Trinity College Cambridge
10 November 2013
Remembrance Sunday

Some Modern Saints?
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Romans 8: 31–end Matthew 22: 15–22

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Three readings. The first from Bonhoeffer [see end]; the second from St Paul and then the passage I have just read from the Gospel. The reading from Bonhoeffer was chosen by me; the other two are set for this Sunday evening. I am going to let those two passages of scripture shape my approach to Bonhoeffer's life and thought, but I begin with that melancholy confession.

The confession is taken from Bonhoeffer's book *Ethics*. He began writing that book in the summer of 1940 and it remained unfinished in April of 1943 when Bonhoeffer was imprisoned on suspicion of involvement in plotting against Hitler. The words we heard were probably written in early 1941 – and they are, of course, Bonhoeffer's sorry reckoning of the failure of the churches through the thirties effectively to confront, oppose or challenge Hitler. Bonhoeffer had given virtually the whole of his own adult life to the struggle against Hitler – here he surveys the history of that struggle, and tells us that the church can only hang its head in shame and come before its Lord in utter penitence, having breached each and every one of the commandments.

Bonhoeffer had been born into a distinguished, cultured, religious and well-connected family of medics, lawyers and academics in 1906. When he was six years old in 1912 his father had taken up a post in Berlin – so Bonhoeffer's schooling and university and his ordination in 1931, all occurred against the backdrop of a decade of increasingly turbulent, polarised and violent political life in the capital. Less than two years after his ordination, in January 1933, when Bonhoeffer was still only 26, Hitler came to power as the democratically elected chancellor of Germany. In the space of a little over 100 days he consolidated his hold on power with a political blitzkrieg which anticipated his favoured tactic in war.
By now the deeply academic Bonhoeffer – who in other circumstances would have lived and died, in his bed, a professor – had decided that his first commitment had to be to the church, not the academy. The universities were, he decided, already fatally compromised and compliant, but there was still something to fight for with the church. So he gave himself fully to the work of establishing what was to become known as the Confessing Church, which drew together Protestant ministers who opposed the subjection of their churches to a proposed Reich Church Government. Hitler's proposed Church Government sought to align the reformed churches with the message and goals of National Socialism under a Reich Bishop. Already in March of 1933, the so-call Aryan Paragraph had been announced, which would exclude anyone of Jewish descent from the civil service, and prevent their being ordained – and already, in that fateful spring, in a lecture to Berlin

pastors, the young and newly ordained Bonhoeffer announced clearly and with a sense of foreboding, the guiding principle of the struggle which was to come, causing some to walk out of his lecture – 'It is the task of Christian Preaching' he declared, 'to say: here, where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God, is the church; here it will be proven whether or not the church is still the church.'[1] Or as he put it even more pithily on another occasion – 'Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing the Gregorian chant.'

When, eight years later, he wrote that woeful confession, Bonhoeffer looked back on the years of what was termed the church struggle – and could only conclude that the church had failed, by his own test, to be the church. The struggle had failed. The Protestant churches had offered no concerted and substantial resistance to Hitler when synagogues were burnt, when Jews were persecuted, when Dachau and other camps began to fill with those who were judged politically suspect, including homosexuals, when the euthanasia programme began against 'Life unworthy of Life'. The record of the Roman Church was no better, of course; it signed a Concordat with Hitler. 'Concordat' is a posh word for a deal – and the deal guaranteed certain rights to the Roman Church in return for the Church preventing its priests from engaging in any significant opposition to the regime. Some individuals, Protestant and Catholic did protest at grave risks to themselves – many priests died in Dachau. But the church as a whole offered nothing but paltry resistance to the march of the Nazi tyranny.

