

A HOLY AND 'THIS-WORLDLY' LENT

Isaiah 58. 1-12

2 Corinthians 5. 20b-6. 10

John 8. 2-11

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Tonight, for reasons that will soon become clear, I would like to speak about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As you probably know, Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 into a deeply pious and academic family in Germany. He became a Lutheran theologian, pastor and director of a seminary. In the 1930s, Bonhoeffer broke from the Lutheran Church in order to become a founder member of the Confessing Church which opposed Hitler. He was therefore barred from teaching in Germany.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer was on a lecture tour in America when war broke out, and refused the opportunity to stay there to ensure his own safety. Instead, he returned to Germany to be a pastor to his people. He was arrested on 5th April 1943, spent 18 months in prison while being investigated, and was then transferred to a Gestapo prison in Berlin after documents were found which indicated his association with a conspiracy against Hitler. Then, after surviving the heavy bombing of that prison, Bonhoeffer was transferred once again and finally hanged in the Flossenburg concentration camp on 9th April 1945. One of his brothers and two brothers-in-law were also executed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is someone who comes to mind when he reflect on our second appointed reading, taken from the second epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians. In that passage, Paul describes the trials and tribulations that he and his fellow apostles faced as ambassadors for Christ; and those trials and tribulations are not unlike the ordeals that were faced by Bonhoeffer centuries later. Paul's catalogue of suffering

is extraordinary by any count: we read words like ‘afflictions, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, and hunger’ without stopping to think what they meant in practice.

Quite apart from the deliberate ill-treatment by Paul’s opponents which (as the apostle tells us elsewhere) left him near death, over the years Paul walked thousands of miles through difficult terrain at the risk of hunger, thirst and attacks from wild animals. Being an ambassador for Christ was no light calling, and Paul could have refused it. Yet he had this deep awareness of being called by God. That calling began on the road to Damascus and was repeated when Paul was commissioned by the praying Christians in Antioch to go on a missionary journey with Barnabas.

Like Bonhoeffer, who made the deliberate choice to return to Germany, knowing that he had to share the destiny of his fellow Christians and give leadership to them, Paul’s discipleship was utterly intentional and utterly self-giving. Both men chose to live out their discipleship and calling in the thick of secular life.

After eighteen months in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter to his closest friend, ‘During the last year or so, I’ve come to know and understand more and more the profound *‘this-worldliness’* of Christianity. ... I mean the profound this-worldliness, characterised by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. ... I’m still discovering ... that it is only by living completely *in this world* that one learns to have faith.

One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner ... this-worldliness (is) living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane.

That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia* (or conversion); and that is how one becomes human and a Christian!

And as he concluded the letter, Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all may he lead us to himself.’

Bonhoeffer and Paul assume that our Christian discipleship is lived out in the life circumstances in which we find ourselves. Wherever we are, our Christian faith is this-worldly. To repeat Bonhoeffer: ‘this-worldliness (is) living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane.’

This Lent, you and I are invited to take account of the profound ‘this-worldliness’ of our faith, which is characterised by discipline and the constant knowledge of the theological truth of death and resurrection. It should help us, in some way, to throw ourselves into the arms of God, and to take seriously God’s suffering in the world.

Think, if you will, of the parable of our Lord that reminds us that what we do (or do not do) to the least of God’s people, we do for him. We do not have to look far to see God’s suffering in our world today through the suffering of his vulnerable people and his damaged physical creation. So yes, give up chocolate or coffee, or read a Christian book this Lent; but don’t allow your observance of Lent to become only *other-worldly*.

What practical good can you and I do this Lent that takes seriously the suffering of God’s world? Our first appointed reading from Isaiah enjoins us to ‘loose the bonds of injustice;... to let the oppressed go free,...to share (our) bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our house, (and to) cover the naked.’ In other words,

you and I are called not only to give alms, to pray and to fast in Lent; we are summoned to get our priorities right and to take our eyes off the comforts and pleasures of this world.

Will the world be a better place by Easter Day because you and I have kept a holy Lent? Whether or not we have yet worked out a Lenten discipline, we need to ask ourselves what positive good we will do to relieve the world's suffering; and then we must get on with it, unostentatiously but faithfully.

On Ash Wednesday, we face the suffering of our world in the sure theological framework of death and resurrection. That is what gives hope in otherwise seemingly hopeless situations. Lent is a journey that leads us to death and then, three days later, to the astonishing truth of resurrection. As we walk this Lenten journey we will discover, with Bonhoeffer in prison, that it is by living completely 'in this world' that we learn to have faith and be drawn closer to God.

So as we begin Lent, may Bonhoeffer's prayer be ours: 'May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all may he lead us to himself.'

May we all keep a holy, *this-worldly* Lent.

Amen.