

32 Brass Festival ELCSA (N-T) 3 June, Johannesburg.
Faith, Hope and Love
Jeremiah 23

Dear sisters and brothers, dear musicians,
I have a challenge for you. On the program there was a music piece, Sonderhäuser Schlossfest Intrade, written for a festival in Germany. How about one of you composing a “Johannesburg Intrade”? It could start off with the sounds of Vuselelas, leading over to the tune of an ice cream combi that we know from the suburbs, and then leading into “Vêr in die ou Khalahari”. Many do not know this, but it is based on a beautiful Tswana Hymn. That would then be a truly “Johannesburg Intrade!”

However, based on the text that we are going to read from Jeremiah 23, it might have been more appropriate to have the Intrade consisting of the sounds of police, ambulance and fire brigade sirens, followed by house and car alarms. The text is not a pleasant one. Let us read it:

16This is what the Lord Almighty says:

“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. 17They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The Lord says: You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’

18But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word? 19See, the storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. 20The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart.

In days to come you will understand it clearly. 21I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. 22But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.

23“Am I only a God nearby,” declares the Lord, “and not a God far away? 24Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” declares the Lord. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord.

25“I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ 26How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? 27They

think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. 28Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the Lord. 29“Is not my word like fire,” declares the Lord, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”

“Faith, Hope, Love” - the theme for today’s festival. - How does this text link up with this theme? Let us see.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” you will have read last week in Hebrews 11,1, if you follow the daily scripture readings. (Bibel reading plan available at <http://www.elcsant.org.za>) For the last two weeks we read about various people of faith that preceded us, and how their faith influenced them and their history.

Based on all these readings, I want to summarise faith as follows:

1. Faith is a life-transforming relationship.

Now to the reading from Jeremiah 23. It paints a sorry picture of the state of faith and religion. The priests and prophets - officially people of faith - had lost it. In the eyes of ordinary people they were the respected religious leaders, people to be trusted, people who spoke for God.

But God had a very different opinion of them. He knew that the priests and prophets had become rogue - their relationship to God was non-existent, their advice not God-given, but based on their own dreams, ideas and opinions. “False prophets” he calls these legitimately installed and recognised religious leaders. How did this come about?

Jeremiah 23 tells us how: “Which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?” the prophet asks. It is a rhetorical question, because God says: None of them!

They are not speaking on my behalf! They are not conveying my message, they never even asked me for my opinion!

From this it becomes clear that faith is not a status, or a quality that some special people have. Rather, faith is a relationship.

God is interested in my daily life, he is concerned about my society, he wants to be actively involved in this world. Faith is the relationship through which God becomes involved and gives direction.

That is why I say: Faith is a life-transforming relationship. When I “stand in the council of the Lord”, when I take the time to “listen and hear his word”, it changes the way I look at things, the way I behave, and the priorities in my life.

People of faith: Do you take time to listen and hear God’s word?

Pastors, do you still take time to pray and listen to the Lord?

All of us: Does our faith shape our lives?

We are invited into a living relationship with the living Lord, that will shape us, transform us and make us a blessing!

Brass interlude: Faith/Glaube by Dieter Wendel

2. Hope

“Do not listen to what the prophets are saying to you, they fill you with false hopes”, we read in Jeremiah. False hope is wishful thinking. It is based on empty promises. It reminds me of the emails that I get on a regular basis, stating that I have inherited millions, or that I will receive a car if I forward this mail to ten friends. False hope is based on nothing, or worse, based on a lie.

When priests and prophets proclaim false hope, claiming that it is a promise from God, they become crooks, thieves, liars. God holds them accountable for the hope that they proclaim!

How can we as listeners know whether hope is false or true?

I remind you again of the readings from Hebrew 10 and 11. We see how people, through their listening and hearing God’s word, were filled with hope. Their relationship to God gave them hope and determined their view of the future.

Out of the relationship with God, out of faith, grows hope. We are serving a Lord who can lead us forward, a God who can help us change things.

In the Gospel reading (Mt 5, 1-10) we heard the “beatitudes” - “Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peace makers ...” Jesus gives hope to those who follow him, stating that there is blessing on their lives, even when it sometimes does not look like it!

“Do I not fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord (v 24). We have a God who is concerned and involved. He not only is aware of the current situation in our country- he wants to lead us forward! He is not only aware of the huge gap between rich and poor, the tensions around land and property, the immense scale of poverty - he wants to heal society. That gives me hope!

Hope: Our relationship to the Lord determines our outlook on the present and the future!

Brass interlude: Hope/Hoffnung

3. Love

The word “Love” does not feature in the passage from Jeremiah 23. On the contrary - the whole passage radiates anger.

Amazingly, it is in this anger that the love of God becomes visible. It is his love for his creation that sparks the anger. He is infuriated by how his servants are destroying his people. Had he not loved the world, he would have turned his back on it, he would have walked away. Had he not loved his people, he would not have bothered about false prophets misleading them- rather, he might even have enjoyed watching the “soapy” unfold - watching people destroying each other.

“God so loved the universe, that he gave his only son” we read in John 3. God cannot stand by idly when we destroy our lives. In Christ he comes to start something new. In Christ he comes to forgive, to heal and restore.

It is God’s love in Christ that invites us into a faith relationship.

It is his commitment to us in Christ that gives us hope.

It is his Love that calls us to love. (1 John 4, 16b-21- epistle)

It is his Love, flowing through us, that transforms society.

Love is not a “feel-good cosiness” - it is a transforming power, a driving force that changes us and every thing around us.

God’s Love transforms us, and then transforms our environment, our community, through us.

Our country is facing many challenges.

“Let us pray for our country” is a good suggestion. Today however, we are challenged: Let us love! Let us live our faith, let us hope! Let us ask our Lord: How do YOU want things to change? How do you want ME to be involved?

Faith, hope and love - Christ’s relationship to us, and our relationship to Christ, can and will transform our present and our future. Let us love as he loved us - a life transforming love!

Amen

Brass interlude: Love

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