

The Word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day.

- John 12:48

We begin this week the season on Lent. It is just one of the cycles of human expression of faith, from birth to death, from life in the present to life hereafter. It is a time dedicated by the faithful to contemplation and meditation, to penitence and doing acts of penance, to the study of the holy scripture and prayer, to self-denial and to acts of charity. And yet we are never allowed to forget that this season of sparseness is not the end. It too will have an end, and will show forth the glory of God in Jesus Christ at the Resurrection.

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa is at this moment undertaking a process to produce a new Prayer Book. The one presently in use is dated 1989, and that indicates that the common prayers of the people are and must of necessity be always dynamic, reflecting the changing cultures, environments as well as the intellectual climate that people of faith inhabit. It is in recognition that as situations change, prayer and worship also reflect that changing social dynamic. One of the essential elements in any Prayer book is the Lectionary. The Lectionary is not just about daily services and prayers, but also about seasons and commemorations. It is my hope that such seasons and commemorations must also change to reflect the changing societal content of faith and practice.

One element of such commemorations is the men and women of faith throughout the ages who have been exemplars of the faith that is lived and experienced, who have provided to generations of the faithful lessons in holy living, and who by their life, especially by their deaths have inspired so many beyond their own age, to follow Christ and to seek to be worthy disciples of Christ.

During this Lent 2014 period, we are focusing on the saints and martyrs of our time. Out of many possible names, I have chosen five, drawn from different Continents since 1945: Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the Nazi Germany era, Martin Luther King Jr of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda at the hands of Amin, Steve Biko who died at the hands of the security forces in apartheid South Africa and Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador during a time of intense repression in Latin America at the hands of military dictatorship. They span the spectrum from the reformed evangelical church in Germany, to the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. Of necessity one has to be selective, because indeed, our times have had no shortage of abundance of witnesses of faith practice, many of whom have paid the price for their beliefs. At the heart of this are examples

of those whose lives were inspired by their faith commitment, and were driven by examples of faith practice, and then paid the ultimate price. There is though a subsidiary point that I must declare from the start. It is that we are reflecting on lives of faith and experience that constitute a judgment on us as church today. It is, if you like, like the writer of St John's Gospel that we can now no longer plead ignorance because in them we have seen the light, and the word was preached to us in their lives. The word of truth becomes the judge of untruth.

I begin my exploration today by presenting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, perhaps the most unlikely martyr of the faith. Unlikely because he could, like so many of us, have become just an ordinary follower of Christ, and a respected theologian of the church; he could have written his theological books, taught his students at the seminary, and hurt no one. He could have lived a life of comfort drawing from his middle-class upbringing.

But it was not to be. The more he delved into scripture and theology (he obtained his doctorate in theology at the tender age of 21), and his two famous books were *Life Together* drawing on the nature of a Christian community in a place of Christian formation, and another, *Discipleship*. What troubled Bonhoeffer's intellectual sensibility in the intellectual climate in which he lived was the evidently changing nature of Christian understandings about God. He was alarmed by the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazi ideology that engulfed Germany of his time. He was horrified to find that the church was not only avoiding confronting what he could foresee was the rise of a demonic power, but that gradually the church got coopted into the Nazi ideology with the election of Ludwig Muller as bishop.

Step by step the church became part and parcel and agency of the Third Reich. With a group of pastors they sought a theological and doctrinal expression of the dangers that were looming for authentic faith. They published the Bethel Document. He could not however, get enough support even from his fellow theologians to go as far as he felt the situation demanded. He felt very lonely and isolated. He took up a pastorate in London, a kind of exile. While in London, the Barmen Declaration was published, and the Confessing Church established. This was drawn from those congregations and pastors who believed that their faith commitment was such that they could not associate themselves with the faith and practice of the church sympathetic to and serving as an agency of the Nazi regime. Even the Confessing Church declined to address the question of the marginalization and later genocide of Germans of Jewish heritage.

For him the Jewish Question was fundamental to Christian identity. He could not go along with the church that excised from its scripture the whole Jewish scriptures, or airbrushed the Jewish foundations of the Christian religion. He was reminded of his experience in the United States about the struggle of the Black African American people. From that experience he saw the Jewish Question in a stark light. He felt bound by scripture and doctrine to state that the church, qua church, stands or falls by the extent to which it realizes that there can be no Christianity without its Jewish foundations, otherwise it ceases to be the church. His call was for the church to get beyond its cloistered existence and take to action to redeem itself, to disrupt the pace of the de-legitimation of the church by direct political action and put a spoke to the wheel.

Bonhoeffer made a deliberate choice to return from the United States to his homeland just at the time that war had been declared. He believed that he would have no moral right to participate in the construction of Germany after the war if it was not with his people in their time of suffering. He had been an avowed pacifist. The situation in Nazi Germany especially since the dreaded Kristallnacht on 9 November 1938 when the Nazi regime orchestrated a murderous persecution of the Jews and by 1941 it became clear that genocide was underway. This challenged him so much that he was drawn into a conspiracy. The nadir of this conspiracy was in the German Intelligence Service, the Abwehr. It included very senior Intelligence Officers, but also members of Bonhoeffer's family including his elder brother and other close relatives. His role had been as an intelligence operative, to prepare the outside world and allies for a possible change and a probable renegotiation of the pact with the Allies.

This was a trying time for Bonhoeffer. He had to live a double-life, a life of lies, and although he himself was never likely to pull the trigger even on Hitler himself, he knew that he was complicit in all the acts of the conspiracy including murder. He never sought to excuse his actions. They were, for him, a necessary evil. In April 1943 he was arrested for his role in the conspiracy, kept in prison for two years, suffered the privations of prison life, had to forgo his planned marriage to young Maria, and had to come to terms with his conscience. In April 1945, after a brief court appearance in Nazi jail, he was executed on the instructions of Adolf Hitler at the age of 39 years. Barely two months later Hitler had committed suicide, and Germany was liberated.

