

KINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH ONLINE NOTICE BOARD - 4

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Today, April 9th, is Maundy Thursday – the day on which we traditionally remember our Lord's washing the disciples' feet, an example for us that we are to love one another as he has loved us (John 13.1-17 & 34).

Today also marks the day on which, 75 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died. He was 39 years old. Bonhoeffer was executed on the direct orders of Hitler on April 9th. He was sentenced to death for his involvement in the last serious attempt to assassinate Hitler, executed on the same day as his brother-in-law, who had masterminded the attempt.



Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor. He spent some time in England and in the USA and, before the war, supervised a small community of young Christians.

From the outset he recognised the diabolical nature of Hitler's National Socialist Party, the Nazis. He believed it was his Christian duty to do all he could, whatever the personal cost, effectively to oppose its influence and oppression. He was motivated by the same commitment we voice when we pray: *'Teach me good Lord to serve others as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost ... not to ask for any reward save that of knowing we do your will'*. But Bonhoeffer, with extraordinary wisdom and profound insight, understood he could never know with certainty if what he did was God's will.

Bonhoeffer knew he could have no certainty that the decisions he took were right. The same may be true for us. He placed himself in the mercy of God and acted on the conviction that the choices he made were unavoidable if he was consistently to follow Jesus.

This was the extraordinary depth of his spiritual insight; of his rare and Christ-like ability to see to the very core of how demanding it is to be a consistent follower of Jesus in this fallen and rebellious world. A world in which satanic deceit and duplicity everywhere generates a moral fog, leaving us caught in uncertainty; making the choices we're confronted with choices between various shades of grey and seldom simply between what is black or white, simply right or wrong.

Jesus knew this dilemma. That is evident from his anguished praying in Gethsemane on the night of Maundy Thursday. His choice to do the Father's will often left the disciples flabbergasted and the Pharisees incandescent with hatred for him.

'Jesus Christ has become my conscience. For the sake of God and of men Jesus became a breaker of the law. He broke the law of the Sabbath in order to keep it holy in love for God and for men. He forsook his parents in order to dwell in the house of his Father and thereby to purify his obedience towards his parents. He sat at table with sinners and outcasts – and on the evening of Maundy Thursday he allowed himself to be 'anointed' by a woman who dried his feet with her hair. For the love of men he came to be forsaken by God in his last hour. As the one who loved without sin, he became guilty in the eyes of men; he wished to share in the fellowship of human guilt; he rejected the devil's accusation which was intended to divert him from his course. Thus it is Jesus Christ who sets conscience free for the service of God and neighbour. The conscience which has been set free from the law will not be afraid to enter into guilt of another man for the other man's sake, and indeed precisely in doing this it will show itself in its purity. The conscience which has been set free is not timid like the conscience which is bound by the law, but it stands wide open for our neighbour and for his real distress.' (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*)

Before God and with God we live without God. The God who is with us is the God who seems to forsake us. (Bonhoeffer)

By avoiding sin I may commit the greatest evil. (Bonhoeffer)

Bonhoeffer saw that Nazi ideology was opposed to every Christian value in which he believed and on the outbreak of war knew that he was faced with a stark choice: wanting Germany to succeed, which meant the death of Christianity or wanting the survival of Christianity, which meant the destruction of Germany.

As a consequence of his decision to become involved in the attempt to assassinate Hitler, a fierce struggle was going on inside him, for what he was doing went against everything he believed. He had, in the face of German militarism, become a convinced pacifist. So how could he contemplate being part of the group trying to kill Hitler? He felt there was no help in the ethical codes he had been shaped by, and that even if he did nothing he would be as guilty as he would be by planning murder. The only answer he decided, was first to ask what Christ asked of him. What did faith's obedience require? And secondly, what was the most responsible action he could take at the time?

For a Christian Bonhoeffer's stance still stands in all circumstances. What does Christ ask of us? And what is the most responsible course of action we can take in our particular circumstances?' (Bishop Richard Harries, *BBC Thought for the Day*, 9 March 2018)

Toward the end of his time in concentration camps Bonhoeffer wrote a poem, *Who am I?* In this poem he asks who he truly is – is he calm and cheerful; friendly and smiling; is he what others think him to be; or restless and sick, struggling for breath; thirsting for words of kindness; powerlessly trembling; one person today and another tomorrow? He ends the poem:

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.