

Veronica – Meditation

²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. Luke 23: 27-28



For today’s meditation I chose the story of Veronica from the stations of the cross which we’ve just reflected. I am fascinated with her act of compassion. She wiped Jesus’ face with her veil as he struggled on his way to the cross. After her loving and passionate deed, she had Jesus’ face imprinted on her veil.

The story is a mixture of tradition, legend, and devotions that developed over the centuries from one end of Europe to another. Veronica’s story, or her name, cannot be found in the Bible. But that is not what counts in the end. What counts is the long tradition in which her passionate love and sympathy for Jesus are made known.

The woman Veronica, unlike Simon, is said to have stepped out of the crowd voluntarily as Jesus tumbled by under the weight of the cross in order to wipe the sweat and blood from his face.

Here is a woman who will not allow the story of the journey to Calvary to be romanticized, to go untold, to be overlooked or forgotten. The image on the veil remains forever a reminder of the whole horror that took place in Jerusalem on that day.

Veronica’s veil stands as mute witness to the depths of injustice, cruelty and violence human beings are able to perform once they leave behind all moral and respect. The veil remains a witness to the crime of all times – the destruction of goodness at the centre of us, in us, around us, forever.

Veronica’s story of compassion and courage wants to touch our hearts. Her act of sympathy questions our own behaviour and can put us to shame. How often do we stop to mend the broken and help the victims?

In Veronica’s mild, womanly way we find a striking call to humanity, to being what we are meant to be, to doing what must obviously be done no matter who approves, no matter who thinks this is neither the place nor the time. It takes the breath away to imagine stepping out in the middle of a furious and fanatic mob to wash the face of the beaten sufferer.

“The sixth station of the cross calls us to realize that compassion is often the only possible human reaction in the face of cruelty, torture and injustice. “To fail to practice mercy in the presence of injustice is to neglect half the face of God,” writes Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine nun.

“Jesus does not resist the journey to the cross,” she writes, “but he does respond most to the act of comfort in the midst of cruel violence.”

In other words: Veronica cannot free Jesus and save him from the harsh death on the cross, but she can perform a small sign of tenderness in the midst of all cruelty!

In our world today this could for example mean: It is not enough to have a sense of righteous anger when the poor are oppressed. We must do something. It is necessary to reach out and lift them from the misery of their despair.

The question with which the sixth station of the cross confronts us is, who is there, who do we feel sorry for, whose suffering comes so close to us, that we have to reach out to help?

In the sermon of an American catholic priest, I read the following:

“Veronica represents all the poor and downtrodden, those whom the world does not see, the invisible and the unimportant.

Veronica represents all those whom the religious of the world deem irredeemable or sinners, and who never feel welcome or comfortable in churches or among the so-called religious people, but who are loved and accepted by God, which is really all that matters.

Veronica represents the bravery and courage of women. The Bible tells us of women who have been the bravest of the brave. Think of Eve, Sarah, Moses’ mother Jochebed and Pharaoh’s daughter who saved and raised Moses, Mary (Jesus’ mother), Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene and many more - the list is really quite endless. Think of the women in our lives, our moms, grandmothers, wives, aunts, godmothers, sisters, nieces and granddaughters.

Veronica represents the person who gives selflessly. She represents those who show mercy in its purest form.

Veronica represents those who care for the sick and aching making all the difference in their lives.”

In our story, in the century-old tradition Veronica walked out of the crowd of curious onlookers and horrified spectators and bloodthirsty zealots and performed a work of mercy.

No questions asked.

No judgments made.

And for her trouble, she left, tradition tells us, with an image of the face of Jesus on the very towel she used to give him relief.

The meaning is obvious.

Every time we make life physically better for someone else, the face of Jesus becomes clearer and clearer in us.

We become more of what we are meant to be.

We become more like Jesus.

The image that Veronica takes away on her veil is an image of serenity, of soulful peace in the midst of human chaos.

The veil does not scream at us.

It does not sob.

It does nothing to draw attention to itself.

Instead, it draws attention to us, to those who see it.

It challenges us.

You, the veil says, what will you do? Will you do anything for those who live in the places of violence and oppression? Will you raise them up, give them hope, to stop the pain they breathe?

To keep this short, let me add one more thought: What I want to learn from Veronica is, to be a balm where there is only ache.

And what I need from a Veronica is that she sits at my side when the pain is unbearable, that she is aware of my hard moments, and when she can't change them, she can give me a bit of relief through the power of her presence.

The message of the Veronicas at all times is: Don't give up. I am with you.

Amen.