

Afternoon session

2PM

Meg Burton takes the opportunity to shortly present the academic journal **“Health and Social Care Chaplaincy”**.

Martijn Steegen (University Hospitals Leuven, Belgium) talks to us about **“Called to the Impossible. Stubborn and Challenging Biblical Narratives and the Reflection on Healthcare Chaplaincy”**. He invites us to go into dialogue, since his lecture will not be a monologue.

The core question of this contribution is: **“Is it meaningful for chaplains to read Biblical narratives in order to nurture their spirituality?”**

Among Flemish school teachers there is a phenomenon of **“Bible-tiredness”**, and it appears not to be so different in circles of chaplains. The use of the Bible in pastoral counselling is likewise a controversial issue.

Yet, even if there is an agreement on the fact that the Bible should play a role in pastoral care, it is still not clear what this role should be. Martijn introduces his point of view by emphasizing the character of the Bible as a **‘dynamic medium’ of Revelation**.

Not only does the Bible contain difficult content, readers may also not be willing to open themselves to difficult narratives, because they don’t want to be challenged in their convictions. As both the content of the narrative and the position of the reader are involved, this turns the reading process into a dynamic reality. Martijn explains the concept of the **‘normativity of the future’** (Bieringer & Elsbernd): texts have the ability to propose the dream of God, and the emphasis is on this future dimension, the texts are, so to say, ‘symbols’ of how God wants the world to be. In other words, religious texts are neither a window or a mirror, but an icon. The text unfolds an alternative world to be realised.

Martijn launches a reading exercise with the pericope of **the raising of the daughter of Jairus** (Mc 5:21-24.35-43): what does the text tell us when it is seen as a window, a mirror, an icon? The raising of the girl can for instance be approached in a literal and medical way (**“window”**): the girl was indeed not dead, but only asleep. But then what is the point of telling this story?

There are strong parallels with the healing narrative in Mc 5:24-34 (the woman with flow of blood), suggesting that spiritual death and physical death are very close (**“mirror”**). But this way there is the risk of reducing the Biblical narratives into an **“ethical cookbook”**.

Approached as an **“icon”**, the tensions in the narrative are valued. They challenge readers to overthink their actions: what vision of the future is unfolded in the text? How does it nourish one’s view on pastoral counselling? For Martijn, the fact that Jesus undoes the separation from community, and the ultimate exclusion by death, is especially striking in this perspective. As a chaplain, the essence of your work is to establish relationship, f.i. by restoring the vulnerable relationship of the deceased with their relatives through rituals (touching, blessing) that put the deceased back in the middle of the circle.

Many Biblical narratives deal with **“the impossible”** (Sarah, Job, Jonah, ...). Since the Biblical God is a God of paradoxes, stubbornness is a hermeneutical key to difficult texts that open a perspective of the impossible as appealing to our understanding. This way, attention can be given to the

transformative quality of texts. Likewise, questions such as “Adam, where are you?” or “Cain, where is your brother?” or “Who do they say I am?”, are clearly not to be understood as simply informative.

Martijn concludes: breaking points in the Bible and in our own biography lead us to transcendence. They have the capacity to open our own narrative and make life possible again. They keep our existence permanently ‘under construction’.