

## 90. FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH (2)

### WENDELMOET

It is two years later.

In our thoughts, we go to The Hague again.

A woman sits in a dark cell. It is cold and damp in there! Some light enters through a small, barred window high in the wall. A bundle of straw lies in a corner, spreading a sour, musty smell. No, this woman did not live in The Hague but in Monnikendam, a village in North Holland. She is a widow and has experienced much sorrow in her life. Roman heretic hunters accused her of heresy, arrested and imprisoned her, and transferred her to The Hague. There they will investigate the purity of her faith. It is soon apparent that she thinks differently about various matters than the Roman Catholic Church.



### Wendelmoet Claesdochter

There is a commemorative plaque of Wendelmoet Claesdochter in the big church in Monnikendam

She was the first female martyr to die for the Protestant faith in the northern Netherlands. She was the daughter of a fisherman and was born in Monnikendam on 1 May 1490.

As a result of all the trading activity on the Zuiderzee (today IJsselmeer), the people of Monnikendam quickly became acquainted with the new teachings of Luther and Zwingli.

Monks regularly enter her musty cell to dispute with her. They try to make her retract. They imagine they will easily talk this woman into it and gain an easy victory. But they are mistaken! They cannot make her recant. They are busy with her for many hours. The Roman Catholic clerics ask her what she thinks of the sacrament of the Holy Supper. Without hesitation, she answers:

"I believe that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but if you consider it your god, then I tell you it is your devil!"

No, she is not scared of them. She is not afraid of the poisonous looks they send her after that sharp answer. They harass her time and again, but she remains steadfast. One day, a woman visits her in her cell. The Roman Catholic tormentors have sent her. This woman speaks very friendly and persuasively with her.

"Simply be quiet about your beliefs, and don't talk to others about it," she advises. "You may believe for yourself whatever you like, but you don't have to talk to others about it, do you? You know it's not allowed. Why should you wilfully bring yourself into danger? That's so unnecessary; I'm sure you'll agree?"

But this approach doesn't work either!

"How can I?" answers the prisoner. "Shouldn't I warn my fellow man against the dangers of Rome's doctrinal errors?"

When she doesn't get anywhere, the visitor leaves again. The name of that brave widow is Wendelmoet. She will not and cannot keep silent now that God has graciously opened her eyes to the deadly dangers of the Roman Catholic Church. When the monks learn she refuses to be silent, they become angry with Wendelmoet. If nothing else helps, she must die! They condemn her to death.

Of course! Away with such cursed, obstinate heretics. Exterminate that brood! On the 20th of November, 1527, she took her last walk to the

stake. A monk walks next to her, holding a crucifix before her.

"I do not acknowledge that wooden saviour," Wendelmoet says to him.

"I believe that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but if you consider it your god, then I tell you it is your devil!"

Wendelmoet

The monk smirks and continues to annoy her. He can't even leave her alone on her last walk, her journey to death. The monk's conduct offends the executioner walking on the other side of Wendelmoet.

He tells Wendelmoet:

"Mother, remain with God and do not permit yourself to be drawn away from Him." Even the hardened executioner feels sorry for her! Soon after that, she stands at the stake. They place a cord around her neck, which the executioner will tighten. Then they hang a bag of gunpowder on her breast. The executioner lights the fire. When the wood catches fire, the executioner pulls the cord. Rome does not pity anyone! Wendelmoet closes her eyes, and ... the angels carry her soul into Abraham's bosom. There she received the crown of victory. She, too, remained faithful, faithful unto death.

## MERULA

The residents of Brielle know Merula very well, and they'll proudly show you an orphanage that Merula had built with his own money. Orphans find a lovely, safe home there. The staff look after them very well. The residents will also show you a row of houses Merula has built and paid for. Various poor families live there, and Merula supports them financially.

All the people hold Merula in high esteem and speak respectfully about him. No, he does not live in the town of Brielle. He is a priest at Heenvliet, a small village close to Brielle. He was born in 1482. His parents were wealthy. At twenty-nine, he was ordained as a priest, first at Brielle and later at Heenvliet.

