



**WITNESSING MERCY**

**LECTIO** (reading): Tobit 2,1-8

<sup>1</sup> Thus under King Esarhaddon I (Tobit) returned to my home, and my wife Anna and my son Tobiah were restored to me..

Then on our festival of Pentecost, the feast of Weeks, a fine dinner was prepared for me, and I reclined to eat.

<sup>2</sup>The table was set for me, and when many different dishes were placed before me, I said to me son Tobiah:

‘My son, go out and try to find a poor man from among our kinsmen exiled here in Nineveh, if he is a sincere worshiper of God, bring him back with you, so that he can share this meal with me. Indeed, son, I shall wait for you to come back.’

<sup>3</sup>Tobiah went out to look for some poor kinsman of ours. When he returned he exclaimed, ‘Father, one of our people has been murdered! His body lies in the marketplace where he was just strangled!’

<sup>4</sup>I sprang to my feet, leaving the dinner untouched; and I carried the dead man from the street and put him in one of the rooms, so that I might bury him after sunset.

<sup>5</sup>Returning to my own quarters, I washed myself and ate my food in sorrow..

<sup>6</sup>I was reminded of the oracle pronounced by the prophet Amos against Bethel:

‘Your festivals shall be returned into mourning. And all your songs into lamentations.’

<sup>7</sup>And I wept. Then at sunset I went out , dug a grave, and buried him.

<sup>8</sup>The neighbours mocked me, saying to one another: ‘Will this man never learn! Once before he was hunted down for execution because of this very thing; yet now that he has escaped, here he is again burying the dead!’

### **MEDITATIO** (explanation)

The Book of Tobit owes its name to the main character Tobit. His name means *God is tov* ('tov', or 'tob', is the Hebrew word meaning 'good'), and since he was a believer he gave his son a name reflecting that very belief: Tobiah.

Tobit lived with his son Tobiah and his wife Anna and other kinsfolk as an exile in the city of Nineveh, a city in Assyria. About the origin of the book not much is known. The story seems to have been written after the exile. Devout Jews in the years after the exile had the custom of reflecting on prophecies of the past. The date must be many years after Amos (fourth or third century). Also the place of origin is difficult to establish. It is generally accepted that the author lived outside Palestine.

The Book of Tobit appears only in Catholic bible editions. It belongs to the so called deuterocanonical books. These are the writings that were only accepted as divinely inspired at a later date. When around 100 A.D. the Jewish scripture scholars established a definitive list of biblical books they faced the question which criteria to apply. They agreed that only those accounts and books were to be incorporated in the bible that had been created within the borders of the nation and that were originally written in the language of the nation: Aramaic or Hebrew.

As far as the genre goes the account of Tobit is unique. It is characterized as a tale, a short story, a fairy tale or a legend. Tobit's illness, his miraculous cure, and the lesson the reader has to draw from it, are typical of a legend. Within the story several other genres can be distinguished: folk tale, proverbs, testimonial, prayer and hymn. The story is a family history about how the Jews felt as exiles. They lived hard lives and occasionally one of them was murdered and endangering his own life Tobit would bury him, for since God is good, that of course must be done. The theme of the book may be summarized in the core message: God rewards those who do good, and shows them His faithfulness, provided they remain faithful to Him.

The tone of the story changes abruptly with a banquet and ends in drama. Tobit thinks back about what Amos said regarding Bethel. Bethel was known for Abram had built an altar there, but especially since God had revealed himself to Jacob in a dream. Jacob saw the heavens being opened and angels descending and ascending. Tobit is in all respects a just and good man. Besides feeding the hungry and clothing the naked he deals extensively with burying the dead (1.17). Not just the dead, but dead people who had been dumped along the side of the road, the dead who would otherwise have disappeared in mass graves. The dead are buried by Tobit with attention and care.

Tobit does not let his fellow Israelites lie along the road as horrible deterrents, but buries them with respect in the evening. He keeps doing that even after harsh punishment. He cannot do otherwise.

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## **CONTEMPLATIO** (contemplate)

Death forces us to reflect on the meaning of life, not only of the life of the deceased but also of our own life. Throughout the ages and in all cultures and religions the burial of the dead was not only a work of mercy but an important and holy obligation. You don't just put people in the ground. The care, the farewell, and the burial of the dead have to be done with great concern and love, out of a deep respect for the life that was received from God.

Jews attach great importance to such a funeral and to the maintenance of the grave since there is the expectation, definitely at certain periods in Judaism, that at the arrival of the Messiah the tombs will open and the dead will precede the living in meeting with the Messiah. In a Christian setting the deceased is perceived as a person created "in God's image" who during his life has journeyed "to His Likeness". In this way we render him or her a work of mercy. We turn over the dead into the hands of the living God and so we demonstrate that our deepest wish for the deceased is to "as God, the beneficent, the merciful", as the first words of the Koran express it.

Due to the horrendous plague epidemics the Middle Ages were a time during which the dead had to be buried as quickly. The burial of the dead was a risky enterprise because of contamination. It is known that many religious died because through their contact with the sick and dead they got sick. They risked their lives for they heeded the words of Jesus: 'comfort the sick'. They did not want that the body of a single person would end up in a garbage dump. .

