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From Priest to Preacher

When in former days in the monastery they came to wake us, they would knock at the door while calling “Blessed be the name of Jesus Christ,” and the response would be “Forever and ever, Amen.” Only then would the caller take it as a sign that we had heard the knock and were awake.

The mutual phrase is called in the Roman Catholic world “the Christian greeting.” Likewise, should you ring the bell at a convent, the Sister-porter would make a modest, friendly bow at you while opening the door, and at the same time greet you with the words: “Blessed be Jesus Christ,” expecting to hear your reply, “Forever and ever, Amen.”

In the same manner, the chairman of a Roman Catholic society would be expected to open a meeting with the “Christian greeting.” These good sorts of people, outwardly rough at times and clumsy, did not always know the proper phrases, but they had loyal hearts of gold and I enjoyed their company. Such was one sailor I met.

If the Apostles had been Butchers

The first introduction did not look very hopeful. I arrived while he, his wife, and a few friends were eating roast beef and drinking liquor. As it was Friday, however, I asked him if he were Roman Catholic. “Certainly, Reverend,” he answered enthusiastically, “and shall I tell you that I have helped at least a hundred missionaries to sail across to the mission field!” I had that to take as proof of his being Roman Catholic. All the same, I asked him “But are you allowed to eat meat on Friday?” Immediately, the sailor had a ready answer: “Don't be childish, Reverend! As if it matters for just one time? I am not home every day. And besides, the whole obligation of eating fish once a week is no more than a business deal of the Church. That is only done because the Apostles happened to be fishermen. Had they been butchers, I am sure that they would have told us to eat meat once a week! But as it is, they were fishermen. Nonsense, Reverend!” Strictly, as “Reverend Father,” I should not have laughed, but I just happened to do so.

The Gospel of a Sailor

Nearly a year later, I was called to see the same sailor. He was very ill; the doctor had said that he had incurable cancer. When I saw him, he asked me, to my surprise, if he were allowed to confess. Obviously, I let him. I was even pleased he asked me.

Then followed an appalling life story, one of the worst I have ever heard. This man had wasted his life. However, the environment, in which he had to live during his youth, and in later

years, had been particularly bad and corrupt. When, in the middle of his story, he asked me if I did not think him to be terribly bad, I could only answer with “No, for if I had lived in your circumstances, I would have been far worse.”

In the meantime, I discovered with surprise, as well as with emotion, that of the devil-may-care sailor of a year ago there was not much left. Seeing his sorrow and repentance was heart-rending. Jesus Christ seemingly laid hold of this rough fellow at the end of his life, just as He had with the malefactor on the Cross.

Because the doctor told me the sick sailor had not much longer to live, I went to visit him again a few days later. He was dying. During the conversation I asked him if perhaps together we would again ask for forgiveness for all the wrong he had committed during his life. “I have already done that,” was the response. And when I sat looking at him quietly awhile, he said: “Listen please, Reverend. If a son who had insulted me asked me for forgiveness and I had told him all is well, he need not have to ask me again after a few days. That is how even I would act, as a father. And the dear God in Heaven is a better father than I.” *“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness...”* (Isaiah 61:10).

What a faith! What a thrilling great faith! How was it that this tough lump of a fellow at the end of his life was a true believer with assurance of salvation? The next day he died in peace. He did not have a religious funeral; his family did not want it. I know for sure that at the end of my life, I'd much rather be in the shoes of this sailor than in those of many to whom I had given a solemn church funeral! I still think this way.

I Left the Roman Catholic Church

Shortly afterwards, many big changes came into my life. I was transferred from Rotterdam to Amsterdam. In itself this was a promotion, but in the meantime my inner conflict with the Roman doctrine and life had become so great that I felt compelled to leave the Dominican Order and the Roman Catholic Church. On top of that, through my almost pure earthbound philosophy of life, there was not much faith left within me. For that reason I left in November 1955. For leaving the Order I requested and received “dispensation.” Not, of course, for leaving the Roman Catholic Church!

I went to live in The Hague, where I started a completely different life. Through the intercession of an influential man in the world, I became the administrator of a hotel in Rotterdam. This certainly was different from being a priest. Mentally and spiritually I felt completely empty. I wanted to get away from a religious atmosphere. I tried to free myself completely from the past and to think about it as little as possible. I nearly succeeded. But that sailor I could not forget.

