

16<sup>th</sup> April

**Teach me to do thy will;** for thou art my God: thy spirit is good; lead me into the land of uprightness. Psalm 143:10

**Something to read aloud from history**

(Note:- Today's history episode is all about a Prince whose family emblem was an orange. A tasty drink of orange juice might be appropriate to sip as you listen to the story – if there is some available.)



William the Silent born **16<sup>th</sup> April** 1533.

William was the eldest son of the Count of Nassau in Germany, who gave him an education in the teachings of Martin Luther. He inherited the title Prince of Orange (a region in France) from his cousin, on condition that he become Catholic – which he did, repudiating his Lutheran upbringing. With the title came great estates in the prosperous Low Countries. William had been brought up and educated in the principles of the Reformation and although he now deserted the faith of his family, its principles were still there in the back of his mind. The education that he had received was to have a decisive influence later in his life.

Charles V of Spain was the Holy Roman Emperor and ruled not only Spain, but Germany, parts of Italy, and the Low Countries which we now know as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Low Countries were a very prosperous part of the emperor's dominions and had traditionally been allowed a certain amount of independence. The inhabitants were hard working people and each of their provinces had a *stadholder* who was chief magistrate, virtually an independent ruler. Charles V was a bitter opponent of the Reformation determined to stop the spread of Luther's teachings in his realm. Charles took a liking to William and trusted him with state secrets, looking to him for advice. He had him trained in languages and gave him a court education. All this helped make William ready for the work God had prepared for him.

Suddenly, just when the whole of Europe was becoming engulfed in religious war, Charles V, decided to give up ruling and hand over to his son, Philip II. Philip had a cold, passionate hatred for the Reformation and all its principles and he distrusted William.

Now William began to change his mind. Perhaps his upbringing began to assert itself. God sometimes uses our upbringing to bring us to himself even if we have wandered far away from Him. William was often in the Low Countries and there he saw at first hand the cruelty of the regime there under Philip's rule. Then came a turning point.

In 1559 William was in Paris hunting with the king, Henry II. Henry began talking to him about a plot between himself and Philip II of Spain to completely exterminate “that cursed vermin the Protestants” from France, the Netherlands and indeed the whole of Christendom by brutal force. Henry assumed William knew all about it. William listened, saying nothing. He was horrified. He let the king go on telling him more and more details without letting on that he had heard of nothing of the sort: inwardly he made up his mind. He would not allow this terrible slaughter especially in the Netherlands, whose people he had come to love. As soon as possible William informed the Protestant leaders in the Low Countries of what was planned. Philip II never knew who had let the cat out of the bag.

William was Philip's representative in the Low Countries and a member of the Council of State which assisted Margaret of Parma, the regent for Philip. Speaking to this council William explained

his opposition to Philip, to the shock of his audience, by saying that although he was a Catholic himself, he could not agree that kings should rule over the souls of their subjects. They should not take away their freedom of belief and religion.

Margaret was replaced by the Duke of Alva. Alva has gone down in history as one of the cruellest of men and it was he who was in charge of the plan to destroy those designated “heretics” by the Roman Catholic Church. As stadholder of the provinces of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht, William did his utmost to help the Protestants. But it was all to no avail; nothing he did could make any difference, the persecution continued. William felt responsible and at length he could take it no more. He went back to Nassau for a while and reflected on his position. Prayerfully he decided that he was on the Lord's side and would fight for the persecuted Christians of the Low Countries.

The struggle was long and at first unsuccessful. Then the tide turned with the help of the *Sea Beggars* – Dutch sailors who spent their time raiding the Spanish treasure ships that plied between South America and Europe. These brave men knew all the lie of the land; the canals and marshes, the saltings and dykes and they were very courageous. Thanks to them the Dutch had command of the sea.

