

“Who is Christ for us today?”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Paul’s description of the gathered church as “the body of Christ” is not simply a metaphor, but a living reality. Paul describes the reality of life in Christ, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28). Paul is describing a reality that any modern Christian will easily understand: The church is united as one in and by Christ, while also at the same time retaining the individuality of its members. We are one body, and yet each person has unique gifts in the body. As Christians we do not stop being “Jew or Greek,” Asian, North American or Latin American, African or European; we are one for the sake of the body, but each of us also has a voice and a story to tell about our experience of God’s grace. For the sake of building up the body and Christ’s united mission in the world, the church speaks with different voices, each telling stories of God’s grace and love.

This week we begin a new midweek series titled “One Body, Many Voices.” The Christian church is arguably the oldest continual global fellowship in the world. We are “one holy catholic and apostolic church,” united in Christ through baptism across cultures, languages, distance and difference. In the church Christ becomes our unity and shared life. Anyone who has worshiped in another culture or in another language knows the power of Christ speaking through different voices. My sincere hope is that this new series will introduce voices and ideas that will help us see more of the global church, and also glimpse how the Holy Spirit is revealing who Christ is “for us today.” Each week, we will be in dialogue with scripture and different Christian voices also struggling with life in a culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse world. The series begins with the well-known voice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the question he posed in 1944, “Who is Christ for us today?”

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On April 30, 1944, from his cell at Tegel Prison outside Berlin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer posed a question in a letter written to his friend and former student, Eberhard Bethge, “What has been bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.” Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned on 5 April, 1943 for conspiracy against the Nazi government, and executed on 9 April, 1945 at Flossenbürg concentration camp. The issues that animated Bonhoeffer’s question were embedded within a post-Enlightenment modern world, which had increasingly understood itself as a post-religious world. The state church of Germany had cooperated with the Nazi government, and Bonhoeffer had been involved in resistance to Nazi rule as a pastor of the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) produced the *Barmen Declaration* in May 1934, drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Article 1 of the *Barmen Declaration* read, in part,

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides the one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

The declaration made it clear that historical events, governments, and their leaders could not usurp the authority of Christ and the church. Bonhoeffer termed this situation "a world come of age," meaning that humanity had to a certain degree "outgrown" the need of God in daily life. Against this background, Bonhoeffer wrote, "We are moving toward a completely religionless time." Bonhoeffer argued that humanity itself had learned to deal with issues in daily life without recourse to a "working hypothesis" called "God." Bonhoeffer was addressing a reality that had grown since the Enlightenment that science had become increasingly understood as a far more significant component to modern life than religion. In other words, fields of discourse advance in the world without "God" playing much or any part in the methodology of research and its applications. For Bonhoeffer this question was crucial for a church seeking to understand itself in the modern world.

In a world that has increasingly grown independent and weary of organized religion, what meaning does Christianity mean in the contemporary world? In October 2019 the Pew Research Center published a study made in the United States indicating that, between 2009-2019, persons who self-identified as "Christian" decreased by 12% from 77% to 65%, and those who self-identified as "nothing in particular" (so-called "nones") increased by 9% from 17% to 26%. Regular church attendance has increasingly come to mean once a month, rather than the every week of a generation ago. The Pew study also indicated that increasing secularization in the United States would, in time, likely follow the historical experience of European nations.

Amidst a changing world, Bonhoeffer's question has been on my mind recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as great social issues continue to press upon our world. In a society that has already been undergoing significant change regarding organized religion, the continued challenges of human life keep relevant the question of Christianity' meaning "for us today."

Though Bonhoeffer wrote during wartime from a prison cell, his observations continue to haunt our world today. Bonhoeffer's thoughts about an increasingly secularized and "religionless" world inhabited by people "come of age," who have learned to live without much thought of God in their daily lives, is more or less reflected in our daily world. Bonhoeffer's description of modern life, written in a letter dated 17 July 1944, remains compelling:

"Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us."

The God who suffers on the cross in the world and for the sake of the world is the hermeneutical key to understanding both the identity of Christ and the role of the church in the modern world. The church is called to be a church that suffers alongside Christ, who will always be found with the suffering and "the least of these." Bonhoeffer described the Christian life as allowing oneself to be caught up into "the messianic event" of Jesus, as a fulfillment of Isaiah, chapter 53. Isaiah 53 describes the "suffering servant" whom Christians have long identified with Christ Jesus: "*He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...upon him was*

the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” In Philippians 2 Paul echoes the images of Isaiah 53, writing that Jesus Christ emptied himself of all power and authority as God, becoming fully human – becoming a servant – so that the church might see how to live for others.

