

Fifth week of Lent 15-21 March

©Written by Rev Willem Jan de Hek

Introduction

A warm welcome again... to all of you, from Scotland and the Netherlands! Welcome to our fifth Bible Study in this series on Lent. We have entered the second half of Lent. Good Friday is approaching, and our study today is about the events following the death of Jesus on Calvary. The texts shows that three followers of Jesus did not run away. We will look at their actions. But let's first start with a prayer from Psalm 19. "Eternal God: may the words of our mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen."

Setting the scene

In the Jacobikerk in Utrecht there is a cross on a wall. It hangs in the southern choir, in a somewhat secluded space in the front right of the church. From a distance you really only see an abstract black cross: two thin black bars, one horizontal and one vertical. But if you come closer, and sit in the choir, for example, you suddenly see that the cross does not consist of just two beams. It has been built from a lot of nails. Some are very small, others a bit bigger. Together these nails form the two beams of the cross. The abstraction of the symbol of a 'cross' suddenly completely disappears. One suddenly realizes that the cross is all about

nails. Very concrete: it is about nails through the wrists and feet of Jesus. This cross is about terrible suffering. It is about pain, blood and eventually even about death.

You see, the cross has (of course) been a powerful symbol throughout the ages. It symbolizes a religion: Christianity. The cross can be seen on display by many Christian churches or seen hanging from a chain around people's necks or on display in their houses and offices. It is indeed powerful because as a symbol the cross does indeed want to tell us what the Gospel is all about. Yet, one also has to say that the cross has lost some of its original meaning. The cross may have become a bit too "common" for all of us. While it was originally a torture device. An instrument that was completely designed to make the crucified suffer as long as possible. The cross was the most humiliating endpoint for a human life. A person hanging between heaven and earth, naked in the scorching sun, until death.

The cross is now the symbol of what followers of Jesus believe. It is difficult to understand how the cross have become such a powerful symbol. How could such a cross have anything to do with God? Let alone with salvation? Or even with reconciliation? The Early Church had to deal with these questions regularly. The cross was called into question by their society and portrayed through mockery which can be seen in an old cartoon that was found in an excavation in Ancient Rome. In this cartoon there is a drawing of a donkey on a cross and next to it is a man with raised arms with an inscription: "Alexamenos worships his god". The

message is clear: A God on a cross? Is it not folly to believe in? Paul, the apostle, goes even further in his letter to Corinth. "For where the cross was foolishness to the Greeks, it is even a stumbling block to the Jews." In other words: a scandal. This is about a Jewish man who is shamefully executed by the pagan occupier. Is that not sacrilege, especially if you associate that person with the promised Messiah?

I would say, if you look around you today, that these kinds of reactions are still very common. One can still stumble in our time and context on a mocking portrayal of Jesus on the cross almost in the same spirit of the ancient cartoon. It sometimes happens almost unnoticed in poems such as the one by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges who says: "What good does it all do me that that man. Has suffered so, when I am suffering now?" (Borges, Christ on the cross.)

Today we are focusing on Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph. They all knew Jesus very well. They found themselves at Calvary, in that terrible scene. Truly a traumatic experience. But they did not run away. They stayed. After everything that happened on this day of darkness until finally a centurion handed over the body of Jesus to Joseph.

Bible reading Mark 15,21-32

⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

Questions to ponder on?

1. Joseph from Arimathea probably knew Jesus. He must have been impressed by the teaching of this Rabbi. But now it all seems to end. Something so wonderful. But does it all stop here? Do you recognize this feeling? If so, would you dare to call this feeling in some sense "traumatic"?

2. Why do you think Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph did not run away (like so many of the other disciples). Would you have stayed?

Reflection

Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph, have been touched by the love of Christ. Joseph brought Jesus' body to its final resting place. It is *his* enormous love for his master and rabbi, that gives him this otherworldly strength and courage to go and ask for Jesus' body. It is their commitment and love that the women follow almost at a distance to see where Jesus' body is laid to rest. Obviously, at that very moment, they could not have imagined what would happen only a few days later, when the women set out after the Sabbath to take care of the body of Jesus again.

In some churches it is customary to change the entire liturgical space after a Good Friday worship service. The lights are dimmed before leaving the church. When the cross loses its abstractness, and we allow the meaning to grab us, then we become silent in the presence of pain, suffering and abandonment. But we will never fully grasp or understand the true impact of the cross. It is not at all easy to stay at the foot of the cross. What one sees over there is a traumatic experience. Someone martyred and murdered, for the sins of the world. But at the same time: the silence and the darkness and the emptiness does not have the last word. Christ will arise, the light will return. Love will turn out to be stronger than death.

Contemporary lesson

When meditating on this scene at Calvary, I was reminded of the persecuted church all over the world. Christians on the front lines, who know what it is like being standing at the foot of the cross - and who also know what it is like **not to** run away, but to stay like Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph because of their love of their Saviour. I want to close with a testimony from Sister Chen from China from a time in Mao Tse Tung in rural communist China when many Christians were persecuted because of their faith. (Source: Jan Pit, Elke Dag Geboeid, 1994, page 355)

"Brother Yuen was arrested and thrown into prison. Later he was taken to the village square to be openly questioned. All believers had to be present at the trial. The purpose of this was to frighten others by killing him. I too was forced to attend the trial. Yuen stood for the government officials. Not a gloomy face, not a despair. Just a peaceful, smiling face. It was as if I saw a life overflowing with peace and love. I knew Yuen very well. How could he have had such peace? I saw a light shining in his eyes that I had never seen before. Oh yes, Yuen had always been a faithful Christian. I remember him as a quiet man who lived with God, without wanting to stand out. But now ... the light of life was shining from God's throne upon this imprisoned Christian. Then he spoke as never before: 'I love Christ. I trust in Him. I follow Him. And I want to remain faithful. I am willing to accept anything that awaits me. I don't want anything but Christ. And I hope that more people will accept Him.' You know, we came with grief, weakness, and pain. But we left with comfort, strength, and joy. We knew: This is not Brother Yuen, this is God who is close to

us! The God who supports us and gives us the words we need. Today, we have the same God. Today, we have his strength. Will Yuen's testimony also be ours?"

Questions to yourself

1. How often do you listen to the witness of fellow believers (far away or nearby) in order to be strengthened in your own faith?
2. What could we learn from "the voices and the deeds of martyrs"?
3. How could we turn our experiences at the foot of the cross – maybe grief, weakness and pain – into hope, strength and joy?

Prayer

Dear Lord and Saviour,

Thank You for the cross.

For the way Jesus went.

In order to fulfil the scriptures.

In order to show that He really was the promised Messiah.

To complete his mission in this way:

carrying away the punishment for sin.

To find a new Kingdom.

To show that you are love.

Love that is stronger than death.

Love that also appeals to us,

to love those around us.

Help us to get to know you like a God who is love.

And who is very close even to our suffering.

Because you know the suffering from within.

When at the foot of the cross
let us be filled with grace and peace.
And be with those who are at the foot of the cross.
Nearby and far away.
Fill all of them with your grace.
Now and forever.
Amen.

Hymn – “There is a green hill”

1. There is a green hill far away,
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all.

2. We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains he had to bear,
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.

3. There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate
Of heav'n and let us in.

4. Oh, dearly, dearly has he loved!
And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood,
And try his works to do.