The siege of Leyden is one of the most celebrated incidents of the war. The dykes were cut so that the sea would rush in, covering the low lying lands and allowing the Sea Beggars' ships to sail up to the starving city with supplies. William used carrier pigeons to keep in touch with the inhabitant of the city but alas, the winds were against the tide and stopped the water moving far enough inland. How the citizens must have prayed for deliverance! But then in the providence of God the winds turned, the water rushed over the land and the laden ships sailed up to the hungry garrison. The Spanish were defeated and the siege lifted.

Gradually, gradually William's Lowlanders drove out Philip. Seven provinces signed the Union of Utrecht in 1576 forming the Netherlands with William as ruler. The Spanish were driven south and eventually the mainly Catholic country of Belgium was formed there. Fighting stopped although there was no official peace until 1648.

Throughout William was determined that he would not have those who had been persecutors persecuted themselves when the Protestants gained the upper hand. He wanted freedom for all. He had lost his rich possessions through helping the persecuted Protestants yet he told his deputy to:

“...deliver the towns... from Spanish slavery, and to restore them to their ancient liberties, rights and privileges, and to take care that the Word of God be preached and published there, but yet by no means to suffer that those of the Romish Church should be in any way prejudiced, or that any impediment should be offered to them in the exercise of their religion.”

When William's army entered the Netherlands, he issued a proclamation which contained these words: “My taking up of arms is because of the security of the rights and privileges of the country, and the freedom of conscience.”

Of course, Philip was not going to put up with all this. Calling William, a “pest on the whole of Christianity and the enemy of the human race”, he offered a huge reward to anyone who would kill him. There were several attempts on his life as a result. Eventually in 1584 a wicked man, Balthazar Gerard, thought of a plan to get the reward. He got into the Prinsenhof in Delft where William was and hid in a dark corner by some stairs. William appeared with his sister and they started to go up the stairs. William paused to speak to the Welsh captain and military expert Roger Williams, who knelt before him. Gerard at once jumped out and shot the prince twice – the bullet holes in the wall of the building can still be seen today. Gerard thought he would be able to escape

(he had tied some bladders full of air round his waist to help him swim the moat) but Roger Williams and others gave chase to him and caught him. The shot had been fatal. William soon died, praying as he did so, “My God, have mercy on my soul and on my poor people.”

William the Silent was the first ruler to be assassinated by means of firearms. More importantly, he was one of the first rulers to try to put into practice the ideas of religious toleration from which we still benefit today. He met his death as a direct result.<sup>1</sup>

### Map Work

The Low Countries in William the Silent's day looked very different to their modern appearance. Much of what is now the Netherlands was under the sea then. The Dutch have reclaimed huge areas of land that were once under water.<sup>2</sup>



The Dutch used the power of the wind to pump water and reclaim land from the sea. Much Dutch farm land is below sea level protected from the sea by dykes and sea walls. Have you ever been to the seaside and built dams in the sand? **Maybe** this would be a good chance to play (experiment) with some water in the sink or in the bath. If you have a garden where this sort of thing is allowed, you could try a soil dam. If you are allowed to use the bath for *re-enactments* you could build some model town walls with Lego then add water and float some toy ships up to them as in the siege of Leyden. Don't forget to dry your Lego off afterwards though – the airing cupboard is a good place for this. Remember the more sensible and responsible you are about this sort of game (whoops! I mean lesson, sorry) the more often you are likely to be able to do it!!<sup>3</sup>

### Drawing

William the Silent was the founder of the House of Orange and the fruit was his family motto. Try drawing an orange. If you have one to hand, cut it in half horizontally and look at the pattern made by the segments.<sup>4</sup>

### Something to think about

In many parts of the world today Christians suffer persecution today as they did in William the Silent's day. We learned about China, for instance, yesterday but there are many other places where being a Christian is just not allowed. We should pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters every day.

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1 More on the Netherlands' struggle for independence on 17<sup>th</sup> October.

2 There are maps explaining this here: <https://brilliantmaps.com/netherlands-land-reclamation>

3 There is a good experiment to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWEWVw7TGk4>

4 There is a “how to” tutorial here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P8Mfc6R24A> (best watched without the sound track!) but you may prefer to do your drawing on your own.