

Rizpah's Tears

Sermon on 2 Samuel 21 v 1-14

Have you ever been standing alone for a long time?
Have you felt that no one else knows your pain?
Were there times in which you could not believe that God was still with you?

In the Old Testament I found the story of a woman who must have had all these fears and feelings. Silently and alone she teaches us how to beat sorrow with grace, dignity and perseverance. She refused to give up when everybody else had already done so. She refused to give up on her children, the ones she had brought into the world. She refused to leave them alone.

Her suffering must have been almost unbearable...
...but her tears opened heaven and made new life possible.

At first glance it is a desperate, dark and cruel story. But it also speaks of deep, deep love, of almost unbearable pain, and of what we can do with that...

I would like to speak to you about Rizpah, whose story you've just heard as the Old Testament reading. I would like to invite you to meet this woman, a mother of sons, and hear and understand her love, her grief and her courage.

Rizpah's sons had been killed, but she is not willing to allow their deaths to be forgotten. Her grief, her love and her faithfulness lead her to strong protest and deep rebellion.

Rizpah mourns publicly and intensively.

In spite of King David and his politics Rizpah does not stay away from these dead sons.

She cannot leave the victims alone. She remains with them, sitting by them to prevent their being torn apart and disfigured by wild animals.

Others would have possibly been put off by the sight of these cadavers... Others would have turned and run away from this place of massacre, but Rizpah stays and looks death in the eye.

Realistically Rizpah could not do anything about what had happened. They all were dead and nothing would ever be the same again.

But in Rizpah's mind there is something very different going on from what is in the minds of those around King David. Not only did they kill innocent people, but also they take their revenge far beyond death, for in Rizpah's world the souls of those who were not properly buried would never find peace in death...

They'd be punished and remain restless forever.

It is only with her love and her tears that Rizpah breaks through the evil course of hate, injustice and violence. And while the powerful return to their everyday business, she remains in her mourning and thus protests against their cruelty.

Rizpah remembers the victims.

She shows her pain and hurt, and lets her tears flow.

And nobody who meets her can pass by without being involved and touched. Nobody would later be able to say that they had not noticed or seen the inhuman sacrifice.

There are two entirely different images of God in our story. Not two Gods, but two very different ways of thinking about God.

One is the image of God, which King David seems to live with:

A God who stands for law and order, who divides his people into good or bad, who gives rewards or punishes... who takes interest in revenge and reparation.

This image of God has been abused so often in the history of humankind. Far too often it had been used to confirm the politics of the powerful; and whoever was not living and thinking in conformity to their ideas and aims was accused, bitterly punished and cruelly persecuted and destroyed.

That is a terrible image of God, who would always seek for revenge and a most dubious justice.

For some reason some people seem to agree with this or even long for it...? Maybe such an image of God is an attempt to achieve stability and organize law and order in a world that so often seems so complicated and frightening.

Yet this image of God is never a biblical one. It could only arise as an enormous misunderstanding of God and his relationship with his creation.

And it is not at all the image of God, which Jesus has shown us.

In him and in numerous stories in the Old and New Testaments we meet a God who does not ask for revenge but who forgives. We meet a God who is not waiting for attempts at reparation, but who is simply waiting for a small sign of mercy.

Jesus has always made sure that no matter how our lives have been, the first and most important word God would always offer to us in a world of fear and sin, is a word of understanding and forgiveness.

And with his life Jesus has at all times shown that the God whom we meet and experience in him is a God, who is influenced by the life of human beings, who can be deeply touched, who is involved in our stories, with our tears and through our pain.

God is not far away, untouchable beyond the world's and people's fate.

God is always on the side of those who suffer, who grieve and hurt; and

God is on the side of the victims - and in the end becomes a victim himself..

God, who in Jesus was nailed to the cross, experiences what the victims of King David do: his body is not left alone, handed over to be forever forgotten.

He as well – at his cross and beside his grave – is given the friendship and solidarity of women who cry and wail and who are not willing to leave him with the dead but who remember his life for those who live.

His body as well is cared for by the women, because he shall not remain forgotten but will live on in the memory and history of men and women at all times.

However the image Rizpah has of God is very hidden...

..it can in fact only be guessed:

It is similar to the God of Jesus, who does not want human dignity dragged through the muck, who does not want victims & revenge but simply signs of mercy.

Rizpah's mourning is enormous.

She is living all the way through it; she is facing the deepest pain and despair that a human being can bear...

And I believe this is the only way, after the cruel loss of her children that she can try to find a way back to life.

In Rizpah's mourning I find tremendous motherly love, and also enormous human rage and pain. What she does is a powerful rebellion and a desperate speechless protest against what had happened.

Rizpah's God – and the God of Jesus – cannot really prevent humans from killing, hurting and suffering... But: God can give the powerful will to show the unspeakable pain it causes and to condemn such injustice. He can empower us to live out our grief and express a protest that cannot be ignored.

Rizpah's mourning, as far as I can see, is the only act of humanity in this story of revenge around King David. Her mourning is the last and only possibility to react against such inexpressible pain and disgraceful cruelty...

In the story we hear that after 3 years of drought it starts raining again, God cares for the future of the land...

Why is that?

Is it the mourning of Rizpah and the tears she sheds that can open heaven and make new life possible? I guess so... I guess this would be the way Rizpah's story would want to be understood.

I certainly don't think that it rained again, because revenge is taken by the Gibeonites...!

In any case this rain can be seen as a symbol:

it stands for new life, for renewal and resurrection. It implies future and openness, relationships which can succeed... lives that can be lived, emotions that need to be expressed.

Rain stands for injuries which can seem unbearable and never ending at times, but in the end can heal. Rain stands for hurt and pain that can be overcome and doesn't have to overshadow our lives forever.

In Rizpah's story it is her tears, her mourning and protesting that can open heaven: Her tears flow...

Her pain turns into public protest for the sake of God and his people, for humanity and for the future of humanity...

What makes all the difference in this story and lets rain fall again is this speechless protest of a single suffering woman against inhuman politics. What really makes a difference is Rizpah's rebellion against forgetting what had happened.

Rizpah's mourning, her rebellion against pain and death, are not her own little private affair; they change the world – of her days.

She doesn't quietly withdraw and weep secretly, but shows her strong emotions, forces them upon the king and his politics, and so accomplishes growth and new beginnings for her country and her people.

I love Rizpah's story... have loved it and lived with it over the years.

And I want to learn from it over and over again.

I want to learn to show my feelings, express my pain, share my despair and stand up against injustice and violence in my own humble way – with the

simple means I have, even if it is only a sackcloth spread on a rock, or my quiet tears shed for those suffering, dying and aching in so many parts of my small life and God's great big world.

Amen.

Prayer

Loving God, let us take comfort and dignity
from here into our everyday lives.

Let us be glad that we love and feel.

And let us be free to weep when we need it...

Let us be always open to share
and willing to hold each other in our pain and despair.

Empower us, God, to live life to the full
and always affirm hope among each other.

May you be our company,

Christ Jesus walk before us,

and the spirit surround us with grace and mercy.

Amen.