

## Diocese of Winchester Space in the City Autumn 2009: Modern Prophets

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is well known as a German pastor who was martyred by the Nazi regime. My aim is to give you as true a glimpse as I can into his prophetic role. He charted timeless depths.

#### Setting the Scene

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 with a twin sister. They were the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of eight children. Their father was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at Berlin University. Their mother was of aristocratic descent. Dietrich was a university lecturer in theology and gifted pianist. He was ordained in the Protestant Church in Germany. He studied in New York and worked as a pastor in Spain, Berlin and London. He was active in meetings of the Ecumenical Council, the body that later became the World Council of Churches. In 1940 he moved into a group of influential Germans who were planning the assassination of Hitler and the overthrow of the Nazi regime.

The historical background to the rise of national socialism is complex. Its immediate trigger was the Great War of 1914-18. That war shook European consciousness, social structures and economies. Due to terms set up at the armistice, Germany suffered especially harsh effects. Psychologically Germans felt humiliated by being held solely responsible for the war. The German economy struggled. Bonhoeffer vividly describes the appalling social conditions and widespread hopelessness he saw as a boy. Political extremists brawled in the streets. The economy began to recover but it was then badly affected by the great depression of the 1930s. By 1932 the fragile post war liberal democratic government had effectively collapsed.

Hitler harnessed a depressed spirit in the country with the promise of a 'new spring'. He believed he had a destiny as the leader of a superior Aryan race willed by Providence to rule the world. He combined a spiritual ideology of a kind with a programme for the reconstruction of the country. Nazism was a ruthless pursuit of power. However, outside Germany as well as in Germany, its essentially sinister nature was difficult to discern until it was too late.

True prophets read the signs of the times accurately. By the time Hitler seized the post of Chancellor of Germany, Bonhoeffer was in no doubt that he would lead Germany into a vortex of destructiveness. The picture he paints is reminiscent of Ezekiel's image of the nation as a vine that produced leadership reaching to the clouds and was destroyed. He then foresaw a time of martyrdom.

International travel played an important role in Bonhoeffer's life because it took him out of the introspective, isolationist mood in Germany. When he returned home from a year's study in America in 1931, he was very disturbed by the growing nationalism. There is a strong sense in one of his sermons that at about that time he wrestled with God in a fiery way. What he says directly about the experience is that the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, changed him from being an ambitious theologian to a true servant of Jesus Christ. Pacifism became obvious to him.

He looked to the Hebrew prophets and the psalms as well as to Jesus for inspiration. The message of the Hebrew prophets is that God longs for the people to know *shalom* - true community and peace - through their trust in God's faithfulness to them. They condemned false prophets and the abuse of power by state and religious leaders. They warned against seduction by idols whose promises are empty. They spoke with passion and with urgency. They proclaimed God's anger and called for

repentance. Nevertheless, they were convinced that God's love for the people was enduring. Therefore, they could speak of hope for the future. The presence of God in Jesus is characterised by a hidden authority that speaks to those who long for *shalom* but which is a shock to established leadership that seeks to exploit power. We find all of this reflected in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For a scholar of his calibre there is astonishing passion in his sermons and speeches.

### **Powers and principalities**

The first matter I want to address is discernment of the spirits, or powers and principalities, that dictate history. How often do we hear it mentioned? In Nazi Germany it was vital. Bonhoeffer spoke openly about demons and the demonic being in conflict with Christ. If we are not now comfortable with that language then we need to find another with which to talk of the same truth. There is both light and darkness, good and evil in the world. They are active and robust and they involve us all.

Bonhoeffer's criticism of life in the Protestant Church began well before Hitler became a serious contender in the political arena. His deepest fear was that it had become too shallow to withstand the onslaught of Nazism. He was right. Hitler came to power early in 1933. By the end of that year Nazi agitators had forced the National Bishop to resign and a Nazi supporter was elected in his place. Jews were excluded from holding office in the Church. It was not long before the National Synod sought to impose an oath of loyalty to Hitler on pastors. The oath began, 'I swear before God ... that I ... will be true and obedient to the Führer of the German people and State, Adolf Hitler.'

Reaction to national socialism in the Protestant Church was divided. Some fully adopted the idea that Hitler was bringing about a re-awakening in the Church as well as the State. They were known as German Christians. Others tried to keep a distance between church life and politics. A third group, in which Bonhoeffer was an outspoken leader, actively opposed Nazi intrusion into the Church's life and belief. In 1934 they declared a schism and formed the Confessing Church. It soon became illegal. Hundreds of its pastors were arrested. One I met was buried alive in a concentration camp. He was a remarkable person. In 1937 the Gestapo closed the Confessing Church training colleges. The following year, it issued a confession of guilt on behalf of the German people and asked congregations to pray for war to be averted. In response, the SS press made 'the eradication of these criminals the duty of the state'. Some Confessing Church members amazingly maintained their stand throughout the Nazi period but overall it was silenced.

