

Third week of Lent 1-7 March

©Written by Rev Willem Jan de Hek

Introduction

A warm welcome to all of you, from Scotland and the Netherlands! Welcome to our third Bible Study in this series on Lent. Let's begin with a prayer from the Psalms. 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

As we have seen in the introduction to these studies two weeks ago, there have been several ways of remembering the traumatic events that took place in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago. One way that has been developed during the long existence of the church is by looking at the so-called "stations of the cross": a series of simple crosses or fourteen images depicting the passion of Jesus. Almost every catholic church in the world has a series of images like that. The fifth station of the cross always shows Simon of Cyrene, helping Jesus to carry his cross. It truly must have been a traumatic event for this casual passer-by. Against his will, he is withdrawn into the passion narrative – as a complete outsider: not a disciple nor a believer (yet). And there he walks with this cross on his back, following a convicted rabbi he probably even did not know.

Over the course of this Lent series, we look at the passion narrative from the lens of trauma. We live in turbulent and traumatic times. Covid-19 is disrupting and threatening our lives, livelihoods, and existence. How do we make sense of it? "Suddenly there is no safe space on the planet. There is no neutral zone. No medical equivalent of wartime Switzerland, where you could escape for a while, relax, and ponder what ought to be done" (Wright 2020:1-2)¹. For Simon of Cyrene this was literally the case. He *had* to take up the cross. He becomes a cross-bearer whether he likes it or not.

Probably, Simon of Cyrene was a Jewish man from distant North Africa. He came to Jerusalem to attend the feasts of the Passover. Perhaps he had spent years putting all his savings aside for this one pilgrimage. But now everything is turning out differently. His dream trip turns into a nightmare, when an unexpected task falls to him. He is forced by the Roman soldiers to carry the crossbar of the cross of Jesus to the place of execution. Simon probably saw Jesus for the first time. One can't imagine a worse first impression. And yet... it seems that something crucial happened on the way to Golgotha. There is evidence that Simon has never forgotten this event and its protagonist. According to Mark, he is "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mk 15,21). And that can really only mean that his children were known in the early church. Was it their father who told them about the good news? Apparently, Simon later became a follower of Jesus.

¹ Wright, T 2020. *God and the Pandemic. A Christian reflection on the Coronavirus and its aftermath*. London: SPCK.

At first it looked like the ultimate day-of-shame for him. But it became the ultimate day-of-glory.

Bible reading Mark 15,21-32

²¹ A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). ²³ Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. ²⁵ It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The written notice of the charge against him read: the king of the Jews. ²⁷ They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!" ³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! ³² Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Questions to ponder on?

1. Simon of Cyrene appears on the scene in verse 21 but disappears one verse later. Let us assume he did not know who Jesus was. Let us also assume that he stayed behind looking at the unfolding of events on

Golgotha (verse 22-32). Write down what he saw and how these events connect to the Scriptures that Simon must have known?

2. Imagine Simon of Cyrene coming home after this traumatic event and telling one of his best friends what had happened on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. How would he have described Jesus? Start your sentence with: "You won't believe what happened over there! I was forced to carry the cross of a man who..."

Reflection

Simon of Cyrene must have been impressed by what he saw when he was carrying the cross of Jesus. He saw mocking soldiers. But he also saw the devotion of deeply religious women around this Rabbi. And he saw the attitude of humility and meekness in Jesus himself. Right through the heavy suffering this man continued to radiate something of God's love. It was no coincidence that a Roman Centurion later said: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mk 15,39) And perhaps Simon saw in this event also the fulfilment of all kinds of prophecies from the Old Testament. After all, he was a Jew, who went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, hence he knew the Scriptures.

Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross. But where are the disciples of Jesus? Is it not striking that at this key-moment in the passion narrative, they cannot be found at all? All of them ran off! Jesus said it this way:

"Whoever wants to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." (Mt 16:24) But that was by no means the route that the disciples had in mind. They had seen the Messiah in Jesus, sure! But above all they had imagined a triumphant king. A winner! Someone who would immediately eradicate all war, all violence and all disease from the world. But now the road to the Kingdom of God turned out to be very different. Upside down and inside out. The road to victory was a road through suffering, through death and even through trauma.

Simon added up all the clues, and then saw one giant arrow, as it were, pointing towards Jesus. This must be Him! This must be the Messiah! In his words: "Even though I don't understand the way He is going right now, this must be the Christ". Not a triumphant God as one might expect - But a God who apparently triumphs through suffering. A world upside down. And that is precisely why this God comes so very close to us. Simon is carrying the cross, on which the Saviour will eventually die for the sins of the world – meaning for the sins of Simon himself as well. It is a thought-provoking picture, isn't it? This is not a God who arranges things from a distance. But a God who descends into our existence. Can you believe that?

Contemporary lesson

Every Sunday the church bells of Balerno Parish Church and St James Church in Utrecht ring. As do church bells all over the world. They ring on the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The image of church bells is used by Tom Wright (2002:11)² in a commentary on the topic of cross-bearing. In a moving meditation on "carrying the cross after Jesus", Wright compares the call to follow Jesus to a large bell that has been ringing for centuries: "Take up your cross and follow me! Take up your cross and follow me!" What would you do if you heard that call? Would you plug your ears? Wright invites his readers to go on an imaginary journey out on the street where you heard the bells coming from. You would see a long procession of people passing by. Carrying their cross, they go after Jesus. A shining trace of people who have carried their cross freely throughout the centuries. People from all kinds of situations – most beautiful to ugly, pleasing and traumatic. People who went after Jesus, even if it still costed them so much. But going after their Saviour gives them everything. They have learned to think upside down and inside out. "Whoever wants to keep his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life will keep it." (Mt 16,25) Are you coming along?

² Wright, T 2002. *Matthew For Everyone*, Part 2. London: SPCK.

Questions to yourself

1. "Take up your cross and follow me" - That is what Jesus said to his disciples. And He says it to us as well. What 'crosses' come to mind when pondering on this command?
2. Tom Wright invites us to picture in our minds a long procession of people coming along. They are all carrying a cross and they all go after Jesus. What does this picture mean to you?
3. How can you reach out to fellow believers when it comes to taking up our crosses? Who needs your help? Who knows about your 'crosses' and about your pain?

Prayer

Dear Lord and Saviour,

We do not know the reason behind
so many things happening around us.

We do not know the reason behind
the crosses we have to carry.

What we do know is that our faith
has nothing to do with a fairytale sweet world.

Our faith is not primarily about beautiful, inner, spiritual experiences.

Our faith does not separate us from the real world.

No, it is all about meeting the anger and bitterness
of the world around us.

Take up your cross and follow me.
That is what Jesus said.
And it is not an easy lesson.
But it does bring us to the heart of Lent.
Following Christ, our faith may pass
through suffering and even death,
but there is light on the horizon.
May Your Kingdom come!
And let us know that we are not alone.
May we find fellow believers,
to walk with us in this procession after Christ.
Fill our hearts with hope.
And fill us with your grace,
now and forever.
Amen.

Hymn CH4 402

1. Take up your cross, the Savior said,
if you would my disciple be;
take up your cross with willing heart,
and humbly follow after me.
2. Take up your cross; let not its weight

fill your weak spirit with alarm;
Christ's strength shall bear your spirit up
and brace your heart and nerve your arm.

3. Take up your cross, heed not the shame,
and let your foolish pride be still;
the Lord for you accepted death
upon a cross, on Calvary's hill.

4. Take up your cross, then, in Christ's strength,
and calmly every danger brave:
it guides you to abundant life
and leads to victory o'er the grave.