Bonhoeffer's time at Tegel Prison was arguably the best for theological production. His mind was restless, fertile and imaginative. He was observant, and reflective and his memory was at its most lively. It also appears that he was allowed limitless

reading material, and he could read and re-read the latest theological books, and revisit some theological work that was attracting his circumstances. He had hoped to complete his book ETHICS, but never quite managed to, and he began writing a novel that would have been an ethico- theological reflection on his own life and circumstances. The time in prison however has become famous for Bonhoeffer's *Letters from Prison*. The Letters to his parents were passed through normal channels through the prison system, but the ones to his close friend Eberhard Bethge were smuggled out of prison through the kindness of sympathetic prison officials. These letters to Eberhard Bethge, whom he regarded as his interlocutor because he said that he found it very difficult to write onto an echo. This must have been the most difficult theological work for anyone to write. A feature of the letters was not so much to make difficult matters appear easy but he faithfully confronted the hard bits of his life, faith and thinking.

Very early on, in November 1943 he asked himself the question as to whether it was indeed for the cause of Christ that he was cause his friend Eberhard, and of course, his fiancée, Maria and his parents, so much grief. He then replied his own question by asserting that "I soon put this out of my head as a temptation, as I became certain that the duty had been laid on me to hold out in this *boundary* situation with all its problems" (LPP:23). There was no self-pity here, and no code of self-justification. Instead, perhaps there was a tone of resignation and acceptance. Later, however, he opens his heart to Eberhard about the pain and hardship, but through visits of friends prison does not become "uninterrupted torture."

Part of his prison experience was also about theology and about God. There was an occasion (there were indeed many such raids) that during an air raid one of his fellow prisoners who did not profess a faith, mentioned the name of God in fear and terror. He asked the question whether that man was professing a faith. Indeed to him the name of God was no more than an exclamation mark, to express an inner feeling of terror. It was an expression devoid of theological or faith meaning about the divine.

A similar trend of thought affected him incessantly about Christian faith practice in modernity. The events characterized by a dominant and repressive state Christianity and church, the marginalization of legitimate Christianity noted in the forced closure of seminaries, the persecution of the Jews, and yet a church and Christianity that was almost oblivious of the sin that was being acted out in drama that went by the name of Christianity caused him to ask the question "Are we still of any use?" It would seem to me that at that point he could not have felt more impotent, and for Christianity to be useless, and of no value whatsoever. What was

the point of believing in anything if evil were to hold sway in a Christian country to the extent that it had.

He had two answers to that. The first was that the church had managed to push God out of the centre onto the margins. God had no existence save as a prop to close the gaps of human knowledge. God had relevance only in times of nothingness. He therefore asks the question: "Who is Christ for us today." The reality was that in a modern age, contemporary explanations of belief could not adequately explain the inexplicable. Words and symbols of the material world failed to extract meaning. Modern man lived in an era come of age, and the religion of magic could no longer suffice. For that reason, even religion had lost meaning. In such a situation Christianity also was without meaning. How do we speak about God, he asks, in a religionless way?" The language and symbolism of worship and sermons – no longer convey a compelling ethic to the people any longer. On the contrary he says that to speak about God, is to speak about God at the centre of human living and not in the margins, or at the boundaries, as an irrelevance, "not in weakness but in strength" because God is not God unless God is God of life and God of the world.

The second observation he makes is that modernity has introduced the concept of "religionless" Christianity, that is God devoid of the living God. God, therefore became a curiosity, a relic of the past, a cultural and a historical feature without which you will miss but with which there is no meaning or compelling idea. It is nice to have but no more. In such a situation, then, how does one even begin to conceptualise Christianity without God. For Bonhoeffer, faith was an act of life, the religious act was always something partial. It is to take sides. "Jesus calls men", he says, "not to a new religion, but to life" echoing the gospel of St John. "I believe that we ought to so love and trust God in our lives, and in all good things that he sends us."

What strikes me about Bonhoeffer's Christology and ecclesiology remains that it is very hard, almost impossible, to be a believing and practicing Christian. Christianity makes high demands on those who believe. In his Discipleship he wrote that whenever Christ calls us he calls us to death. That is the reason that we must constantly be alive to a need of God, and deepen our prayer life and seek spiritual resources to gaze into the face of God. He said

My calling is quite clear to me. What God will make of it I do not know... I must follow the path. Perhaps it will not be such a long one... I believe that the nobility of this calling will become plain to us only in times to come."

Contrary to what his church would have Christians believe, a faith of comfort and privilege, he dared to call on Christians to a hard faith, to the cost of discipleship. For that he was perhaps the most orthodox in envisioning the faith in god afresh.

It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life...Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life...

Looking back I can say that I have been immensely privileged to have grown up at a time when the church had discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer, such that during the 70s and 80s, Bonhoeffer was an immense inspiration to those of us who dared to be Christians in this country could call on Bonhoeffer to challenge the heresy of apartheid and the indifference at best, but more likely the complicity of our churches in the crime of apartheid. Today, 20 years into our democracy, and the end of apartheid we discover Bonhoeffer afresh as the church is uncertain and hesitant about the centrality of justice, and the plight of the poor. We are reminded ever so painfully by Bonhoeffer that autocratic rule does not happen in one Big Bang, but tip-toes like the thief it is, and catches us unawares. The greatest defence is eternal vigilance.

I guess that, with fear and trepidation, Bonhoeffer would call upon John's gospel to pronounce on the truth of God's holy word for our time, and ask the question, "Who is Christ for us today?"

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