

## Texts

Micah 4:1-5, Revelation 21:1-7

## Sermon

As a regular preacher in this church I am expected to discuss the Bible texts we have heard, and, because of the special nature of this service, I have also been asked to say something about the theme of Remembrance Day, when we remember the fallen from Great Britain and the Commonwealth in the First and Second World Wars and the other wars that followed.

The texts we heard from the Old and New Testaments are both glowing visions of a world to come, a world of peace and plenty, where there will be no more war and where even death will be banished, as we read in the text from Revelation, the last book of our Bible. These are texts often associated with Remembrance Day and, indeed, they were beloved texts for many Christian soldiers and resistance members.

In our Remembrance Day services in The Hague we pay particular attention to the Stijkel-group, one of the earliest groups set up to resist the German occupation force during World War II, which was centered here in The Hague. As a Dutchman I can never forget the contributions made by the British and Commonwealth forces in the Second World war; indeed I have a personal reason to be grateful to the Canadian forces in that war, as I will make clear. But I will focus on a subject I can speak about, which is the Dutch resistance to the Germans.

The Netherlands was militarily no match for Germany, and the country was overrun in five days. That means that most Dutch stories about the Second World war are about how to deal with the regime of the German occupiers.

Although I was born after the war, I was brought up with the stories of what my grandparents and my parents had gone through in the war, and so it is not hard to imagine the war situation in my head. Han Stijkel, the leader of the group, was studying English literature. He was a bit older than my father, who at the beginning of the war was just beginning with his medical studies.

Stijkel recruited dozens of people – one source I read speaks of military officers, policemen, engineers, fishermen, students and businessmen – and they started to gather information that they thought would be useful for the counterattack they expected to come from England. Things like plans of a munitions factory in Voorburg, for instance.

A good part of them were devout Christian people, to whom the Nazis were manifestations of the Anti-Christ, but one should point out that the most active people in the resistance were disproportionately either quite conservative Calvinist Christians or Communists – “bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble”, quite surprised to find themselves on the same side, as the saying goes. Of course, both groups had in common that they cherished visions of a world to come.

At the beginning of the war my grandmother was a young widow bringing up three teenage children, and a very devout Christian. She did not go out to gather military information; what she did was to start sheltering in her house – mostly in the attic I think – Jewish people who were on the run trying to escape the Germans.

Both in the case of the Stijkel-group and of my grandmother, their activities were successful for a while, but then they, as amateurs in this business, were no match for the dedicated professionals of the German Security Service, the Sicherheitsdienst or SD. Already a few months after the start of activities, the SD was able to infiltrate the Stijkel-group; one of their informants was a person claiming to be a Jew trying to escape to England and offering the group a large sum of money for such a plan.

Stijkel made a plan to go to England on a fishing boat belonging to one of his comrades, but the Germans knew of it beforehand and were waiting for them when they were trying to get out of Scheveningen Harbour. My grandmother's case was more humdrum but not less painful: a neighbour informed the SD of her activities, and she was immediately arrested.

47 people connected with the Stijkel-group were arrested in April 1941. The group stayed in prison in Scheveningen until March 1942, when they were transported to Berlin. They spent a year in prison there; their steadfastness, inspired by their faith, made a great impression on the German prison chaplain, Harald Poelchau, who wrote a book about the group after the war. But in the end, most of them were convicted and executed one by one in June 1943. Poelchau writes that they went to their end singing hymns and the national anthem. My grandmother was first sent to the infamous Dutch concentration camp at Westerbork in the east of the country; she actually survived the war, but only just. She was more dead than alive when she was liberated by Canadian soldiers while trudging in a forced march toward a concentration camp somewhere in Germany. She did recover, however, and lived for another fifty years after the war, long enough to inspire her grandson with her lively, optimistic faith.

What role do these happy visions of a world to come play for people caught in these horrifying wars? For some it is tempting to say: "Well, people caught in a hell on earth see only darkness around them, nothing inspiring or happy, so instead they dream about a perfect world to come once they have escaped this hell on earth." This theory has a name: "pie in the sky".

That is a completely mistaken view.

For one thing, although Jesus also looked to a future ideal world, it wasn't for him only in the future. Jesus's first sermon in his brief career on earth is recorded in Luke Chapter 4. He stood up in the synagogue and read a passage from Isaiah, not the one we heard today but quite similar: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to proclaim good news to the poor. ... to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" OK, this text was undoubtedly familiar to his audience. But then he says something astonishing; he says "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" In other words, the Kingdom of God is not only in the future, but is already here.

Jesus repeats this quite a few times. If you believe in him, you have eternal life. Period. Not: you will have this eternal life sometime in the future. The Kingdom of God is here.

The second thing is, people of faith trying to survive in horrible circumstances, do you think that they have time to dream about future worlds? Forget it. They are too busy trying to survive today. And while they are doing that, they often are enacting the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not a specific place or time. It is a state of things that has infiltrated the world. Its complete fulfillment is in the future, true, but it is also here wherever people behave like it. It is here when people make sacrifices, even up to their own life, for the good cause.

The heroes of Great Britain and the Commonwealth who fell in the wars made the ultimate sacrifice, and they are leading us into the Kingdom of God. When we remember them in these peaceful and prosperous times of ours, let us be grateful and humble followers. Let us take courage from their examples when we do our best to overcome our own troubles, like the dreadful Corona pandemic we are struggling with. And let us never lose hope.

Amen