Looking back on ten years of resistance to Nazi rule, Bonhoeffer wrote in December 1942,

“We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.”

Bonhoeffer was writing about those who suffered persecution and death because they were looked upon as “undesirable” or “degenerate” by the Nazi state. Though not published until after the war, Bonhoeffer wrote in 1940, “An expulsion of the Jews from the west must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew” (*Ethics*, III Inheritance and Decay). What was at issue was the inability of the state church to see the face of Christ in the faces of those who were being persecuted because of their ethnic and religious identity. “For Jesus Christ was a Jew,” reminds us that Christ will continue to be found with all who suffer the injustice of dehumanization.

Bonhoeffer’s struggle in his context contains issues that our world continues to struggle with. The voices of those who have suffered for Christ, and continue to struggle for freedom, are voices that can also bring healing and wholeness to the body of Christ. The church needs all voices, “Jew or Greek,” Asian, North American, Latin American, African, and European. The church is a body belonging to a servant named Jesus, who healed the sick, liberated the possessed, welcomed and forgave the sinner, and proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of heaven for all nations.

In our world today, the church is challenged to walk with and serve “the least of these,” meaning the church is called to be a servant church, to see the events of world history “from below,” from the perspective of those who suffer. In the modern world, as the church itself is increasingly pushed to the margins of society, “participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life” becomes the way in which the church not only retains relevance to the world, but the way in which it fulfills Christ’s command to love, to make disciples, to teach, in short, to fulfill Christ’s command to servanthood.

Bonhoeffer’s question, “Who is Christ for us today?” is also our question because it presupposes our struggle as a church pushed away from the center of the world stage. This is a good thing, because for nearly two millennia the church has been complicit in systems of imperial, colonial and oppressive powers that have robbed the church of its liberating voice in the world, a voice sent to proclaim the kingship of Christ, the living Word of God. As Paul wrote in Colossians (2:9-10), “*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.*” Christ, whose fullness dwells in the church, is the suffering servant who was pushed out of the world onto a cross, whose kingdom ministers to all who suffer and gather at his cross. Christ will always be found with those who suffer, and so must we as Christ’s church. Amen.

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Week 1 midweek meditation reading: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Excerpts from *Letters and Papers from Prison*

“What has been bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience – and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’...if our final judgment must be that the western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity – and even this garment has looked very different at different times – then what is a religionless Christianity? (30 April 1944)

“And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur* (even if there were no God). And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we live as people who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...The Bible directs humanity to God’s powerlessness and suffering: only the suffering God can help.” (16 July 1944)

“Humanity is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world. One must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. One must live a ‘secular’ life, and thereby share in God’s sufferings...To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a person – not a type of person, but the person that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia*: not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event, thus fulfilling Is. 53...The religious act is always something partial; ‘faith’ is something whole, involving the whole of one’s life. Jesus calls people, not to a new religion, but to life.” (18 July 1944)

Excerpts from *After Ten Years* (reflections on a decade of Nazi rule, written in December 1942)

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward people. Will our inward power of resistance be strong

enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?

There remains and experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is that neither bitterness or envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune. This perspective from below must not become the partisan possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied; rather, we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of ‘from below’ or ‘from above’. This is the way in which we must affirm it.

Book recommendations:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters & Papers from Prison*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. New York: Collier Books, 1971.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters & Papers from Prison*. (DB Works Volume 8) English edition edited by John W. De Gruchy. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and leader in the Confessing Church that resisted the Nazi government. Bonhoeffer studied at Tübingen and Berlin, receiving a Ph.D. at the age of 21. He was a visiting scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, 1930-31, where we heard the gospel preached at Black churches in Harlem. This experience helped him hear the gospel from the perspective of those who suffer. Bonhoeffer became the head of an underground seminary for the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde (1935-37), which was closed by the Gestapo. In 1938 he was banned from Berlin by the Gestapo. In 1938, he was again invited to Union Seminary, traveling there only to immediately return to Germany, writing, “I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of 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 trials of this time with my people.” In 1941 he was further forbidden to publish. Working for the Abwehr (German military intelligence), he worked as a double agent for the German resistance movement to reveal its intentions to the Western Allies through ecumenical contacts in Europe. He was arrested on 5 April, 1943 and imprisoned in Tegel Prison outside Berlin. Implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, he was eventually moved to Buchenwald, and then to Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was executed on 9 April, 1945. His *Letters and Papers from Prison* has left perhaps the most profound and enduring outline of his thoughts about Christian life in the modern world. The *ELW* contains a hymn by Bonhoeffer, (#626) “By Gracious Powers.”

Next week: Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963); Haile Selassie I “Address to the United Nations General Assembly” (1963).