

Sermon [on Joshua 4:1-7 and Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10]

[Market Garden commemorative evensong, Oude Kerk, Oosterbeek, Sunday 22 September 2019]

It is in these days of the commemoration of the Battle of Arnhem that we are especially aware of the fragility of our lives. It's only a short time ago, that there was war here: 75 years; we still know the stories of our parents or grandparents who sought refuge in cellars and who then had to flee from this area. And even though we are living in freedom here in Europe right now - in countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, we see how people still suffer from armed violence. Besides, life in our world is threatened in other ways: political crises, trade wars and worrying developments in the world economy, a climate crisis and damage to nature worldwide. We become aware of the fragility of our lives in all sorts of ways.

How to deal with uncertainty, with the awareness that your life can be affected by calamity? That, of course, was the question that faced the Allied soldiers 75 years ago when they came to our region, when they came down with their parachutes and were shot at from all sides. Imagine how vulnerable you would feel then.

It all became much more dramatic than could have been foreseen. The communication was not properly established, or it stagnated. As a result, the various army units did not know what to expect from each other. Moreover, the German resistance turned out to be much stronger than expected. The Allied forces therefore regularly must have felt very small and powerless, facing the enemy's violent onslaught. And finally, it turned out that the army commanders had set themselves an almost impossible task: They had to take the Rhine Bridge from the Germans and then occupy it for so long, that the Allied armies advancing from the south could safely cross to liberate the northern part of the Netherlands. That should be accomplished within a few days. But the troops from the south were delayed and it was impossible for John Frost and his brigade to hold the bridge any longer.

Roy Urquhart, the commander-in-chief, describes it all in his book, *Arnhem: the hopeless struggle*, the fear and desperation, but also the great courage, loyalty, solidarity, camaraderie, the stamina, the perseverance often against better judgment. And it is precisely in these things that for me lies a key to answering the question how to deal with the fragility of our lives.

The book has beautiful passages about trust, support, solidarity - sometimes even towards the enemy: assistance to wounded enemy soldiers - in my opinion a seed from which global solidarity and humanity can grow.

I was much moved by what Roy Urquhart has written about a group of five hundred defeated soldiers of his own army. They had to withdraw, the battle was lost. But how strange: these men marched away along the Utrecht road in Arnhem, near the Elisabeths Gasthuis, singing! It was like a victory parade, though they had lost the battle. Even the Germans felt a great respect for them (ch. 8: p. 190). It tells me: however fragile and threatened life is, you can still overcome the misery. They did at that moment - and we can do this in our situation.

Particularly moving is the account of the fierce battle around the headquarters Hartenstein. Urquhart describes how the Airborne flag was blown away, something that nobody could be bothered about at that moment, but later on he noticed that someone had raised the martial flag again (ch. 7: p. 178). I consider this as something of great symbolic significance: the battle could not be won, but still the flag was raised. No matter how fragile life is, it is always worthwhile to raise what is important to you, what you want to live for and fight for. When the battle is over, Hancock, one of the officers, turns to Urquhart: *I thought you'd like this*. And he takes the Pegasus flag out of his uniform jacket (ch. 8: p. 189). It says: invincibility despite loss - and courage and hope for the future.

Let us consider the final phase of the battle for a moment. The German forces have become too strong. It is no longer possible for John Frost and his brigade to control the bridge in Arnhem. Many men have died. Others are injured, defeated and exhausted. They have fought as heroes - certainly -

but they have also become victims in an impossible battle. At a certain point, there is no alternative but to withdraw. A plan is made for this (chs. 6-8: pp. 172-89). It is carefully determined which units will be the first to leave their posts and how the men will retreat through the woods and across the open field. They wrap their boots with rags to make them less audible for the enemy who will shoot mercilessly at every move. It is dark and foggy that night of 25 to 26 September 1944. White ribbons hang on the trees and shrubs. No matter how dark it is, the men can follow the white ribbon, the life-line to freedom. Some are too sick or too badly injured: *Go without me*, they say. *Good luck in crossing the Rhine*. But there are also boys who are injured along the way, who are dragged along by companions, who are lifted on their shoulders. In small boats they are ferried across the river. Some are hit by hostile fire. Urquhart's boat is carried along by the stream and comes ashore much further away. Many soldiers manage to swim across; some drown. The battered army is reforming again - in freedom.

The desperate walk following the white ribbon was not a glorious procession but a difficult road to liberty. And the further life of these brave soldiers will have been marked forever by loss and grief. Yet I also want to see their journey in a positive and hopeful light. Montgomery later wrote a letter to Roy Urquhart (ch. 8: pp. 193-94), in which he basically said\*: You and your men have made an essential contribution to the liberating process. Your efforts have considerably weakened the position of the opponent. Thank you for your heroic commitment.

Three quarters of a century later we look back on everything that happened. And we look at our own lives, so much more comfortable and secure than theirs. But our lives too are vulnerable in a world full of problems. Nevertheless there is a white ribbon for every life: in our darkest hours there are always moments of light: the courage that you receive, the things that you achieve in work and private life, the results that we achieve together in the struggle for a better world with less violence and destruction - experiences that give you courage. They are like the white ribbon through the days of our existence.

And sometimes you do well to mark those good moments: just like the Israelites laid stones after they crossed the river Jordan. Looking back, they said: The journey was not easy, but these stones testify that we have made it: The Eternal has guided us through the depth of the water. That they may be a sign for us and for our children forever.

Nobody escapes the fragility of life. Still we must go on. Like Abraham, who was on his way without knowing where he was going. In the epistle to the Hebrews we read that you should have faith and trust. This reminds me of the soldiers who passed the Elisabeth Gasthuis: tired and defeated, but still singing a victory song. You don't know where life will take you. The writer of the Hebrews letter speaks about the city whose builder and maker is God. That is of course metaphorical language. But let it encourage us to live our lives with passion, commitment and faith, confident that it may be a valuable link in the great order of God that is beyond our comprehension.

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\* Fuller quotation: "had you failed, operations elsewhere would have been gravely compromised. You did not fail, and all is well elsewhere. [...] And all Britain will say to you: You did your best [...] we are proud of you. [...] Please give my best wishes and my grateful thanks to every officer and man in your Division" (pp. 193-94) [1960 Pan Books ed. of 1958 book]

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[With some help translating by Dorienke de Vries and some sub-editing by David Llewellyn Dodds]