He came to true knowledge of salvation through reading God's Word and Luther's writings. This knowledge completely changed his way of preaching. Now he brings the *gospel* to his hearers. He points his congregation to Jesus as the only ground for salvation. He wants nothing to do with Mary worship. He earnestly warns his hearers *against* that idolatry. He also warns them against the veneration of other saints. He refuses to administer the sacrament of the Roman Catholic mass. He does not believe the Roman Catholic lie that in the Lord's Supper, the bread and wine change into the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus. He teaches his congregation that they cannot earn their salvation with good works because *Christ* has earned their salvation for them! He even dares to publicly say from the pulpit that the pope is the antichrist!

Merula certainly dares to say a lot!

But did Rome permit all that? Well, they couldn't do anything for many years because a wealthy nobleman, who had much influence on that island, protected him. That rich man's name was Joost van Kruiningen. But it all changed after Joost died, and his son took his father's place. This son was married to a woman who was an ardent Roman Catholic, and then Rome dared to strike. In 1552, at the age of seventy years, Merula was arrested and immediately brought to The Hague because they feared the people who loved and



**Merula Orphanage.** Orphanage built by Merula.

It was used as an orphanage till 1948.

<https://www.beleefbrielle.nl/nl/>

honoured Merula. Just imagine if those people all revolted!

That grey-haired man suffered in prison for five years. They cross-examined him unceasingly, hoping he would recant. But he remained



*Some authors tell us that Merula was kept prisoner in Castle Ravenstein at Heenvliet for some time. Build around the year 1250.*

steadfast. He weakened and became seriously ill through all the misery and mean treatment he suffered in prison. Rome announced to the congregation at Heenvliet that Merula had revoked everything, but that wicked lie became public. This deception caused the anger and resentment of the whole island to rise to the next level.

The Roman Catholic Inquisition, afraid that the people would liberate him from prison by force, took Merula to Louvain, a city in Belgium. Possibly fearing that was not far enough, they soon brought him to Bergen, close to the French border. Finally, they condemned him to death. By then, Merula was already seventy-five years old. In the middle of June 1557, the aged man took his last walk to the stake. It was midsummer. Everything grew and bloomed, and the sun bathed nature in a golden glow. What a glaring contrast — the beauty of God's creation and man's cruelty.

Look, there he goes. The old man stumbles along with great difficulty, leaning heavily on his cane. He looks pale and emaciated. Many people line the side of the road to watch this sad scene. Suddenly a strong young man pushes through the

crowds of people. He walks toward the stumbling old man and puts his arms around him while happily exclaiming:  
"Uncle, I have found you after all!"

The name of that young man is William. He was Merula's nephew and had lived in the parsonage where Merula had brought him up for years. William loved his uncle dearly.

He had searched for his uncle everywhere. He had asked everyone, even Roman Catholic monks and priests. But they did not tell him where he could find his uncle. No, they uncaringly shrugged their shoulders. Yet William had not lost courage and, despite all setbacks, had continued searching.

By 'chance', he is now in Belgium. How he ended up there, we do not know. Did someone give him a clue? It is quite possible. He notices all those people standing at the side of the road. Curious, he joins them, and - by 'chance', he witnesses the last walk of the beloved uncle he has been searching for, for so many years. Or, was it not 'by chance'? Would God have directed all that? Would the Lord have directed his steps exactly then to that distant city? You may definitely believe that! Doesn't God's providence govern all things? With the Lord, there is no 'chance'!

Sobbing with joy at this unexpected meeting, Merula puts his trembling, bony arms around his nephew's neck. William hardly recognises his uncle because he looks so thin and worn out; those five years of brutal imprisonment have changed and aged him. Deeply moved, the crowd observes all this. The police officers, impatient by this delay, gruffly order the old man to hurry up.

Look, now they go together to the place where the execution will take place. William cannot stop this cruel sentence from being carried out, but he can accompany his uncle on his last walk. He supports the aged, thoroughly weakened Merula. While they walk, Merula tells William about his experiences during those five years of imprisonment. They arrive at the stake much too soon for William's liking. They bid each other farewell. Then William steps aside.



Merula asks if he may pray once more. They allow that.

Then the aged man laboriously gets on his knees and prays for strength for the dreadful thing he must now endure. However, he stays on his knees for a very long time! A strange silence descends on the crowd. One can only hear birds singing.

The police officers look at each other and get impatient. That heretic must hurry up because they haven't got all day!

