

Reflection by Willem Buiters – Dutch Church, City of London, 7 May 2017

“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott”. *“A mighty fortress is our God”*. These are words of comfort for us in times that are often bewildering and filled with anxiety and fear. This Bach cantata has special meaning for me. This is in part because I have participated, as a youngster, in several performances – singing or playing the cello. But most of all this cantata, and the great hymn that opens it and sustains it throughout, is special to me because of what it meant to my late father – Harm Buiters. To him *“Een vaste burcht is onze God”* was a self-evident truth. This highly intelligent, well-educated man with an inquisitive mind, quick wit and a healthy dose of scepticism about many things most of us take for granted, had a faith that was unquestioning – child-like almost. I envy my him the rock-solid faith and the unquestioning trust in God that sustained him for as long as I knew him.

During his long final illness, God was his rock and his salvation. When he died, he knew where he was going and who was holding him by the hand. *“A mighty fortress is our God”* was to him another way of reading his favorite Psalm, 121:

“I lift up my eyes toward the mountains—

from where will my help come?

My help is from the LORD,

maker of heaven and earth”

Our faith makes us strong; it neither makes us aggressors nor victims

God is a mighty fortress means that God is a defender, not an aggressor. Our faith is not one that can be rammed down other people’s throats. Faith, hope and charity imply and require tolerance of everything except intolerance. Our faith can never lead us to condone forced conversions or other ISIS-like behavior – the Crusades were about power politics, not faith.

But our faith also does not require us to be willing victims. I have always been struck by an implication of the Second Commandment that is too often ignored: *“Love thy neighbor as thyself”* means that without a healthy dose of self-respect and self-love, you cannot love your neighbor adequately. It not only permits us to stand up for ourselves and our rights – it demands it.

We cannot withdraw inside the mighty fortress

The fact that our God is a mighty fortress does not mean we can retreat inside this fortress and let the world and its tumult rage outside. Here on earth we have to do God’s work. We cannot hide behind the complexity and moral ambiguity of issues. In fact, much of the time the rights and wrongs are pretty obvious – it is our lack of courage that complicates matters and stops us from acting the way we should.

My father was 18 years old and a student at the University of Amsterdam when the Nazis conquered the Netherlands in 1940. He was non-religious at the time, as were both his parents. His father was the last of 12 kids in a dirt-poor fundamentalist Protestant family from the North-East of the Netherlands. My grandfather became a convinced and articulate atheist at roughly the same age my father rediscovered Christianity. My father's first act of resistance came late in 1940 when he gave his passport to a Jewish friend who used it to escape to Switzerland. My father did it because it was the right thing to do. He did God's work, although he did not know God at the time.

For my father and his brother, the first real moment of truth came in October 1940, when the Nazis required all Dutch civil servants (including university professors) to sign an 'Arian Declaration'; 98% complied. Students were required, on March 10, 1941 to sign a 'loyalty declaration'. This involved a consent to work in Germany for 6 months after completing your studies. If you did not sign, you were deemed not a student and unemployed and therefore subject to the forced labor draft; 85% of students followed the moral code: "Don't sign". My father and his brother were among them. Again, they did God's work, without consciously knowing God. As a result of this they had to go "underground". They were not eligible for the 'food stamps' that made the essentials of life available when scarcity and rationing became ever more pressing issues. They both joined the resistance and somehow managed to survive the war.

During the war, my father found God. He told me that he felt the presence of God for the first time when he was lying in a ditch, hiding from the Nazis after a failed attempt to derail a train. From that day on, God was his companion. Jesus was not an abstraction. He was a friend – sometimes a demanding friend. My father read the bible to us on a daily basis, especially the Psalms, the letters of Paul and the passages recording the words and deeds of Jesus. When we were faced with a moral dilemma, my father's simple advice was: "*ask yourself, what would Jesus do in this situation*". Much of the time that implied a simple answer, although acting according to that simple answer was often far from simple.

Our faith is inclusive: all who seek safety have to be welcomed to the mighty fortress

My father combined a deep and unshakable faith with a completely open mind towards and tolerance of other religions and those who reject all religion. He probably got this from his own father for whom the coexistence of his own atheism and the new-found religion of my father were not a problem, but just the way things were. When my grandfather was dying, the last words he said to my father were: "*I'll soon know which one of us is right*"...

My father believed that there are as many roads to God as there are people – and most likely quite a few more. He believed, as do I, that by whatever name you call God, by that name shall God come.

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

Tolerance is not weakness; it does not require meekness either. The Jesus that cleared the money changers from the temple was not exactly meek. That episode/incident is always somewhat

uncomfortable for those working in the financial sector. I reassure myself that Jesus objected to the location of the activity rather than to the activity itself; I am therefore reasonably confident that in one of the many rooms that can be found in the house of Jesus' Father, there is a place for those working in the City. My confidence is boosted because, in addition to expelling the money changers, Jesus also expelled those selling cattle, sheep and doves - so I think we're alright ...

Speaking truth to power

Christians all should follow the Quaker saying of "*speaking truth to power*".

Martin Luther spoke truth to power when on October 31, 1517, he nailed a copy of his 95 Theses, a list of questions and propositions for debate, to the door of the Wittenberg Castle.

The words of pastor Martin Niemöller tell us why:

*First, they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Communist.*

*Then they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Let's transpose this to 2017:

*First, they came for the refugees, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a refugee.*

*Then they came for the immigrants, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not an immigrant - actually I am, but a very lucky, featherbedded immigrant.*

*Then they came for the Muslims, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Muslim*

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

Sheltered in and shielded by the mighty fortress of our God, we can face and fight the evil in this world and defend all that is good. The struggle may be long but we know the ultimate outcome: "... we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither

death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

This is the faith of my father. If it was good enough for him and for Martin Luther, it is good enough for me. Perhaps the weakness of my faith comes from it not having been tested enough. The way the world appears to be evolving we are all likely to be put to the test sooner rather than later. If and when this happens, we know where to turn to for help: “*A mighty fortress is our God.*”

Amen