Bonhoeffer's immediate objection to developments in the National Church was that the Church ceases to be the Church when it excludes people on racial grounds. He worked tirelessly to counteract the pressures brought to bear on the Confessing Church. He also worked very hard in meetings of the Ecumenical Council to make the world church aware of the true nature of national socialism. His main ally in this was George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, who is the subject of next week's talk. Bonhoeffer told members of the Council very clearly that the Light was being extinguished in Germany and that they faced an urgent choice between national socialism and Christ. He partly achieved his objective but the Council too faltered at the critical point of discernment. It condemned the Aryan racial laws but allowed the Nazi controlled National Church to remain in membership.

### **Community and peace**

Bonhoeffer was ahead of his colleagues in seeing that a Church split was imperative. Confused and lonely he accepted an appointment as pastor to two German speaking congregations in London. While here he maintained his opposition to German Christian leadership, continued his ecumenical work and

searched for a style of authentic Christian community living. He visited Anglican religious communities, a Methodist missionary college and the Quaker college at Selly Oak. He also arranged (through Bishop Bell) to spend time with Mahatma Gandhi to study Gandhi's method of non-violent resistance. In the event, he could not go to India because the Confessing Church recalled him to be Director of one of its training colleges.

The students in the college had already received a theological education and were preparing for ministry in Confessing Church parishes. Bonhoeffer introduced a discipline of prayer, meditation, bible study and social action that was quite unfamiliar to them. He would not have Jesus put into a dogmatic straightjacket or taken apart by speculation. Christ lives on, he said, in those who believe him and to find his spirit we must be quiet and listen to what Jesus' life, words, actions and suffering mean to us now. The question is not what we ought to believe but 'Who is Christ for us today?'

Bonhoeffer saw from the beginning that Hitler intended war. He spoke passionately about peace and the ties that bind people together across the world. He looked to the Ecumenical Council for an authoritative common voice that proclaimed peace in Christ's name. He argued that the ways in which the West has sought to guarantee peace; by political treaties, stockpiling arms and - note - through international capital investment and the big banks, are selfish and bound to fail because they are based in mistrust. It is the mistrust that leads to civil conflict and war. He pleaded for the truth and justice that are an essential basis of peace and for the Church to make its witness to peace in suffering.

### **Church and State**

Everyone was sacrificed to Hitler's hollow promise. The aggression and extermination programmes were one side of its face. The other was the brutalisation of spirit that allowed them to happen. The wholesale destruction of life by the State appalled Bonhoeffer. It was axiomatic to him that the Church lives not for itself but for others as Jesus lived in service to others. He expected the Church, as the minimum requirement of its belief, to speak up for the persecuted and those in need. He considered it blasphemy to worship God while ignoring their cries. The parables of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 and of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 reveal those truths. On the night of 9 November 1938 the synagogues in Germany were burned down. A Dutchman who later became General Secretary of the Ecumenical Council was there at the time. He describes it as an 'explosion of inhuman, anti human and demonic forces'. The Confessing Church, by then much weakened, remained silent. Bonhoeffer wrote the date in his Bible at Psalm 74.8-9:

*They said to themselves, 'Let us crush them with one stroke!'  
They burned down every sacred shrine in the land.  
We see no more signs, no prophet any more,  
and none of us knows how long it will last.*

Bonhoeffer was personally silenced. His licence to teach at university was withdrawn. It was intolerable to him to fight in Hitler's armies or take the required oath of obedience to Hitler. When he was called up he arranged a year's leave in America but returned home within a month convinced he had made a mistake leaving his people at that time. He resumed such training work as was still possible. He applied to be an army chaplain and was turned down. In 1940 he was banned from speaking in public on the ground he was subverting the people and required to report regularly to the police. Then he began seriously to consider the move into politics. Though it was contrary to the tradition of his Church to cross that boundary it was consistent with his own belief.

Bonhoeffer's brother in law, Hans von Dohnanyi, was a judge. During the war he was on the staff of the Abwehr, the German Military Intelligence. He was a key person in the plans to activate a coup d'état. He told Bonhoeffer the conspirators needed him for his contacts abroad. They were an important line of communication with influential people outside Germany after the fall of France. Bonhoeffer decided that, as a Christian, he could no longer keep out of the eye of the storm. For him, the subterfuge and complicity in an assassination plot were a price to be paid in the cleansing of German guilt. The times were exceptional. He trusted his conscience to God.

