Books and The Book:
Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Sunday 3 November 2024
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Psalm 137: 1–6 Galatians 6: 1–10

You could be forgiven if the title of tonight's book, translated from German as *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, fails to set your heart racing. Nor would I be surprised if you'd never heard of the book. Of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's significant body of writing, *The Cost of Discipleship* and his *Letters and Papers from Prison* are better-known. Born into a well-educated and cultured family in Breslau, then in Prussia and now in Poland, Bonhoeffer was a theologian, a writer, a teacher, an ecumenist, and a pastor.

His name has come to be associated with contemporary Christian martyrdom, and his statue appears above the main entrance of Westminster Abbey and there takes its place among nine other 20th century Christian martyrs from across the globe. He resisted the nazification of the Protestant Church in Germany, and his active resistance to the Third Reich demanded his life. Bonhoeffer died in Flossenbürg, a concentration camp in Bavaria near the border of what was then Czechoslovakia, on 9th April 1945, shortly before the Allied liberation of the camp and almost exactly a month before VE Day.

Life Together, all of 122 pages, has been understood and used as something of a pastoral handbook, instructing people both ordained and lay about how to understand and practice their Christian faith: in church, at home, at work, on their own and in the company of others. It is brief but, like so much that Bonhoeffer had to say, demanding.

From its opening words, it is clear that scripture will feature prominently in *Life Together*. It begins 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity', a quotation from Psalm 133. For Bonhoeffer, as for Jewish and Christian thinkers before him, it was the Psalms that most profoundly shaped his life of faith. This seems a worthy consideration within the context of Evensong, which is fundamentally, at least in its evolution out of the Church's evening Office of

Vespers, rooted in the Psalms. Evening Prayer, like its predecessor Vespers, remains intact without a sermon, without hymns, without anthems, without much of what we have come to love about it, but it loses its fundamental identity, and its intended purpose, without the Psalms.

But the Psalms themselves, like so much that Bonhoeffer had to say about the life of faith, are often rather difficult to deal with. They don't always read as the lovely poems that we might wish them to be. They often lack all traces of beauty and positive sentiment, and the human condition is regularly shown to be anything but enlightened and good. But here, it seems to me, is where Bonhoeffer believes they come into their own.

Because as eagerly as we take some of the Psalms onto our lips, others we might just as eagerly seek to avoid or explain away. The Psalms that we might avoid, about which we might even feel uncomfortable or embarrassed – might they serve, in that very moment of discomfort or embarrassment, in such a way we are faced with the needs, the sentiments, and the situations in which others find themselves? They may not seem to speak to me, or to my life, or to my experience, but does that render them unworthy of my thoughtful, prayerful use?

Bonhoeffer might suggest that it is then, in that moment of unease, that we become as one with the prayers, and the needs, of another; the prayer of someone – the one with whom you live, perhaps; the irritating colleague; the less than faithful friend; the person seated next to you struggling with life, though unnoticed; the person disfigured by war or crammed into a boat, but who otherwise comes no closer to you than the image that flashes up on the little screen in your hand – the dejected, sad, angry, thankful, joyful, ecstatic person you likely to encounter most days of your life.

Psalm 137, read earlier, at least in part, is one of those passages of scripture that gets said and sung with some regularity – except for the part that doesn't. It begins 'By the waters of Babylon' but moves swiftly on to the weeping that is going on beside these waters; these are hardly the still waters along we amble in Psalm 23. We are told that those who are weeping are being held captive against their will, such that they respond as so many other captives have responded across the centuries, by breaking into song. They are far from home; they long to keep alive the memories, the sights and sounds and songs of home. The Psalm ends (and this is the part that is rarely said or sung): 'O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed. Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.'

We might recoil at such harshness, such barbarity; we might take offense; we might choose to leave these words out of our pleasant and respectable worship; and we might even try to explain them away as expressions not entirely consonant with what Bonhoeffer might call 'modern respectibilities'.

But what if in our reading, dare I say, praying, of something so arresting, they give voice to others? What if they speak to the situations in which others find themselves, now – as captives, as hostages, as migrants, as people suffering the devasting effects of human rage, the war-torn and war-weary, forgotten and frightened people wherever they are, not least children.

To read *these* psalms as prayers is to be directed towards the prayers, and the condition, not just of ourselves, but of others. As such, they serve as what Rowan Williams has recently described as 'soul friends'. It's less fluffy than it sounds. Because they, that is, those to whom our attention is directed and who, in turn, demand something from us, become spiritual companions to us – challenging us, opening us up and revealing our inner selves, exposing our souls and expanding them and thus giving us more room for others; moving us beyond ourselves to those whose concerns, whose very being, rightly probe our depths and turn us inside out in a way that, in forcing us to face ourselves in order that we can faithfully live with others, might be surprising and even terrifying. Lest we were tempted to distance ourselves from the people, the worldview, the science, the culture – and whatever else we might deem to be rather too crude and primitive for our liking in the Psalms, C.S. Lewis, in his commentary on the Psalms, reminds us that 'we are, after all, blood brothers to those ferocious, self-pitying, barbaric men'.

For Rowan Williams, with his idea of 'soul friends', and for Bonhoeffer, as evidenced in *Life Together* and in *Letters and Papers from Prison,* those people, but more surprisingly, perhaps, those *situations* which, in presenting themselves to us, in questioning us, in offending us, even, serve to remake us from within. Situations, too, like people, become our friends. They remake, reform, and repurpose our souls, our humanity – not in order that we might then credit it to ourselves as a superfluity of holiness, but in order that in changing us, we might find a new capaciousness within ourselves towards God and, crucially, towards all that is God's and is loved by God in Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, says Bonhoeffer, true community springs to life.

In mentioning this notion of community, I conclude where Bonhoeffer began in *Life Together*. For him, community is rooted in Christ; it makes sense of itself only in its relationship with Christ; it serves no other, and no greater purpose, than to be as Christ to others. It's not a club or a society of our choosing, nor is it a grouping of like-minded people to whom we feel a particular emotional affinity. Nor is it, as he rather memorably puts it in Chapter 3, 'a spiritual sanatorium'.

Bonhoeffer's community is one rooted in Christ: in his life and death, as Christ, in his love, gave of himself, in his life and in his death, for the life of the world. His love, his life, and his laying down of his life, were universal, and so the community to which he calls us, the fellowship of his life in its fullness, frees us to be more open to others, to everyone, wherever and however we may find them. The quiet waters of Psalm 23, and the tear-drenched waters and the violence of Psalm 137, together find their ultimate meaning and expression in Christ: in his life, and death, and resurrection from the dead.

Community, for Bonhoeffer, understood as the Body of Christ, the Church, is that fellowship which knows, firstly, that its ultimate source of life comes not from within it, but is external to it. This is a community not powered by its own comfortable sense of togetherness, nor its own piety, nor its own particular ability to inspire; but is energised solely, and is utterly reliant upon, God.

Secondly, and equally as important for Bonhoeffer, this is a community which exists by God's grace not principally for itself. Its life-force is external to it, and the object of its love is not the community itself, for its own sake, but the world: our neighbour, everyone, in their need, in their complexity, and in their endless call to us, as to Christ, to embody that life and love which is not ours, but God's.

In its affirmation, but equally in its being challenged, our humanity is deepend, if not perfected, into something nearer to the heart of God; we come closer slowly, falteringly, to realising the community of Christ in the Church as the community of Christ to the world.