Suddenly Merula falls to one side. Hastily the executioner dashes forward to catch him. Looking into that wrinkled face, he sees a joyful, peaceful expression. He sees that Merula is dead; God had taken His aged servant home before the stake was lit. Merula would not feel the pain of the fire which he feared so much. It was as if the Lord said:

"It is enough My child; I am taking you home!"

The crowd is immensely impressed. A low murmuring rises from the people. Yet the Roman Catholic priests command the executioner to light the stake. That happens. They lay the lifeless body on the wood, and soon, the flames crackle and consume Merula's body. But that doesn't matter. He does not feel pain or grief anymore. His soul rejoices before God's throne.

Deeply moved and yet cheerful, William travels back to Brielle. He need not search for his uncle anymore. He knows that his beloved uncle is in safe hands. Back home, William tells everyone how his uncle had died with heavenly joy on his face. Merula also remained faithful unto death!

### THE INQUISITION KEEPS PERSECUTING

At times, Rome massacred entire families.

In Ryssel, a city in Belgium, the Inquisition arrests a whole family: father, mother and two children. The father's name is Robert Ogier.

What have these people done wrong?

Well, they no longer attend mass and hold religious services at home. These are crimes in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church. The Inquisition drags them to court and asks them if this is correct. Robert Ogier answers positively: yes, the accusation is true. Then the Roman Catholic inquisitors want to know what they *really* do. They ask the youngest son, still a child, what happens at a family religious service. The boy answers:

"We kneel and ask God if He will forgive us our sins. We pray to God if He will protect our monarch and if the Lord will grant that His rule may bless our country. We also ask the Lord if He will preserve and protect our government. We ask if the Lord will give them wisdom."

Instead of the Inquisition repenting in shame because of the boy's simple and humiliating answer, they condemn the entire family to death. How terrible! How blinded have those people been?! We would almost say, "How is it possible?!"

Soon after, they set up two stakes right next to each other on the marketplace at Ryssel. They take Robert Ogier and his oldest son out of prison

and lead them to the stake. When they bind the oldest son to the pole, he raises his eyes heavenward and prays:

"O, eternal Father, accept the sacrifice of our lives for Jesus' sake!"

A nearby monk hears that prayer and cries: "You lie! God is not your Father! The devil



*Angelus Merula dies in front of the stake. Historic Museum Brielle*

is your father. You are children of the devil!"

The executioner lights the fire. The thin branches start burning, crackling softly as they catch flame. Wisps of smoke float around the spectators' faces. The flames flare up. Suddenly the oldest boy cries out, in a voice quivering with joy:

"O Father, I see the heavens opened, and many angels rejoice and await us!"

A mocking, angry expression covers the face of the monk standing there. For the second time, he screams through the noise:

"You lie! Heaven is not opening to *you*! You are mistaken! Hell opens its mouth. The angels shall not come for you, but the devils are coming to meet you, and they shall cast you into eternal fire!"

But the voice of the young martyr is silent. The smoke and flames suffocate him. Their bodies burn to ashes. A week later, they burned the mother and the youngest son. That's how these people died the martyr's death.

We shudder when we think about those terrible days. However, those bodies shall rise from the ash on the great day of days. Then they shall lift their heads and gladly await their King. Then that monk will be horrified to discover that that boy did *not* lie when he said he saw heaven open!

What a terrible day that will be for their executioners! They will be summoned before the divine judgment seat to render an account of all that innocent blood. Then they'll see that they were mistaken. How terrible will that be? Because they can never rectify their actions! That is irrevocable!

No matter how the persecution raged, it proved impossible to exterminate those despised heretics. Nobody can destroy God's work! The number of people leaving the Roman Catholic Church continued to increase. They braved the threatening dangers, even though death itself loomed ahead. Yet nothing could stop them. They turned their backs on the false doctrine of Rome and formed new congregations everywhere.

Ministers preached everywhere. Elders and deacons were chosen everywhere. Consistories guided and ruled those congregations.

Rome did not shrink back from offering high monetary rewards to people to betray believers. The Inquisition particularly picked on those preachers, elders and deacons. When a betrayer succeeded in informing against a minister so the Inquisition could arrest him, Rome paid the traitor 800 florins as a 'recompense'. That was a considerable sum of money in those days. There were always people who tried to earn that blood money. We'll tell you of one happening — one of many.