Through the years of the Church Struggle, Bonhoeffer's freedom of action had been more and more circumscribed. In August 1936 his authorization to teach was withdrawn; in 1937 the confessing seminary he headed was disbanded; in January 1938 he was banned from Berlin; in 1940 he was prohibited from speaking in public; in 1941 he was forbidden to write for publication; in 1943 he was imprisoned. But whereas Bonhoeffer's freedom of action had been taken from him, the churches had given up their freedom freely. Bonhoeffer's ability to oppose and protest had been ever more tightly curtailed; the churches had chosen curtailment in a collective act of moral and spiritual apostasy. Hence that heart-felt Confession – written in somewhat veiled terms (since everything he wrote, as he knew, was pored over by the Gestapo), and yet not really mincing its words: 'The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ.'

How could this apostasy have occurred? Some of Bonhoeffer's most concentrated thinking in thirties, concerned this conundrum – how, in a great Christian land, the land of Luther, the land of Bach, with a bible in every house and a church in every village and town, could 'the inherent godlessness of National Socialism', as the great Karl Barth called it, not only triumph, but triumph without encountering significant opposition?[2] There could be no simple answer but – and this brings me to the Gospel – part of the problem lay in a mistaken theology of church and state which seriously misconstrued such texts as the one we have before us: 'Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

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[1] See the lecture, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', from 1933.

[2] Barth, writing in 1943; quoted by Metaxas, 171.

As Bonhoeffer saw it, Lutheranism had always been tempted to think of church and state, or the religious life and secular life, as occupying two distinct spheres – such that 'the Church has no right to address the state directly in its specifically political actions.'[3] According to that way of thought, Caesar has his domain, God has his. God rules over one sphere. Caesar rules over another. Each must stick to their own territory. On this view, Hitler could be opposed when, say, he sought to prevent the baptism of Jews, but not when he confiscated Jewish businesses, or prevented Jews from holding posts in the civil service, or made them wear the star of David. By means of this understanding of church/state relations then, the church was effectively relieved of any responsibility to respond to injustice in the political sphere, for its business just did not lie there.

But this notion of two spheres, said Bonhoeffer, was bad ethics, bad theology and bad exegesis. Go back to our Gospel text. Jesus takes the coin and asks his questioners whose image it bears. The answer is that it bears Caesar's, and so, bearing his image, it belongs and is owed to him. But then there is an implied question – not spoken, but implicit in the exchange: what bears God's image? If the coin, bearing Caesar's image, is owed to Caesar, what, bearing God's image, is owed to God? Well, we know what bears the image of God – as would those who questioned Jesus in the temple precincts, for in the first chapter of Genesis they and we read: 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.'[4]

So give the coins which bear his image to Caesar – but give to God what carries his image, our very humanity. Thus far from endorsing two spheres and two realms, parallel and autonomous, one worldly, one spiritual, Christ's saying denies any such scheme. Those who had posed their tricky question to Jesus, went on their way 'marvelling' at his words, for by affirming a duty to both God and Caesar he had avoided taking one side of an either/or, either one of which would have caused contention – but he tells us, in effect, that Caesar is owed the loose change of our lives, but that to God is owed our being and substance.[5]

In that lecture I mentioned from 1933, Bonhoeffer had announced, contrary to any sharp division of church and state, that the church may have a duty 'not just to bandage the victims' who fall under the wheel of the state, 'but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.' But what were the precise limits of such opposition to unjust rule? In 1939 Bonhoeffer had asked a somewhat startled group of students and colleagues: 'would you grant absolution to the murderer of a tyrant?' The question suggested that he had already reached the conclusion that what the church owed those in authority was not meek and blind submission, but, in broken times, determined opposition. By opposing resolutely a government or ruler who strayed beyond the bounds of legitimate action, a Christian credited that ruler with wanting to be the good and just ruler they were called to be. Indeed only by such resolute opposition, did the Christian honour oppressive rulers as

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[3] As Bonhoeffer puts the point in 'The Church and the Jewish Question'.

[4] The interpretation is taken for granted by e.g., Tertullian in many places. And see discussion by P. Hinchliff, *Holiness and Politics* (London, 1982), 4ff.