During the Middle Ages the theme of burying the dead, from the story of Tobit, was declared the seventh work of mercy by the church, next to the six found in Matthew 25: clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, comfort the ill, and visit the prisoner. Already back in the fourth century the Father of the Church, Lactantius, pleaded to add this seventh work of Mercy to the list of six. This happened officially in 1207 by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). He too was inspired by the text of Tobit: "I gave bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked; if I saw one of my people who had died and thrown outside the walls of Nineveh, I would bury him." (Tobit 1,17)

Pausing at death raises the question: who am I, what do I stand for in my life? A deceased one makes us realize what trivialities occupy us, how blind we are to what happens around us.

None of us took the decision to start his or her own life. It happened to us. This realization may make us open to another insight, namely that we received life in a completely gratuitous way: just like that, free, without charge. Speaking from a religious perspective: we live with all what we desired, from a favoring love which transcends our comprehension. and what we simply call: "from God". Huub Oosterhuis, a well known Dutch poet, wrote a famous Dutch poem which can be translated as following:

"Life, we do not comprehend  
Only it was given, totally free  
and of this deep mystery  
God was the beginning and the end".

The burial of the dead is a current issue in countries at war or places of genocide where people are dumped in anonymous mass graves. and never had a decent farewell. Regularly, bodies are found along the highway between Northern Mexico and the border with the U.S.A.. More than 60.000 people have died in the past five years in the Mexican drug war. More examples like this can be found.

*notes*

Mother Teresa (26 Aug. 1910 - 5 Sep. 1997) has become well known for her work in India , where she had people, who were perishing along the public roads, taken to shelters so that they might die in a setting of human dignity. She is very popular among the Albanian people for she shares the same nationality. In 1950 the pope approved a new religious congregation with the name Missionaries of Charity. In 2003 Pope John Paul II declared Mother Teresa blessed.

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**COLLATIO** (sharing)

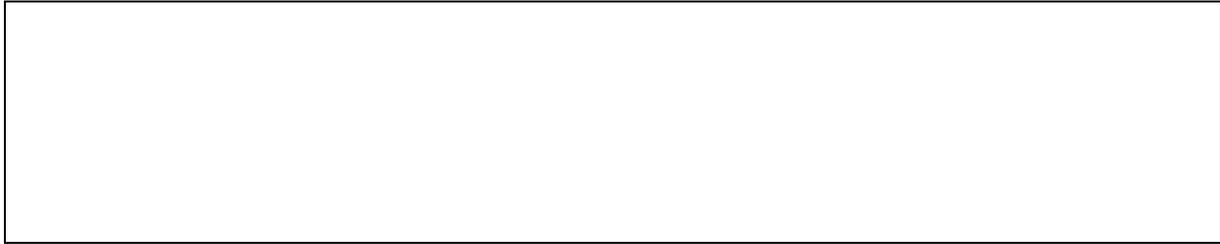
- Tobit functions as an example for his people. In the Jewish tradition respect for the deceased is of premier significance. At the present time the care for the deceased is being shifted to the care for the dying and much more consideration is given to the relatives. What kind of work calls for greater mercy? Why?

- At a funeral different rituals take place, e.g. the lighting of candles, the sprinkling of holy water, the references to the cross, the use of incense. Could you describe a ritual, that you saw at a funeral that made a special impression on you? What makes this impression important to you?

- Mother Teresa once said: "Happy are they who work in a home of the dying, for they may touch the body of Christ twenty four hours each day. Do you understand the dedication of Mother Teresa? Does this kind of work appeal to you? What do you stand for in life?"

**ORATIO** (praying)

Allow a member of your group to end the session with a prayer. Include in your prayer, if possible, the memory of the dead.



**CREATIO** (creative assignment)

*Material needed for this assignment: (film)camera; computer and internet access; other materials according to the chosen procedure. If your WWB group is large, divide into smaller groups of 5 to 10 people.*

The seven works of mercy are: to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty to drink, offering a home to the stranger, visiting prisoners and visiting the sick, and burying the dead. Select, in each group, one of these works and try to realize witnessing this work of mercy *today* (depending on the time you have left this day, of course). Make a short video / text reportage of it, that you can share with others (at [facebook.com/AmbassadorsWWB](https://www.facebook.com/AmbassadorsWWB)) and thus others too will be inspired by you to commit themselves to others.

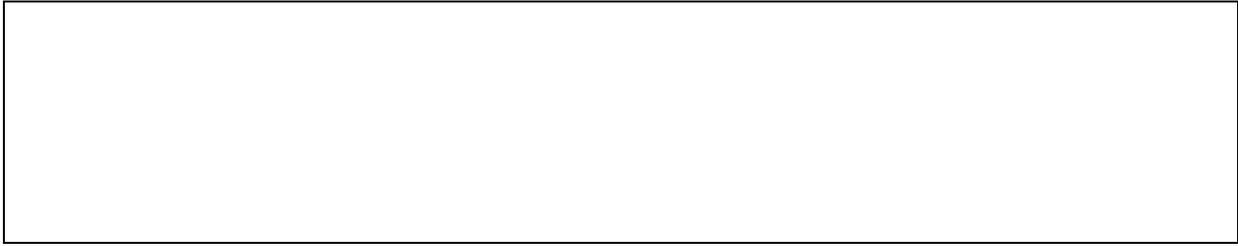
*Notes*

**OPERATIO** (to act)

- In the coming month, please pay attention to burying the dead as a work of mercy. Pay special attention to the *ritual* aspects of this work of mercy.

- Is there something you can do for others, in this area? And if so, what and how?

- What touches you most, in the ritual of burial of the dead?



At the next meeting, please apply a report of your findings.