

LENTEN PROGRAMME
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”
Week 3, 2021 – Mark 5. 25-34 [ESV]
Hope for the Future – Tenderness – Veronica
[Adapted]

GATHERING

OPENING PRAYER:

O Jesus, Veronica served you on the way to Calvary by wiping your beloved face with a towel on which your sacred image then appeared. May we grow in our ability to see your sacred image in others, to recognise their hurts, to stop and join them on their difficult journeys, and to feel the same compassion for them as Veronica did for you. As we bind their wounds, Lord, remind us that as we do this for them, we do this for you. Amen.

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

[Mark 5. 25-34]

[There is no actual reference to Veronica in the Gospels - her tradition is a part of Catholic popular piety associated with the Veronica veil, a cloth bearing an image of the face of Christ. Here we read a passage about the Haemorrhissa, a woman of great faith who has, on occasion, been identified with Veronica.]

There was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, 'If I touch even his garments, I will be made well.' And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my garments?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, "Who touched me?"' And he looked round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

Poem: Veronica's Veil

.....
A woman's power and presence and peace
gives you, Jesus, a moment's release
I press my dampened cloth to your face
so bloodied and butchered by men's brutal blows.

Gravel and grit, phlegm and spit
the salt of sweat, blood smeared thick
all absorbed in the linen's strands
hatred's poison lanced and drained.

But the wave returns, I am swept aside
erased in the sand by the rise of the tide
the mob surges on to the butcher's block
to Calvary's barren and cruel outcrop.

Discarded, abandoned, cast free from the din
I can still feel the steam, the sting of your skin
then sensing the cloth clung tight in my hand
I look down to see your face reflected in red.

Unplanned, unrequested, a gift of pure grace
your passion scarred image has left its trace
I fall to my knees and in silence adore
venerating the veil with its saving blood.

Please take a few moments in silence to reflect on the passage and the poem.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE [Laila Asfoura]

Over the last years I have become increasingly drawn to Veronica's experience of wiping the face of Jesus. On some occasions, I have joined a group of pilgrims walking and praying the Stations of the Cross in the Old City of Jerusalem. At those times I have also become increasingly drawn to the Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. I can still remember the first time I met with a group and the expression on their faces when they heard that I am a Palestinian Christian living in Bethlehem. The pilgrims showed great interest to know more about the modern-day life challenges of a Christian woman born and raised in the little town of Bethlehem.

I find myself challenged and comforted by the idea of Veronica being the woman cured of the flow of blood. Her whole life was touched and transformed by Jesus' kindness and healing power. At Jesus' time of greatest need, she returns that act of kindness and compassion. Veronica's act is a powerful reminder that we are all called to be people of compassion and sympathy. When we step forward in kindness as an act of charity we invite a response of love and gratitude. Hopefully, like Veronica, we can have the courage to take that step to help another in need, for it is then that Jesus' face is revealed to us and in us.

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that we allow Christ into our lives, practise our faith, follow His teachings and become more aware and caring about others, especially the disabled, elderly, helpless and hopeless in our community.

I serve as the Executive Director of St Martha's House, founded in 2009, which is the first day-care centre for elderly ladies in the Bethlehem area, and is supported by Friends of the Holy Land in the UK. The ladies range in their ages from their 70's to their 90's. They are mainly widows living alone with no one to care for them. Many have families that have emigrated and are struggling to establish a new life so are unable to help their parents. Families that remain in the West Bank find the demands on their limited income make caring for the elderly problematic. Therefore, many of these elderly women live a lonely and isolated existence outside of St Martha's.

No welfare systems exist in Bethlehem such as state pensions, healthcare or social services to provide a safety net of support. Elderly women living alone are particularly vulnerable. St Martha's provides a safe and caring environment where they can spend quality time in their latter years. We have a core of 28 ladies in regular attendance 4 days a week. We provide nursing support for them with healthcare checks, haircare podiatry and assistance in crafts and cooking skills during their day at St Martha's. They enjoy a midday meal, board games, embroidery and tending the garden which provides vegetables for the House.

Sadly St Martha's had to close in March for ten weeks because of the coronavirus pandemic. The ladies remained each in their own home concerned about their health issues and the virus. They stayed as safe as they could but they felt lonely and isolated by themselves with very limited activities and social gathering. We missed the ladies as they missed us - each one of them is a mother to all of us.

The Holy Land is experiencing a situation of uncertainty and political, social and economic instability. Regardless of these number of challenges, I believe that we, as Christians, are here to stay as active members of the community and preserve the presence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Life is a journey towards God with purpose. As I continue my own journey of faith, I am grateful for the gift of caring and showing love and affection to others. I feel that it is an important mission that inspires me to look at the world around me, and those in it, through the eyes of faith.

We have one lady at St Martha's who is 92 years old that has 13 children, but is now a widow living on her own facing the difficulties of daily life. Despite these, challenges, she, as an elderly Christian lady, shows the same courage as Veronica, sharing her love and compassion towards all of us at St Martha's House.

Short Reflection on Scripture and the Poem

In the brutality and rage of Jesus' journey to his crucifixion, we are struck by the feminine tenderness of Veronica in her courageous act of lovingly wiping his face as he passed by. Anyone who prays the stations of the cross in Jerusalem today will be struck by the narrowness of the streets and can imagine the surging force of the crowds as Jesus dragged the cross amongst them. The noise, the din, the verbal and physical abuse of the prisoners...

Please take a few moments of silence to reflect on what you have read.

Question for Reflection

Tenderness is one of Pope Francis' favourite words. What does it mean for you?

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray earnestly to Christ the Lord. He tells us to watch and pray that we may not fall into temptation.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you promised to be with those who are gathered in your name; keep us united with you as we pray to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

Cleanse your Church from every stain of sin; make her alive with hope and the power of the Spirit.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

Help us to care for our neighbour and show your love for all; through us let the light of your salvation shine in the world.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

Let your peace spread to the ends of the earth; let all people see in every place the signs of your presence.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

Bring the dead to everlasting happiness; let glory and immortal life be theirs.

R: Hear us, Lord, and have mercy.

In the silence of our hearts let us bring to the Father our thanks [pause]

In sorrow let us ask the Father for forgiveness [pause]

With confidence let us entrust to the Father our cares and concerns [pause]

Almighty God, by the cross and resurrection of your Son you have given life to your people. We have received the sign of the cross: make us living proof of its saving power and help us to persevere in the footsteps of Christ. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Acknowledgement:
“Holy Week Voices from the Holy Land”

[You may wish to purchase a physical copy directly from Friends of the Holy Land or obtain an electronic/digital version (also priced £7.99), both of which are available from their website: www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk

The proceeds of this book (priced at £7.99 plus postage and packaging) will go to the Friends of the Holy Land to aid their work with the neediest of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. As with those closer to home, our brothers and sisters there have suffered dramatically during the coronavirus pandemic, including economically with the cessation of pilgrimages and tourism and the resulting loss of income]