

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of (our) faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame,,. (Heb 12.1-2)*

Our Reading this morning from the Letter to the Hebrews pulls no punches when it comes to the incredible witness and sacrifice of so many people in the Hebrew scriptures and finally of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Some of it is quite graphic. The word *martyr*, with which we associate a person who has died for their convictions, actually means *witness*. That is because thousands of people over the centuries have been killed for witnessing to their faith. They still are today, and you will remember, in Advent last year, David Robinson addressing this topic.

In his *Letters from Prison*, published after his execution which took place just 3 weeks before the Second World War ended, the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the theme of suffering: *It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to suffer in the freedom of an act undertaken purely on one's own responsibility. It is infinitely easier to suffer in community than to suffer in loneliness. It is infinitely easier to suffer openly and in honour than to suffer apart and in shame. It is infinitely easier to suffer by risking one's physical life than to suffer in spirit. Christ suffered in freedom, in loneliness, apart and in shame, in body and spirit, and many Christians have since suffered with him.* Apart from those letters and papers, perhaps Bonhoeffer's most famous book is *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book he castigates the Church for selling Christianity short. He calls it 'cheap grace' – the kind of grace that is purveyed by an official religion of doctrines, rites and institutions. Against this he pleads the case for 'costly grace'. Cheap grace is 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate'. Grace is certainly God's free gift, but it cost God in Christ. And for you and me, it is costly because it demands a response of genuine discipleship, in the sense of an obedient and sacrificial following of Christ.

At the core of Bonhoeffer's theological, and therefore political life, was a repudiation of the doctrine of 'The Two Kingdoms'. According to this doctrine which was alive and well in Germany at that time, the proper concern of the gospel is the inner person, the sphere where the Kingdom of God reigns. The Kingdom of the State, on the other hand, lies in the outer sphere, the realm of law, and is not subject to the gospel's message. German Christians used this argument to justify devotion to race and fatherland as 'orders of creation' to be obeyed until the final consummation. It was Bonhoeffer's dissent from this perversion of the gospel that led him, at the tender age of 29, to establish in 1935 the German Confessing Church. This would ultimately lead to his own downfall and early death at the age of 39, but not before a new revolution of faith and life had taken hold of people's hearts.

It would have been much easier for Bonhoeffer to have lived a 'double life', to have risen somewhere senior in the state church with a cushy theological career and live to a ripe old age. The same could be said of the apostle Paul, for religious duplicity abounded in the church of his own day and he was a zealous adherent. But just look at the massive spiritual upheaval he had. He writes of all his fine accomplishments in Judaism but then regards them as 'loss because of Christ'. He goes on, *More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.* Phil 3. 7,8 The ultimate cost for Paul was his reckless, abandoned conclusion and decision: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death...* Phil 3. 10 So it came to pass: imprisonment, suffering and a martyr's death, but not before a new revolution of faith and life had taken hold of people's hearts.

Some people would say that doubt is the opposite of faith, but I believe they are mistaken. I believe that the opposite of faith is confinement and predictability. Jonah was confined in the bottom of a boat and in the belly of a whale because he was hiding from grace, vocation and freedom! This, too, is the primeval story of Adam and Eve. Fear is the opposite of freedom. Confinement and Fear go together. That is why they lock criminals up in prison, not only to keep society safe, but to force physical and therefore spiritual, social and mental confinement upon them- the darkness of isolation, the loss of freedom and that is hell on earth. The Son of Man, on the other hand, had 'nowhere to lay his head'. That was hard, but He was free! There's a huge difference. He would therefore experience torment yes, but not fear, frustration but not anxiety, he would be 'alert but not alarmed' – never in panic mode. Wilderness is freedom. True Freedom and True Fear are quite contradictory places. Faith is also freedom – the freedom even to live creatively with our doubts and uncertainties. Life is *not* predictable – we all know that. Paul knew that. Jesus knew that. How sad that some Christians hold stubbornly to a faith that only sees black and white, saved or unsaved, in or out!

We may need to learn to lose our lives. Most of our fear is to do with trying to *hold on*. We accumulate, fill diaries, being driven rather than drawn. There is freedom and liberation in losing. When we come to the place of the cross, paradoxically we come also to the shore of resurrection where our answers are never black and white, not clean-cut, but disturbed by the fullness of divine yearning and mysterious grace. How arresting, how sobering is the account right at the end of John's Gospel of the disciples who simply went fishing, business-as-usual, and caught nothing – failed again, so it seems. And then Jesus turns up – the leveller, the comforter.

Many Christians find themselves living 'between a rock and a hard place' in life. Does that mean they lack faith? Absolutely not. Life is full of ups and downs, convictions but also unanswered questions, hopes and fears. But all these things are met in Jesus Christ, who became one of us and experienced all the things that we do. In Christ, we are more than conquerors. This is the amazing story of God's people down the ages. Amen