

2 Cor. 4:6-12, 16-18

Mark 8:34-8

If you've been in chapel the last three Sundays, you may have noticed something rather odd. None of the 'heroes' that people have been talking about can be proved to have lived. King Arthur *may* have done, of course, but the stories about him are certainly more legend than history; the story of Shrek is a mishmash of ancient mythology; and Hercules was a character in Greek myth. What? – are there no *real* heroes or heroines out there? The only *real* hero mentioned this term was the first world-war veteran Alfie, whom Simon tended in his care-home.

The hero I have chosen certainly existed – indeed, he was alive during my own life-time – and the evil he resisted was all too real. He is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born on the 4th February, 1906, in Breslau, at that time part of Germany. He was executed by the Nazis on April 9th, 1945, just a month before the end of the Second World War, and only a few days before the camp where he was being held was liberated. Why, you may ask, should he, in particular, be remembered? His death at the early age of 39 was certainly poignant, but there were many others who suffered a similar fate. He is remembered, not simply for his resistance to Hitler, but because he was a theologian whose writings have proved extremely influential. In the years following his death, Bonhoeffer's writings were all the rage among theology students; even today, people are still analyzing his writings, and discussing their significance.

So – a theologian. You may have noticed that some people – newspaper editors, for example – tend to use the word 'theology' – like the word 'academic' – to refer to something which they consider to be irrelevant to the real world, the world that normal people inhabit. Some of you may even share that view! Clearly Bonhoeffer can be of no real interest, then, except to other theologians! I want to suggest that Bonhoeffer is interesting, precisely because the story of his life and his theology are intertwined.

Bonhoeffer's decision, at an early age, to study theology, took his family and friends, who were anything but religious, by surprise. He became a pastor and teacher just at the time when Hitler came to power. At that time many Christians in Germany drew a sharp line between the Church and the State, and concluded that they should not interfere in what was happening in political life, but from the beginning Bonhoeffer was one of those who opposed what Hitler was doing. During the 1930's he spent several years studying in America and as a pastor in England; it was a relief to him to be out of Germany. When he returned, it was to find that things had grown worse. He himself fell under suspicion, and the Seminary of which he was Principal was declared illegal.

In 1939 he was invited to return to the United States, and went to New York, but as war approached, he returned home, against all advice. In a letter he wrote: 'It was a mistake for me to come to America. I have to live through this difficult period in our nation's history with Christians in Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the tribulations of this time with my people.'

And so he went back. He carried on his pastoral work. But at the same time he was involved in the resistance movement. He helped Jews to escape to Switzerland. In 1942 he met Bishop George Bell of Chichester in neutral Sweden, and shared with him details of the plot to overthrow Hitler and the conspirators' hopes that they would then be able to negotiate peace. To what extent he himself was involved in the plot to kill Hitler is not clear – it is, after all, unwise if one is involved in a conspiracy, to record that fact in writing – but he certainly knew about it, and appears to have helped the conspirators. In April 1943 he was arrested and spent two years in prison and concentration camp before his execution as a traitor against the state.

So what was it that led Bonhoeffer to abandon non-violent resistance to the Nazi regime, and to approve a plot to assassinate Hitler? How could a Christian justify murder? To answer that we need to turn to his writings, and see how his theology and his actions were a unity.

The title of one of his early books – *The Cost of Discipleship* – is an ominous hint of what was to come. In it, Bonhoeffer attacked what he called 'cheap grace'. By 'cheap grace' he meant the kind of Christianity which was orthodox in belief but which had no effect on one's way of life; it meant the acceptance of God's forgiveness and love without any kind of commitment to obedience and discipleship. 'Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance . . . it is grace without discipleship.' '*Costly* grace . . . is the call of Jesus Christ, at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.' It is the call to take up the cross, which we heard in our Gospel reading tonight.