[5] For Bonhoeffer's criticisms of the two realms/two kingdoms thinking, see, e.g., *Ethics*, 55–64. After all, and as Bonhoeffer put it in another lecture of the same period, Christ commands us to pray 'thy kingdom come – on earth!' See 'Thy Kingdom Come! The Prayer of the Church-Community for God's Kingdom on Earth', 2/11 in vol. 12 of DB's works.

not irredeemably tyrants, as not irrevocably the servants of evil, but as themselves called, as you and I are called, to be children and servants of God. For Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators against Hitler – for by 1940 Bonhoeffer was deeply connected with the resistance – the church was not permitted to mind its own 'spiritual' business. It could not be quiescent in the face of evil – indeed it fell to some, he concluded, not only to raise a voice against Hitler, but even also, and at great personal risk, to raise a hand.[6]

The failure of the churches in the thirties in Germany was, in part, then, a failure of thought. I have mentioned a single failure which Bonhoeffer addressed in his writings – the failure to understand properly the relationship between church and state. But his intense and unrelenting academic endeavour through the thirties was devoted to challenging the very many other misconstructions of the Gospel which had allowed the church to slip into a cosy relationship with the Nazis, of at best, a non-committal neutrality. The failure of the church was not, however, just a failure of thought; it was also, of course, a failure of will and courage.

In another reckoning of the state of things written at the turn of 1942, so just before he was arrested in early 1943, Bonhoeffer asked 'Who stands fast?' – in times where people have so little ground under their feet, 'who stands fast'? Thinking clearly may have been necessary to save the church – but it was never going to be sufficient. What was also needed, so Bonhoeffer believed, was that the church develop new habits and practices of spiritual formation and discipline, some of them rediscovered in, and borrowed from, monasticism. His unofficial seminary, finally disbanded in 1937, aimed to unite its members in 'Life Together' – the title of the little book which wrote up the experiment after the seminary had been forcibly closed – and that Life Together was founded on and made strong through serious and careful study of the bible, through regular patterns of worship and prayer, and through the solidarity and support one Christian owes another. It was such a serious practice of the Christian life which alone would equip those who might stand fast, even when there is no ground under one's feet. Principles, conscience, a sense of duty are all fine – but they are not themselves enough. We need, he concluded, discipleship – a way of life, not just a pattern of thought. We do need to think well – he was an academic to his fingertips – but we also need to confess, to read the bible, to receive the sacraments; to take up a form of life which we endeavour to inhabit.

Which brings us finally and briefly to our third passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, which is surely a bit of a problem. The opening line of the lesson – 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' – was the Daily Text in Bonhoeffer's Bible marked up for 21 July, 1944, the day after the failure of one of the most famous and promising plots against Hitler. Bonhoeffer, in his prison cell, realized immediately that that failure pretty well sealed his fate and that of his co-conspirators. So, on that day, of all days, what could Paul's confident assertion of faith mean? What could it mean on such a day to read the assurance that 'in all these things' – in tribulation, in distress, in persecution and in peril – 'we are more than conquerors', when all hope of freedom and safety had disappeared? What could this passage mean on the way to Buchenwald, one of the great death camps of the Third Reich, or a few weeks later on the way to a less well known camp, to Flossenbürg, where Bonhoeffer

[6] Thus in *Ethics* he declares: 'The theme of two realms, which has dominated the history of the church again and again, is foreign to the New Testament.'

was to die on the gallows with some of his co-conspirators, only three weeks before Hitler killed himself? How, on the steps of the scaffold, could one say – 'I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'?