He met with a Roman Catholic network that was reporting to the Vatican and went to Switzerland and Norway to meet leading members of the Ecumenical Council. He met Bishop Bell in Sweden in 1942. His brief was to convey a message to the British government through the bishop asking for stable peace terms if Hitler was removed. He also had the conspirators' permission to reveal their names. In April 1943 he and others were arrested when suspicions about the activities of the Abwehr were raised. After the abortive attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944 details of the conspiracy were discovered. Bonhoeffer was hanged with other conspirators, condemned of His treason, at Flossenburg concentration camp two weeks before it was liberated. He was just 39.<sup>1</sup>

### **Suffering of God**

In Jesus, and in the Hebrew scriptures, God is both mysteriously transcendent and present among us. Bonhoeffer believed unflinchingly that authority in eternity, in history, in nature, over the powers and principalities belongs with God. However, he found triumphal talk about an Almighty God inappropriate and inadequate. He countered the idea of a remote, all powerful and invisible God with the question, 'Did the cross not become extraordinarily visible ...?'

The vulnerability and suffering of God in the world is central to Bonhoeffer's theology and spirituality. When Jesus struggled in Gethsemane, he asked his companions who fell asleep, 'Could you not watch with me for one hour?' In the circumstances, that question was alive for Bonhoeffer. It was in the sharing of God's suffering in the world that he found hope of freedom, blessing and renewal. His deeply moving poem, 'Night voices in Tegel', written in prison, reflects the role of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. In that poem, the nightmare of the prisoners' lives, his own fears - which he certainly had - and his thankfulness for blessings entwined in his trust of God.

The impression he made on others in the midst of great danger was one of calm and cheerfulness. An Italian professor in prison with him said that his dignity, his goodness and courageous kindness were a light in the darkness of prison life. He attributed that to Bonhoeffer's conviction that God through Christ would restore everything.

### **Church in the Future**

When he was imprisoned, Bonhoeffer had first to concentrate on covering the conspirators' tracks in interrogation. Though nothing definite was proved against them then, there was no immediate prospect of release. He returned to his thinking about the Christian community and its relationship with the world. The world, he said, has grown up and it is pointless, even insulting for the Church to try to push it back into the thought forms and language of a bygone age.

The prophetic message speaks of changing people's hearts rather than saving souls. The Church, Bonhoeffer says, should stop trying to justify God, faith and its own existence on the fringes where

human knowledge runs out, for instance in death and personal sin. It belongs at the centre of life helping the world to understand itself in the light of God's love. It should be in the public square, as we would say today, in the structures of society where the deepest impulses of justice, truth and the good - or their opposites - are forged. Faith, he wrote, frees us to live fully in life's experiences and perplexities in the knowledge that God is with us.

National socialism begged so many questions for the Churches that Bonhoeffer foresaw there would have to be a completely new beginning. He expected that in time the purification of the Church would give way to a new experience of Pentecost which would be as transforming as it had been for Jesus' followers after his death. He sought a Church that walked humbly with its God, letting go of any privilege it derives from ties to the state. He thought it should give away its assets to those in need and learn to live as part of the world because only then can it be truly free to be of service to others. It should practice a hidden, or quiet, discipline gathering for worship, prayer and just action while waiting for fresh word from God.

### **Today**

I'll end with some very brief comments.

First, I am struck by how sensitive thinkers today are making similar prophetic critique of the powers and principalities. Professor Bob Goudzwaard, an economist and former member of the Dutch parliament, said in a recent address to the Churches on the crisis in the money markets, 'The deepest underlying cause of our present global crisis looks to me like the sudden betrayal of a self-made god ... What our society needs most is the perspective of *shalom* combined with relief.' He appealed to the Churches to light the path. If people of good faith do not, who or what waits in the wings to pick up power in the restless space?

Finally, few of us can doubt the degree of mistrust that characterises our own age, internationally and on our own doorsteps. The promise of *shalom* is the peace that comes from caring and sharing, for each other and the future of God's earth. *Shalom* is to be found in the blessings of sufficiency, justice and mercy not in the hollow belly of the golden calf. It is in the values of the Sermon on the Mount, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered.

*Gillian Court – 4 November 2009*

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<sup>i</sup> His last known words are a message for Bishop Bell given to an English officer, Payne Best, if he got home to England. The message was, 'Tell him that for me this is the end but also the beginning of life. With him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain – tell him too that I have never forgotten his words at our last meeting.'