

Dirk Willems—Faithful Witness of Our Lord Jesus

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No other story of Anabaptist martyrs seems to capture more notice in Mennonite minds than the account of Dirk Willems. Dirk was born at Asperen, Rotterdam, (The Netherlands). Historians record that Dirk was re-baptized upon confession of faith at the age of fifteen at the house of Peter Willems. The words of the judge who sentenced Dirk for burning at the stake condemn Dirk as having "...further, in Asperen, at his house, at divers hours, harbored and admitted secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines, and that he also has permitted several persons to be rebaptized in his aforesaid house; all of which is contrary to our holy Christian faith, and to the decrees of his royal majesty, and ought not to be tolerated, but severely punished, for an example to others...."

These few, recorded details of Dirk's life indicate that he was a faithful man in all things. His life stands as a monument to the teaching and example of His Lord and Master. *But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*



Dirk had been apprehended, tried and convicted as an Anabaptist in the later years of harsh Spanish rule under the Duke of Alva in The Netherlands. He escaped from a residential palace prison, by letting himself out of a window with a rope made of knotted rags, dropping onto the ice that covered the castle moat outside. Seeing him escape, a palace guard pursued him as he fled. Dirk's weight had been reduced by the short prison rations. He crossed the thin ice of a pond, the "Hondegat," safely, but his heavier pursuer broke through. Hearing his pursuers' cries for help and perceiving his life in danger, Dirk turned

back and rescued him. The man wanted to let him go, but the burgomaster, on the opposite side very sternly called to him to honor his oath. Dirk was seized and returned to prison.

This time the authorities threw him into a more secure prison, a small, heavily barred room at the top of a very tall church tower, above the bell, (where he was probably locked into the wooden leg stocks which remain in place today). Dirk was condemned for execution and after not many days led out to be burned.

The day of his fiery execution is thought to be May 16, 1569. Martyrs Mirror records as follows: ...it is related as true from the trustworthy memoirs of those who were present at the death of this pious witness of Jesus Christ, that the place where this offering occurred was without Asperen, on the side of Leerdam, and that, a strong east wind blowing that day, the kindled fire was much driven away from the upper part of his body, as he stood at the stake; in consequence of which this good

man suffered a lingering death, insomuch that in the town of Leerdam, towards which the wind was blowing, he was heard to exclaim over seventy times, “O my Lord; my God,” etc., for which cause the judge or bailiff, who was present on horseback, filled with sorrow and regret at the man’s sufferings, wheeled about his horse, turning his back toward the place of execution, and said to the executioner, “Dispatch the man with a quick death” But how or in what manner the executioner then dealt with this pious witness of Jesus, I have not been able to learn, except only, that his life was consumed by the fire, and that he passed through the conflict with great steadfastness, having commended his soul into the hands of God.

Some residents of present-day Asperen, (none of them Mennonite), regard Dirk as a folk hero. recently Asperen named a street in Dirk’s honor. We know that Willems’ spontaneous action to one in need came only from a heart overflowing with allegiance to the teachings of Jesus. A Christian, so compassionate that he risked recapture in order to save the life of his drowning pursuer, stimulates great respect and memory.

What Dirk did on that icy pond was reflexive and intuitive, not logical —Dirk did not have to stop and consider whether it was right or wrong nor what the consequences. He simply did what his faith compelled him to do. So do all those who follow the same sacrificial footprints of the Lord Jesus.

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