For Bonhoeffer, salvation meant not being saved *from* the world, but being saved *in* and *for* it. Salvation meant being concerned about human suffering and injustice. He accused the Church of staying silent when it should have cried out, of failing to help the victims of violence and wrong. The Christian was called to follow Christ, and that meant being conformed to his likeness.

But what did being conformed to Christ's likeness mean? First, we need to know who Christ is, and what we can say about him. These were questions that Bonhoeffer tackled in his lectures on Christology, delivered in the 1930's. His book *Christology*, based on the notes jotted down by some of his students, was published after the war. For Bonhoeffer, the Incarnation was central: God had become man. Christ had come, as Paul puts it, 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'.

And *that* meant, Bonhoeffer said, that 'Christ became involved in the predicament of the whole flesh. . . . He is man as we are, he is tempted on all sides as we are He was continually engaged in struggle. He did things which outwardly sometimes looked like sin. He was angry . . . he evaded his enemies, he broke the law of his people, he stirred up revolt against the rulers and the religious men of his country. He entered man's sinful existence past recognition . . . and yet he is without sin.'

In the letter Bonhoeffer had written back in 1939, when he explained why he was going back to Germany, insisting that he must share the tribulations of his people, he had said: 'Christians in Germany are faced with the fearful alternatives either of willing their country's defeat so that Christian civilization may survive, or of willing its victory and destroying our civilization. I know which of the two alternatives I have to choose but I cannot make the choice from a position of safety.' For him, being conformed to Christ's likeness meant that he could not stand apart; he had to protest against injustice. Christian discipleship meant *participation* in the struggle. It meant being involved in human life, as Christ had been.

Bonhoeffer was to work out the implications of Christian discipleship in his book on *Ethics*, on which he worked during the war, and which remained unfinished at his death. Already we can see, however, what 'conformity to Christ' is going to mean for him. It was Paul who first wrote about being conformed to the image of Christ, and it is hardly surprising that Bonhoeffer appeals to his teaching. Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh, wrote Paul. He shared our humanity, and in Christ, men and women are recreated. Christ is truly Man, and in him we see what we should be. As man, Christ was involved in struggle, in battling against injustice, in rebellion. He shared our condition, and we are remade in his likeness. To be conformed to him, then, means that we share his struggle against evil, in order that we too may become what, in the eyes of God, we were always meant to be.

In our first reading tonight we heard something about what being conformed to Christ's likeness meant for Paul. It meant sharing his death and his resurrection. In the interests of the Gospel, Paul was persecuted, hounded from one city to another; he knew what it was to be perplexed, hunted, and struck down; for him, conformity to Christ meant being handed over to death. And yet Paul was convinced that the greater his suffering, the more the power of God was at work; and that even in his death, the risen life of Christ would triumph, and bring life to others. No wonder Paul's teaching spoke to Bonhoeffer.

In prison, Bonhoeffer continued to think and to write. A collection of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* was published after his death. In some, he advocated what he called 'Religionless Christianity'. It was another way of expressing what he had written about more than a decade earlier, when he had attacked 'cheap grace'. What he was protesting about was the 'religion' which was a substitute for true Christian discipleship, and which was so concerned with forms and structures that it ignored the Gospel. 'Religionless Christianity' did not mean abandoning worship;

indeed, on the day before he died, Bonhoeffer conducted a service of Holy Communion for his fellow-prisoners. Nevertheless, 'it is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life'. Bonhoeffer's theology was anything but irrelevant, for it was what led him to act as he did.

In that reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of his confidence that the God who raised the Lord Jesus to life will raise us with him. For Bonhoeffer, too, conformity to Christ meant resurrection as well as death. In a final message to George Bell on the eve of his execution, he wrote 'This is the end – but for me, it is the beginning of life'. In the eyes of the law, he was put to death as a traitor to Germany, hung up, as a final indignity, on a meat hook. But in the eyes of God, he was surely a martyr, for a martyr is one who witnesses to Christ. You will find his statue among the Ten Modern Martyrs carved above the West door of Westminster Abbey.