

⁷ For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. ⁸ In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer. ⁹ This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. ¹⁰ For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:7-10)

Tom is deaf. He can't hear. He panics as soon as his mother leaves the room. He is not able to hear when his mother says: "I am just going to collect today's post from the letterbox!" He can't hear the noise of the plates and pots when she does the washing up in the kitchen. He does not realize when the doorbell rings, or when his mother is on the phone.

He only sees that his mother leaves the room and disappears into nowhere, without a warning, without an explanation, without the certainty that she will come back. Tom throws himself to the ground, kicks his legs and screams. "I was just away for a second", his unnerved mother says, "only for a brief moment".

But a moment can be endlessly long, when you are abandoned. A moment feels like eternity when fear absorbs everything. A moment is not a proper unit of time for our fear, our suffering and our pain. Loneliness and senselessness lengthen time until everything is unbearable, no matter whether we talk about seconds, days or years.

"For a brief moment I abandoned you... In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you"

This does not give comfort. It sounds cynical. How small can a moment of suffering be to be bearable? How long is a brief moment for God?

Some seconds when a child is crying for his mother?

Some days when your husband is waiting for his diagnosis?

Some months when your daughter is suffering from lovesickness?

Some years when your wife needs lots of painkillers to survive?

Or some decades when a nation destroys itself in a civil war?

How long is a brief moment for God?

For the people of Israel God's brief moment, which began in 600 before Christ, was one of the biggest disasters in their history:

Decades of oppression, deportation, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed twice, - a brief moment for God.

For the people of Israel God's brief moment meant: little shalom and a lot of Ariel Sharon and Netanjahu and Arafat and Hamas – thousands of men, women and children killed, suicide and missile attacks and violent retribution. A brief moment...

Time is relative. Suffering is not relative. Sometimes people say: "Time heals wounds, life will go on somehow, just wait until you are grown up and wiser". Words like these are a cold comfort.

It definitely is not true:

Life is ripping wounds which can only be healed by God.

'Quick and easy' is not even true at the dentists', and does not help in any situation.

Jesus knew that. He tore himself apart. He himself was hanging on the cross for hours – at least? or only? – and cried out with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Time is relative. Suffering is not relative. Just a brief moment – what does this mean?

It is an experience with God that people feel abandoned, lost and hopelessly caught in a life situation which they are not responsible for. There are no satisfying and helpful answers.

I myself could understand that God withdraws from us when we intentionally try to destroy life. I could understand that acting like this hurts God's love. I could understand that God leaves us to our own resources because he loses his temper and is disappointed when we do not answer his love.

The people of Israel always believed: God cares about how we live. His love is so passionate, so full of emotion, so dedicated, that he does not accept the disappointment, but abandons us...for a brief moment.

"For a brief moment I abandoned you... In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you"

It sounds a bit like an excuse, as if God had got frightened by what he had left behind when he withdrew from his people. How desperate they had become. As if God had got frightened by how his people tried to explain his withdrawal:

Does God want to educate us through pain? Does he want to punish us or lead us into temptation?

But: How could love play a dirty game with the suffering and the despair of people?

Does it make any sense when people die in a plane crash as in Ethiopia some weeks ago?

As long as we love and as long as we believe that God is love we have to contradict everyone who claims that suffering is a punishment or a form of education or whatever...

Let us confess that God is suffering when we suffer; that God cries when we cry. That God tries to comfort us with the whole power of his love and our love. Even if it is hard to accept that there is no answer to some of our life experiences, we have to confess as this bible text does:

Our God is a God who hates a death sentence and answers which in a way humbles people:

⁹ This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you.

And even more vehemently says the prophet Hosea: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction" (Hosea 13,14)

How long is a day when you sit next to the phone waiting for the call of a missing person who you love? How long is an hour when you are waiting in front of the door after a job interview?

How long are five minutes in the waiting room before the doctor arrives and tells you your diagnosis? Who is able to comfort and help us in these eternities if not God himself?

God enters our lives, the words of this bible text on his lips, he enters our lives as if a beam of light comes into a dark room. As if someone opens the door and draws back the black curtains: It's me, the Lord, your redeemer!

It is not part of our faith to convince someone that a half-empty glass is, in fact, a half-full one.

It is not God's intention to convince his people that 50 years of exile is just a brief moment. And what are six weeks in a hospital compared to eternity? No – that is not the way to comfort people in the name of God. God is not a marketing strategist.

50 years of exile, the day in front of the phone, the minutes in the waiting room ...eternities!

The hours, when Jesus was carrying his cross up the mountain top to be crucified there...eternities.

Only God has the power to enwrap these eternities of death and to overcome them by his eternal love.

The left-over of these frightening experiences are the stigmas at the hands and legs of the resurrected Christ. He shows them to his disciples in order to comfort them.

God says: Every single moment is too long when you have to carry unbearable loads alone. Unbearable means: This feeling of being totally abandoned: When I am not able to talk about my pain, because others won't be able to share my feelings. The deafness of this world, which only tells me that my pain is just a question of time. Suffering is not relative. Every pain is unique as every person is unique. Time does not comfort! Just as it is no comfort, reminding people that others had been suffering the same or even more. How does that help? Unbearable pain does not make us stronger. Over the years, it transforms us into an unbearable person.

Even if others will never be able to share our life or to understand us: The only way to bear suffering and pain is to live in community. We can arm ourselves or be drunk all the time. Unbearable pain will remain unbearable until I open myself to my neighbour.

For God suffering is not a question of time but a question of community. He does not put us off until we are more adult or more pitted. He does not point with his forefinger to our sinful past. No – God comforts us by his presence. Now and here!

I will gather you! With everlasting love I will have compassion on you. I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you...says the Lord, your redeemer. God will not turn away from us.

His love is too big:

¹⁰ For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

With everlasting love I will have compassion on you

The only way to bear suffering and pain is to live in community.

God promises: In community you will never be alone with your pain. I will be in the midst of your community.

I will abide with you.

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed...and even if your private world breaks down, I will gather you! With everlasting love I will have compassion on you. I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you...says the Lord, your redeemer.

By the way: Tom's mother started to learn sign-language.

Little by little his panic attacks disappeared.

For the first time his mother could talk to him at eye level.

Her words became flesh in her gestures and her facial expression. "I will never abandon you!"

The word becomes flesh, a language of hope grows.

We are able to learn gestures of love; we are able to learn how to comfort someone with our eyes, our ears, our hands, our prayer and our community.

Even the smallest bit of compassion, even the smallest effort of mercy is a seed for God's new community.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.