One answer which Bonhoeffer would give, so I think – not the only answer, but one answer – is that we must read Paul's declaration not first of all as a metaphysical proposition about God, but rather as a call to discipleship. Paul's words are not, first of all, to be read as some sort of cosmic guarantee that God will always be at our sides, but instead as an invitation to us to pledge and promise and pray to act in the world in such a way that we remain always at the side of his son, Jesus Christ. If Bonhoeffer was not separated from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord – even in Buchenwald, even at Flossenbürg – this is because Bonhoeffer held to Christ in all the dark places in which he found himself as he himself inhabited the practices of discipleship he had commended and learnt. In his simple and practical care for his fellow prisoners, in his confronting and challenging bullying and violent prison guards, in his seeking to comfort and encourage those who were frightened in the face of death, in his going to his own death 'brave and composed' and 'submissive to the will of God', to cite the words we have from an eye witness – Bonhoeffer determined that he would not be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus, but rather that he should take the love of God even to the very sites of abandonment and despair where many millions of victims of the Third Reich had died. What presence of Christ he found there, it is not given to us to know. But Bonhoeffer believed that Christ is present in his church when that church is faithful to him in its preaching and action. So, when the memorial service celebrated in his honour in July of 1945 at Holy Trinity Brompton, in London, opened with the hymn, 'For all the Saints', it meant to assert, I think, that in his servant Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ had indeed been present at one of the century's most awful sites – when one who had cried out for the Jews, died alongside them.

But what has this story to do with us? We need not be melodramatic. We need not compare our times with his times – times in which, as he put it, 'Shakespeare's characters walk in our midst.' We may feel that the confession of today's church could be less woeful than the one he wrote for his. We may feel that we do not need the spiritual discipline he and his contemporaries needed, to stand fast in less terrible times. And yet, every Christian in every place and time is challenged, albeit in very different ways, to remain faithful to the vision of humanity we have in Christ, in the face of alternative visions – visions of inhumanity. Every church falls short of being the church God would have it be, and needs to begin with confession and to learn and relearn once more the practices of the faithful Christian life. We may not live under a Nazi tyranny, but there are certainly other tyrannies which claim our allegiance – tyrannies of desire, or ambition, or of conformity to the spirit of the times – which invite us into cosy relationships with kingdoms other than the kingdom of Christ for whose coming kingdom we pray. 'Who stands firm?' Bonhoeffer asks. His answer? – 'Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience . . . but whose life is a response to God's question and call. Where are these responsible ones?'

A Confession (taken from 'Guilt, Justification and Renewal'
in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, written 1940–43)

The Church confesses that she has not proclaimed often and clearly enough her message of the one God who has revealed Himself for all times in Jesus Christ and who suffers no other gods beside Himself. She confesses her timidity, her evasiveness, her dangerous concessions. She has often been untrue to her office of guardianship and to her office of comfort. And through this she has often denied to the outcast and to the despised the compassion which she owes them. She was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. She has failed to speak the right word in the right way and at the right time. ...

The Church confesses that she has taken in vain the name of Jesus Christ, for she has been ashamed of this name before the world and she has not striven forcefully enough against the misuse of this name for an evil purpose. She has stood by while violence and wrong were being committed under cover of this name. ...

The Church confesses herself guilty of the loss of the Sabbath day, of the withering away of her public worship, and of the contemptuous neglect of Sunday as a day of rest. ...

The Church confesses herself guilty of the collapse of parental authority. She offered no resistance to contempt for age and idolization of youth, for she was afraid of losing youth, and with it the future. ...

The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ.

The Church confesses that she has found no word of advice and assistance in the face of the dissolution of all order in the relation between the sexes. She has found no strong and effective answer to the contempt for chastity and to the proclamation of sexual libertinism. ...

The Church confesses that she has witnessed in silence the spoliation and exploitation of the poor and the enrichment and corruption of the strong.

The Church confesses herself guilty towards the countless victims of calumny, denunciation and defamation. She has not convicted the slanderer of his wrongdoing, and she has thereby abandoned the slandered to his fate.

The Church confesses that she has desired security, peace and quiet, possessions and honour, to which she had no right, and that in this way she has not bridled the desires of men but has stimulated them still further.

The Church confesses herself guilty of breaking all ten commandments, and in this she confesses her defection from Christ.