My Roman Catholic belief was at low ebb. I seldom went to a place of worship. The Roman Catholic Church had left me disillusioned, and Protestant churches left me often bored by the dull, fixed, dry, uninspiring, traditional sermons, behind which one could not detect much personal conviction or enthusiasm. With some exceptions, the few Protestant sermons I listened to gave the impression of being more or less successful as a personal or theological essay about the Gospel, but not one was charged with conviction and proclamation of the Gospel. Especially the reading from papers and the very style of the sermon was foreign to me. Coming from a

Roman Catholic Church, it was already a dead loss for me. Besides, a couple of times it happened to be a so-called “modern” minister, whose vague talk put me off even more quickly. I lost interest in church altogether. But that sailor I could not forget.

After three years of hotel life, for which I was totally inadequate, I had the opportunity to do something more in line with my former training. I could commence studying again, and I became a teacher in classical languages at a couple of high schools. The third and last one of these was a Christian high school in The Hague. As a matter of course, I had to mix with Christian colleagues. Now I would not say that they were all examples of a living Christianity. Some lived their lives out of a conscious religious conviction. The freedom and gladness of God's children were obviously present. Involuntarily, I began to watch them, and it became an attractive experience for me.

The Bible Began to Fascinate Me

I was obligated to begin classes each morning by reading a small portion of Scripture. At first I did this solely because I had to. But to my surprise, I gradually began to enjoy it.

The Word of God began to take hold of me and to fascinate me as never before, and of my own accord I began to read far more from the Scriptures than the small portion I was obligated to read at school. Together with this, I also read commentaries by learned men. At times it was enlightening and inspiring, but most of the time I found it dull and arid. It annoyed me, as I did not feel one needed the help of scholars to understand the Scriptures. The Ethiopian eunuch did not learn to understand his reading from Isaiah through a professor or minister but through the deacon Philip, and he did not preach to him things worth knowing, but rather Jesus. *“Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus”* (Acts 8:35). Philip preached in such a way that the man believed, was baptized, and went on his way rejoicing.

“And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:36-39).

After the reading of some commentaries, I could not possibly say that about myself. On the contrary, very often the joy I had already in the wonderful message of God's love and mercy was being rather dampened and hindered. Therefore, of all the learned writings about the Scriptures, which I read, there was not much that remained with me. However, that sailor I could not forget. The more I read the Scriptures, the more it became clear to me why I could not forget that sailor. That man was a true believer. Personally, I was not and never really had been, in spite of the fact that in earlier days I had accepted a great number of theological theses as “religious truths” and in spite of the fact that I held a leading position within the Church.

That is the conclusion to which I came through reading the Scriptures. At one time I thought that to believe was to accept the authority of someone else (for instance, the Church), and to accept with the intellect a certain number of truths (for example, that God exists, that there is a heaven and a hell, that there are sacraments, etcetera.). The Scriptures, however, taught me that this is not faith. If that were so, the devil himself would also be a believer. The devil also accepts these truths! That is not “saving” faith.

The Laugh of the Century

According to the Scriptures, believing is the same as trusting. Why do the Scriptures call Abraham the father of all believers, the example of a believer? Not because he accepted a series of truths intellectually, nor because he was a fiery defender of a church meeting or synod or of the Articles of Union. He never knew about those. The Holy Scriptures called Abraham a believer because he trusted blindly in God and in God's Word, even when he did not understand it intellectually. *“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised that righteousness might be imputed unto them also”* (Romans 4:11).

When Abraham and his wife were nearly a combined 200 years of age, God said that they would have a child. Biologically it was the joke of the century and completely “unbelievable.” That is why Abraham had some difficulty at first, because there is no such thing as an uncomplicated faith with solely ready-made answers.

Yet, Abraham did trust blindly that what God had said would come to pass, even though this expectation was not in accordance with the insight of his human understanding. That is why the Scriptures call him a believer. Believing according to the Scriptures is the same as blindly trusting God and God's Word. Whoever does that, even contrary to the insight of his human understanding, is a believer. Man does not believe in the first instance with his mind, but with his heart! As the Scriptures say, *“For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation”* (Romans 10:10).

But Abraham Believed

For this reason it is possible that someone who may know a lot of theology, hold a high church function, regularly attend church services or even lead them, who has intellectually accepted a large number of “religious truths” and can defend them eloquently, but is thereby leaning on his own insight and “proofs” and does not possess that blind trust in God and in God's Word, can yet be an unbeliever. That is why that sailor, who had no theological knowledge at all and who seldom had been to a church, was a believer at the end of his life. He had that blind trust whereby one is a believer according to the Scriptures.

