

# Thursday

## To stand where God stands - Klippies Kritzinger

Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar contains some striking sentences. It calls us to believe:

that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this ...;

that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

The image of God *standing* somewhere is not common in the Old Testament. One could point to many passages in the New Testament about where and how Jesus, God-with-us, stood. But in the Old Testament we hear more frequently of God *sitting* on a throne. So when we do find a passage about God standing, we should sit up (!) and take notice. There are some passages where this is implicit, but I want to draw your attention to Psalm 109, which speaks explicitly about where and how God stands.

<sup>21</sup> ... Sovereign LORD, help me for your name's sake;  
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.

<sup>22</sup> For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is wounded within me.

<sup>23</sup> I fade away like an evening shadow;  
I am shaken off like a locust.

<sup>24</sup> My knees give way from fasting;  
my body is thin and gaunt.

<sup>25</sup> I am an object of scorn to my accusers;  
when they see me, they shake their heads.

<sup>26</sup> Help me, LORD my God;  
save me according to your unfailing love.

<sup>27</sup> Let them know that it is your hand,  
that you, LORD, have done it.

<sup>28</sup> While they curse, may you bless;  
may those who attack me be put to shame,  
but may your servant rejoice.

<sup>29</sup> May my accusers be clothed with disgrace  
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.

<sup>30</sup> With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD;  
in the great throng of worshippers I will praise him.

<sup>31</sup> For he stands at the right hand of the needy,  
to save their lives from those who would condemn them.

In this desperate call for help, a believer in deep trouble appeals to the goodness of God's love (v.21) and to God's unfailing love (v.26). She had enemies who were accusing her of some crime and preparing to charge her before the court, the *lekgotla*, held at the town gate where the elders judged the affairs of the community. She longs for God's hand to deliver her from her suffering (v.27). With a wounded heart (v.22), feeling as empty as a shadow and like a mere insect (v.23), with weak knees and a wasted body (v.24), mocked by her accusers (v.25, 29), she asks God to bless her (v.28). She longs for someone to step up who will be different from the evil and uncaring people around her. She calls on God, because she knows God as the sovereign LORD (v.21), who in the past rescued and delivered the people of Israel. She does not curse her accusers but prays that they may be shamed in public, covered with shame and taken off her back, so that she can breathe again and experience joy (v.28).

And then she moves ahead, in faith, to promise what she will do when God has delivered her (vv.30-31): She promises to praise God in a worshipping congregation, to testify of God's goodness and love: "God stood at my right hand and saved my life from those who wanted to condemn me" (v.31). When she gets dragged into court, she will not be alone. She will have an Advocate at her right hand, speaking up for her, defending her. But she doesn't say it like that; she doesn't just speak about her own experience. She speaks about God. So she says: God (always) stands at the right hand of the needy. This is who God is. This is how God is. This is where God stands. This is where you will find God in a world of inequality and oppression. "In a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged" (Belhar).

But as we have seen, Belhar doesn't only believe "that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged" but also "that God calls the church to follow in this." It believes not only that God "stands against injustice and with the wronged" but also the "the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands." Friends, that is what you did when you stepped forward to run a shelter during this lockdown. When trouble happens and challenges arise, some people look away (the indifferent), others look on (bystanders) and a few get involved, getting their hands dirty. Like you did. You did not stand by, you stood up and stood with.

A former US representative at the United Nations, Samantha Power, got involved in genocide issues as a young student and later wrote a book about it, called *A problem from hell*. As that book started making an impact, she writes:

Somewhere along the way, I began describing the book's protagonists – those who tried to prevent or otherwise 'stand up' against genocide – as 'upstanders,' contrasting them with bystanders. I noted that very few of us were likely to find ourselves the victims or perpetrators of genocide. But every day, almost all of us find ourselves weighing whether we can or should do something to help others. We decide, on issues large and small, whether we will be bystanders or upstanders (Samantha Power, *The education of an idealist*, 2019, p.132).

We, who are not on the front line of this sheltering project, but supporting it from the wings, want to thank you sincerely for being upstanders, for going to stand where God stands. But we all know that ministry, mission or service is not a one-way affair. It is not doing things for others, but being with them and learning from one another. So I hope that you will gather the stories of pain and hope from you shelters, like the story of the poet in Psalm 109, and (with their consent) make them part of our ongoing conversation on homelessness and how to overcome it. Through their lives God comes and stands at our

right hand to deliver us too from our captivities. As Stephan has written so clearly and strongly on Monday, nobody is truly free unless all of us are free.

**Prayer**

God of the harassed and helpless

God of the poor and needy

God of the accused and attacked

We praise and adore you for always standing at their right hand, taking up their cause

Lord Jesus, God-with-us

We praise you for coming to stand with us,

by our side,

on our side in the struggle against death and evil

Holy Spirit, Breath of God

Blow new life into us

Imprint your divine love in our hearts and lives

That we may stand where you stand in this broken world.

Amen.