*Florin or Gulden, minted in 1423*  
<https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/germania>

#### A SECRET SERVICE WITH CHRISTOFFEL SMIT

A woman cautiously sneaks through the deserted streets of Antwerp, the large seaport in Belgium. She stays in the deep shadows of the houses. It is a dark evening, and street lighting, as we have it now, did not exist yet. That's why people mostly stayed home in the evening. If it were essential to go out on an errand, they would take a little lantern along, spreading some light, but most people did not risk going out on the street. However, this woman has no lantern. That's not surprising, for she is on her way to a forbidden meeting, a secret gathering of the Reformed, of the 'heretics'. The mandates, or placards, were rigorous. Persecution is raging violently, and the stakes are also smoking in Antwerp. It is dangerous to attend one of those gatherings. If Rome's henchmen catch them, they will arrest them, subject them to endless questioning and maltreatment, and sentence them to death! The Inquisition is cruel and without mercy and used the most brutal means to get their victims to 'talk'.

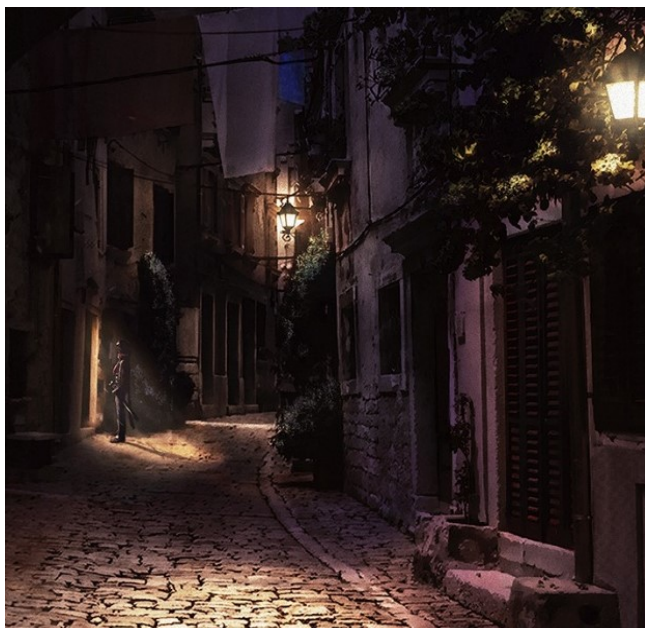
So everyone tries to keep out of the hands of the Inquisition!

That's why this woman sneaks around so cautiously. She doesn't want anyone to see and follow her. She doesn't need a lantern because she knows the way. She stops in front of a house that shows no light at all. She listens intently for any footsteps or noise, for then she would hastily walk on. Every pedestrian could be a betrayer. But no, everything is quiet. Nothing disturbs the stillness.

Very softly, she lets the knocker fall on the door. Not too loud because she does not want to arouse suspicion. Even the neighbours may not hear anything. One can never be too careful.

The people inside do not open the door immediately. A muffled voice asks who is there. Only after she has identified herself do they slide open the bolts and open the door a crack. At times they also used a password that only close friends knew.

She slips inside, and they quickly close and bolt the door behind her. The danger is so great. Betrayers could be watching. Utmost caution is required. She walks through a long passage that leads to a large room. Various people, both men and women, are already there. The windows are covered with extra blinds so that no rays of light



*'Sneaking through the dark streets...*

can shine outside, which could attract attention. They sit together silently, waiting for the service to begin. The woman who just arrived sits down. Finally, the preacher stands. He is still a reasonably young man. His name is Christopher Smith, but he is also called Fabricius. He opens the meeting with a short prayer. He reads a part of God's Word, including the text and begins his sermon.

With inspiring words, he points them to the forgiveness of sins based on Christ's merits alone. He explains to them that justification comes by faith alone. He warns his listeners against the terrible errors of the Roman Catholic Church. With great emphasis, he warns them against the deadly danger of the doctrine of good works because, with that doctrine, Rome denies them their eternal salvation. True, God's people must do good works, not as payment for salvation, but out of gratitude because they *are* delivered! Salvation is by grace alone.