In spite of all the suffering and misery in the world, from which many conclude that there is no God or that He is not a loving, caring Father as He is presented in the Scriptures, that sailor did blindly trust that God was truly the real, loving Father as the Scriptures describe Him, and was, therefore, a much better father than himself. Led by the Spirit of God, that sailor knew with

absolute certainty that God was his Father, that his sins were forgiven and that he was one of God's children. Moreover, the steadfast, blind trust made him cry with joy from his deathbed, "Abba Father."

A short time after it had become clear to me through reading the Scriptures what faith really is, the Bible became an entirely different book to me than what it first was. I had always "believed" that the Scriptures were inspired, but that had not stopped me from reading the same Scriptures critically and not taking the necessary statements and stories seriously or too literally. Suddenly, I could do this no longer. Instead, my distrust was directed against the opinions of my own intellect and that of others, rather than against the Scriptures. That does not mean that every problem in connection with the Scriptures had disappeared. Oh no, I still see them and believe that they will always remain for the human intellect. I also believe that what seems impossible and unbelievable to man is yet possible with God (Luke 18:27). That which passes as great sagacity in this world before God (and thus in reality) is the greatest foolishness. On the other hand, that which in the Scriptures seems foolishness according to man's concept is the greatest wisdom with God, and thus in reality. "*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men...*" (I Corinthians 1:25). "*For the wisdom of this world is foolish with God. For it is written, he taketh the wise in their own craftiness*" (I Corinthians 3:19).

It was for this reason that I could do no other than submit to Holy Scripture and I felt compelled in the future to blindly trust in the Lord and upon His Word only. Then I also could, in an unforgettable moment, cry out with all my heart, "Abba Father."

God's infallible Word in the Bible taught me that with this faith, with this blind trust, my sins had been taken away. I now belonged to the children of God. I could also have "everlasting life," not only much later, but NOW! "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life*" (John 6:47).

Sorrow and Joy

The feelings of sorrow and repentance over my many terrible sins were surging up and not to be restrained. They were being mingled in a wondrous way with the abundant joy of the sure knowledge that I was saved by the precious blood of Jesus from eternal rejection and that now I was forever one of God's children. It is indescribable what this means to someone who has never known this surety before. In any case, because of this I am still a happy man and no one, however important and learned he may be, will take this from me. Not for all the money in the world would I put one step back on the road I came from, even when I see with sorrow and consternation how esteemed colleagues in curiosity go ever further on that road and therefore miss all the more the comfort, the certainty and the joy of God's powerful message and His promises to the believers.

I continue to read and re-read that it is not the churches and the works but only the real biblical faith, the blind trust in the Lord and His Word that justifies the poor lost sinner. For this we have the example of the old, remarkable character of Abraham. "*For what saith the scriptures? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but*

believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:3-5). “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24).

After that complete spiritual change in my life, I felt unspeakably happy. I still feel that way. That is why I would wish nothing less than that many, many others would experience the same happiness; for that I pray daily. *“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).* The ones sentenced to eternal death were you and I! Upon Golgotha’s Cross, where you and I had deserved to hang ... but Jesus hung there! No one less than the Son of the Judge Himself hung there, because He loved us poor, lost people so much. He took our place and died to save us from eternal death and to sanctify and bless us now and forever! This immensely impressive message of God's endless love for the people, for you and for me, is the heart of the Scripture, that unique book with its unique contents. To tell, without distortion, this wonderful, hopeful message of redemption, of deliverance, and everlasting life is why I became a minister.

Only Christ

For more than 15 years I was a friar, but however important that was in the eyes of people, it was impossible for me to find peace and happiness. I could not, nor can I, live happily and in peace without knowing for certain that my sins are forgiven, that I may be a child of God. The Roman Catholic Church has never been able to give me that assurance, not even when I was a priest and friar. The Roman Church did not teach me rightly what is necessary. The Roman Church did not teach me that only God's mercy is necessary, and from the human side, only faith, and the way thereto is only to be found in the Scriptures.

Along the completely unexpected road from priest to preacher, which I have tried to describe on previous pages, I have been allowed to find that long-sought peace and may now witness with endless thankfulness and gladness that through this I have become a completely happy man.

With all my heart I pray every day that many of my dear fellow men with whom I used to work, pray, and search, and not least those who will read what I have written here, may find the same peace, assurance, and this same life of joy. That is possible. It is not to be found along any arbitrary road, or along any exclusively ecclesiastical way, but only by God's mercy, only through an unshakable, immovable faith, and through praying, reading, and reading again the overwhelming, unique Message in that powerful and unique book, the Bible.