and paid for me so that I might have as my only comfort the knowledge that I am property of Christ, today, tomorrow and for ever and ever. Amen.

Closing prayer

Closing song: Psalm 84:3+6.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.

Rev W. Ten Haaf
Reformed Church Bellville
Date: 18 December 2011
Scripture: NIV.