Christopher's eyes sparkle, and his face is flushed, for he *knows*! He was brought up in and learned the Roman Catholic doctrine. His birthplace is Brugge, located in Belgium, not far from Antwerp. As a monk, he lived in a monastery there for years. But by reading God's Word, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes, and he believed and experienced that the works of the law cannot give them salvation. When his Bible reading revealed the truth about the Lord Jesus to him, he tasted that blessed peace that the world does not know and that the Roman Catholic Church can never give to its members! Then he could no longer endure living in the monastery. So he left and turned his back on the Roman Catholic Church. Shortly after, he got married. But he was soon forced to flee because the Inquisition had heard about him and was after him. His life was in danger. He fled to England, where there was no persecution at the time. While living there, he received a call from the persecuted congregation in Antwerp. He didn't feel free to decline and accepted that call. That was a courageous decision, as persecution raged all over Antwerp. His work and life would always be at risk. Yet he went, aware of the danger. He conducted many secret meetings.



Of course, he did not always hold those meetings at the same place. He travelled from one part of the city to another.

He also visited church members at their homes. He encouraged the sick and comforted the mourners, of which there were so many. With a genuine contempt for death, he performed the work that a shepherd and teacher must do in his congregation.

And so, on this dark evening, he again conducts one of those secret meetings. His hearers listen breathlessly. See them sitting there, those hunted ones! They aren't safe anywhere! Yet they brave all dangers to hear the Word of God preached.

Oh, do we appreciate that we can freely and peacefully attend church undisturbed every Sunday? I don't think so! Sadly, indifference is enormous in our country and among our people, especially among the youth, when it concerns the service of the Lord. How easily don't we stay home? What pathetic excuses do we often use to *neglect* attending church? How many of our young people only go because their parents *make* them? How often don't we try to kill time in God's house with things that do not honour Him? Religion is very cheap nowadays.



*Listening to the preaching at a secret venue.*  
<https://www.britannica.com>

What a humiliating example these people set us. See them sitting there with faces worn by care and sorrow. See them listening breathlessly to their minister preaching God's Word, taking no notice of the time. But that pure preaching of the gospel strengthens their hearts and is worth more to them than the whole world. Here they receive food for their soul, spiritual food. Here they receive the courage to enter their danger-filled lives again, and they even defy death to hear the truth preached. They are willing to sacrifice everything for that.

When the minister concludes the service, they leave deeply impressed, encouraged, and strengthened.

No, they do not all go at the same time. That would be too dangerous. One after another, they slip away and disperse as quickly as possible.

They have arranged the place for the next meeting. Perhaps in an altogether different section of the city. Maybe in the attic of an old barn or the chilly basement of an old house.

#### TALL MARGE

The woman whom we saw arrive also leaves. She also sat listening attentively. Maybe she brushed a

tear away. No one saw the evil flicker in her eyes. Everyone in Antwerp knows this woman as 'Tall Marge'. She earns her living as a milliner. She has been part of the secret and forbidden gatherings of the Reformed for a long time. She has become a "pious" woman. Everyone thinks well of her. She can speak very seriously and with intense feelings. But an evil smirk covers her face when she hurries home this evening. No one but God sees that.

When the evening for the next meeting arrives, she sneaks through the dark streets of Antwerp again. Again she lets the knocker fall gently on the door of the venue where the congregation will gather. Again she identifies herself, and they open the door for her. She enters, but before they can lock the door again, a few dark forms jump out of the darkness as quick as a flash, put their foot between the door and overpower the man who has opened it. More and more dark forms force their way inside. Everything happens so fast, and that man is so dumbfounded that he cannot warn those inside.

Led by Tall Marge, who is acquainted here and shows the way, they suddenly enter the meeting room. Alarmed, all present jump up, but it is of no use. The surprise attack succeeds perfectly. This time the police officers are not after the ordinary members; no, their object is the minister, Christopher Smith. It is impossible to resist. What can they do against those heavily armed intruders?

Look, they have already tied up the faithful preacher. They rudely push him outside and take him away. The next day Tall Marge receives the eight hundred florins she earned because she betrayed him. All her piety was hypocrisy! She had only pretended to believe! Alas, her diabolical plan succeeded only too well. First, she learned to know the meeting places, and after that, she warned the Inquisition. That evening the officers of the Inquisition stood hidden in the dark shadows of the houses. They seized the opportunity when the door opened and forced their way inside.

