

Twenty -Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

6/12/15

“Jesus, John and Dietrich...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

He walked with composure.

He knew what waited.

The two guards either side of him were silent.

They entered the room.

It was empty, apart from a single wire hanging from the roof. It wasn't even a traditional rope, but a thin wire, known to prolong suffering.

He stood in front of the wire.

The guards stepped back.

He knelt down onto his knees and prayed.

It all came flooding back to him in those seconds...

He was born in Breslau on the 4th of February 1906. He moved to Berlin when he was twelve when his father became Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Berlin. His family was well-educated, gifted, closely knit and part of upper-middle class privileged society.

At sixteen he studied theology.

By the age of twenty-one he submitted his doctoral thesis.

At the age of thirty-three he publicly denounced the German public for following Hitler.

On the 8th of April 1945 he faced the wire that would take his life in the next few minutes...

His name?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In today's Gospel reading we read of how John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord. In ancient times, when a King was going to visit a city, he would send before him someone to herald his coming, someone to announce that he would be coming soon. The herald would then go around the city, and go before the elders of the city, telling them all, "The king is coming. He will be here any day. So clean up your lives. Make sure that you are in obedience to the king's commands so that you will not be punished when he arrives."

In Luke, the herald is John the Baptist and the King is Jesus Christ. John the Baptist's message to the people of God is to repair their lives and prepare for Christ's coming. He does this by calling the people to repent and be baptized.

As we enter the Second Sunday in Advent we are reminded of the arrival of Baby Jesus in the weeks to come. The focus today should not be so much on the upcoming Christmas Day celebrations, but rather on our personal and communal spiritual journey as we prepare for His arrival.

This should be a very important time of personal introspection and reflection for each one of us as Christians.

We should be ignoring the flashing Christmas lights on the Christmas trees, blocking out the commercial carol songs belting out in the shopping malls that have become our new cathedrals, instead we should be reading our Bibles, praying, meditating and looking deep inside ourselves as to where we are in relation to Christ in our personal lives.

It is so easy to be taken in by the hype and excitement of Christmas. Our retail giants have become so good at this. I know, as I trained as a retail manager for a large national retail group. Christmas, in retail, was not about Jesus. It was, however, all about meeting and exceeding sales targets. The expectation for retail managers was not the arrival of Baby Jesus and all that this means for the world, but rather what extra bonus they would qualify for if the targets were met and surpassed.

This is not what Christianity is all about.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this.

He knew the importance of preparing our souls for the coming of Jesus and he wrote extensively about what it means to be a Christian living in the real world. In a way, it could be argued, that Dietrich was also a herald, cut short in the prime of his life by evil personified, much like John the Baptist was.

Therefore this morning, I wish to bring you some of the insights that Dietrich left us before he died. He was close to God. He understood with an unusual clarity what we need to do as Christians to remain close to God. I believe that his writings and theology have a very special message for us this Second Sunday in Advent as we prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of our Lord on this planet we call home.

Bonhoeffer believed strongly in the “weakness” of Christ and all of the theological implications that this has for us as Christians. This is opposite to the theology that many of us have formed in our own minds with regards to how we view and understand Christ. We are taught from a young age in Sunday school and then we are later taught as adults, that Christ is our strength and our rock. He is the foundation, the power that will take us through our life and help us to weather the storm. Dietrich sees Christ a little differently and I do believe that we have something to learn from him this morning. Dietrich celebrates Christ’s weakness. For him, this is how Jesus is able to access fallen humanity, not through His strength and power, but rather through His frail weakness. Dietrich calls us to be less proud, less arrogant, less sure of ourselves, for it is only once we do this and acknowledge our personal frailty and weakness that we are able to live and speak entirely from the mercy of Christ and no longer from our personal knowledge and experience.

Dietrich was opposed to the idea of cheap grace. He once wrote that to live by faith, which means to live truly, means to live unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. Dietrich disliked outwardly based ritual that he saw as a way of receiving cheap grace. He longed for a costly discipleship.

What is costly discipleship?

Costly discipleship is held captive to Christ, it is Christ-centred. It is also a life that focuses on community, centred on our communion with Christ. We are NOT individual heroes achieving greatness (think of the “selfie” generation) an unfortunate but prevalent model of many Christians living today. Instead we need to live together in Christ by faith.

Dietrich also calls us to a Cross-centred life. For Dietrich, all theology and Christian living flows from the Cross. This life from the Cross and the life in the church together lead to the disciplines of the Christian life. The three disciplines are:

- Reading and obeying scripture
- Prayer
- The practice of theology

The life from the Cross not only leads us to these three disciplines, but also leads us out into the world. (Much in the same way that Fr Derek announces our last hymn as being for going out into the world.)

Bonhoeffer so well understood how to live because he so well understood the Cross on which Christ died. Bonhoeffer also grasped the all-encompassing implications of the Cross for human existence. He lived from the Cross to the world.

You may ask why the focus on human weakness?

For Bonhoeffer, human weakness paves the way for God’s grace.

Our human weakness leaves us unable – dependent on something beyond and outside us.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer's theology can be best summarised with the following quote:

"The cross was a stumbling block to the Romans, the cross was a stumbling block to the Nazis, the cross was a stumbling block to moderns, and – unless we are humbled and brought low beneath the cross to see its power and beauty- the cross can be a stumbling block to us."

So my call to you this Second Sunday of Advent is to focus on the Cross and the weakness of Christ as an additional, crucial means for our growth in knowing Christ and conforming to His image. We are the church beneath the Cross. After we have come to the Cross, we must return there again and again. In Christ's suffering and weakness God meets us in our suffering and weakness.

The man who goes to the cross finds God's strength manifest in weakness and suffering. There he feels God being with him, there he is open for God's strength, that is God's grace, God's love, God's comfort, which passeth all understanding and all human values. God glorifies himself in the weak as He glorified Himself in the Cross. God is might where man is nothing.

Perhaps my sermon can be best summed up in Bonhoeffer's own words written from the confined walls of his prison cell...

"I think we are going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious, the emptier our hands, the better we will understand what Luther meant by his dying words: We are beggars, it's true."

And so the camp doctor who witnessed the execution of Bonhoeffer wrote:

"I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed a few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years I have worked as

a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

Are you and I entirely submissive to the will of God?

Are you and I embracing our weakness so that we can relate to the weakness of Christ on the Cross so that we can receive His abounding grace and love?

Are you and I focussed on our spiritual journey this Advent so that we can move towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of what is to come on Christmas Day?

May God continue to bless you this Advent as you grow in faith and love through His grace from the Cross.

Amen.