While Marge lets the golden pieces slide through her fingers with much pleasure, her victim, Christopher Smith, suffers in a musty cell. Perhaps he has even prayed for her. He is led before the Inquisition and questioned. He does not try to wriggle out of anything in his answers but boldly confesses his faith. They ask if he believes in the Papal Mass. Without hesitation, he answers that he attaches no value to that wicked idolatry but loathes it to the depth of his soul. They ask him what he thinks of Mary worship, the images, the

relics and many other things. Smith firmly rejects all those errors. Every answer he gives is equivalent to a death sentence. But the brave preacher does not fear death.

Regarding matters of faith, they soon stop interrogating him. His answers are too clear to be misunderstood!

Then the questions change. In which houses and with which people has he conducted those secret meetings? But his examiners get no answers now. Smith shakes his head decidedly.

Indignantly he says:

"Will I betray my brothers and deliver them to you? No way!"

A nasty sneer pulls at the lips of his torturers. They'll bring that boaster down a peg or two! They have ways and means to make people talk! They put him on the rack, but despite suffering excruciating pain, he betrays no one. He steadfastly refuses to mention one name. This constant refusal embitters his interrogators, but their rage doesn't help. All their efforts fail. Finally, they pronounce his sentence — death by fire!

He writes letters to his friends and enemies from his musty prison cell. Even his traitress, Tall Marge, receives a letter from him, but that letter is *not* full of reproach.

When it becomes public that Fabricius must burn at the stake, the discontent in Antwerp rises to a dangerous level.



*'Safe and honest ways to bring the heretics back to the Catholic Faith'.*

1. Wheel 2. Prison. 3. Whip 4. Gallies 5. Fire



It would have been easy for Christopher Smith to use that sentiment to escape. A few words hinting in that direction, and the people would have freed him by force. But he admonishes the large crowd to stay calm. They all sing Psalm 130.

Finally, they arrive at the stake. A strong force of soldiers keeps the excited people at a distance. Before ascending the stake, Smith asks if he may pray again. Curtly, they refuse this last request. How cruel!

Instead, they roughly drag him to the stake. But the people see that, and now their rage knows no bounds. They push forward impetuously. Loud cries resound. The soldiers, who must keep order, can't restrain the raging crowd.

The people run to the stake to rescue their beloved preacher. At this stage, they don't consider the consequences of their action. Alas, they get there too late. The executioner sees them coming and quickly smashes the martyr's brains with a heavy hammer. He died at the age of thirty-seven, but his end was peace! Would Tall Marge have had peace in *her* soul, too?

We could go on like this for a long time because each martyr has their own history, but we stop here. The stories we told are enough. Hundreds, thousands of people, young and old, rich and poor, were murdered. Rome did not consider rank or station. The stakes smoked everywhere. The prisons were overcrowded. Daily there were more victims. There was no end to it: two here, four there, and fifteen somewhere else. They were not all executed publicly; oh no, most of them weren't. Many were secretly drowned to death in large vats of water. They often applied this inhumane treatment to women and girls. They bound their head between their knees and died a wretched death. They were - no, let us stop. To relate all this is too horrible, too cruel!

In Antwerp alone, Rome publicly killed 3400 people, but how many did they murder behind closed doors? God alone knows that.

No pen can describe the grief the believers suffered. That isn't necessary.

One day the righteous Judge of heaven and earth will judge all things, and that Judge makes no mistakes! How terrible His full vengeance will be on the guilty! Then the smoke of *their* torment will last forever, and no pen can describe that either!

But those who remained faithful unto death will receive the crown of glory. How blessed are those people!

## QUESTIONS

1. Summarise Wendelmoet's view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
2. What did she mean when she said, "If you want to consider it your god, then I tell you, it is your devil"?
3. Explain the meaning of the executioner's statement to the widow.
4. State Merula's views after his conversion.
5. How was Merula protected? What caused the change?
6. What did God do for his aged servant?
7. What did the oldest son of Robert Ogier mean when he said, "O eternal Father, accept the sacrifice of our lives for Jesus' sake"?
8. What means did the Inquisition employ to enable them to capture ministers, elders, and deacons?
9. Identify Christopher Smith.
10. Compare Tall Marge with Judas.
11. What inhumane punishment did they often give women and girls?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Psalm 130. Why was this an appropriate psalm for the people to sing when they led Christopher Smith to the stake?