



## Christian Voices from Prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer

21 May 2023

Sam Wells

*John 11: 17–27* Extract from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life Together*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been remembered mostly as a man 'for' others. He wrote theology *for* the academy, he stood up *for* the Jews, he spoke up and established a seminary *for* the Confessing Church, he joined the bomb plot *for* Germany's salvation. But I believe he should be perhaps even more remembered as a man 'with' others. At three defining moments in his life, he resolved that to be a faithful disciple meant to be *with* God by being *with* God's church, by being *with* his people and by being *with* his family, friends, trusted companions and fellow conspirators.

I want to look with you at how Jesus crosses three key thresholds in John chapter 11. First, he crosses the threshold into Judaea. The message comes from Martha and Mary that Lazarus is ill. Curiously, Jesus stays two days longer in the place where he is. It's not entirely clear why. Jesus announces it's time to return to Judaea. The disciples say 'But they were all ready to stone you when you were last there'. Jesus is not to be deterred. He discloses the true reason for his journey: 'So that you may believe'. And Thomas gets the message, proclaiming: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'.

Here lies the first defining moment of Bonhoeffer's life. It is June 1939. He's in New York. He's received an offer to employ him for three years coordinating work among German refugees in the city. He ponders his situation for two weeks, echoing Jesus' delay after receiving Martha and Mary's message, before declining the offer. He writes to Reinhold Niebuhr, 'I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian 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. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilisation may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilisation. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make the choice in security!'

The second threshold Jesus crosses in John chapter 11 is into Bethany. Why does Jesus come to Bethany? Because, we are told in 11:5, 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'. Bethany represents the world that Jesus enters because God so loves it. Martha and her sister and Lazarus represent the people of God with whom Jesus identifies. This is the threshold where the profound conversation takes place. Mary says to Jesus, reproachfully but in words full of faith, 'Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died'.

These words sum up the quandary of the Confessing Church. Had Christians in Germany been more faithful, would the soul of Germany have descended to the point where Hitler captivated the national imagination? Jesus doesn't affirm Mary's statement. He never says that if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died. God's action, it seems, is not to make bad things not happen. God's glory is revealed in that God does not leave us alone when they do.

Here lies the second defining moment of Bonhoeffer's life – only a year after the first. The capitulation of France on June 17 1940 meant the undisputed supremacy of Germany in Europe. This confronted Bonhoeffer and his circle with the horrifying truth that no one was going to get rid of Hitler for them. If they wanted Hitler gone, they would have to do it themselves. Bonhoeffer had to accept the loss of the sense of his own righteousness. One can hear resonances of this moment in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, written four years later, where he maintains that responsible action involves 'the willingness to become guilty,' just as Christ entered into human guilt and took it upon himself out of selfless love for his brothers and sisters.

Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot to kill Hitler was not a lonely hero's quest to save Germany even at the risk of his own soul; it was his much humbler participation in the communion of saints. It was not something Bonhoeffer did 'for'; it was something he did 'with.' In this lies its profound continuity with the previous threshold, the return to Germany a year earlier. The return to Germany was an incarnate expression of 'with': to have remained aloof and beyond Germany would still have permitted Bonhoeffer to work and be 'for' a new Germany. Yet it would not have permitted him truly to work and be 'with' Germany in its most benighted hour. Having committed himself to 'being with' Germany in 1939, it was not an incomprehensible step to begin to 'work with' those who sought to remove the single force that was propelling Germany deeper and deeper into the mire.

Bonhoeffer was under no illusion that the death of Hitler would be the salvation of Germany: that would have been the fantasy of 'working for,' the presumption that he could have the fate of a nation in his own hands. What Bonhoeffer was seeking to do was to help Germany get to a place from which it could begin to row back from catastrophe, to prevent things continuing to get worse, to bring about circumstances in which sanity could begin to break through the storm clouds of demonic fanaticism. In this he saw himself in solidarity with a diverse group of people whom he regarded as representing the best in German character and spirit. For that reason, it is appropriate to see his efforts in the resistance as a humble identification 'with' Germany, rather than a high-handed action 'for' his nation. Like Jesus, he bore in his own body the sins of his people. He lived the logic of Christ's incarnation.

And that brings us to the third threshold Jesus crosses in John chapter 11: in verse 38 Jesus comes to Lazarus' tomb. It takes 38 verses of a 44-verse story for Jesus to reach Lazarus' tomb. Just as Bethany, in the persons of Mary and Martha, corresponds to Israel, so the tomb, the place of horror and of transformation, represents Jerusalem. Jesus says, 'Take away the stone.' Martha responds, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Jesus insists, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Martha wants there to be a way to redeem her brother that does not involve the stench. Jesus asks if she is serious about wanting to see the glory of God.

Bonhoeffer was kept in Tegel prison in the north west of Berlin from the day of his arrest, April 5 1943, until his transfer to Central Security Office in central Berlin on October 8 1944. In the summer of 1944 he had the opportunity to escape. But he didn't take it. That was his moment of facing the stench of the tomb, out of a deeper desire to see the glory of God.

The unexpected, absurdly unlucky, but nonetheless devastating failure of the plot to kill Hitler at his Wolf's Lair headquarters near Rastenburg in modern north-east Poland, on July 20 1944, was described by one observer as 'perhaps the most tragic day in modern German history.' It marks a turning point at least as significant as the fall of France. After the fall of Paris, it was clear no one could get rid of Hitler but the Germans themselves. After the failure of Claus von Stauffenberg's attempt on Hitler's life, it seemed that all who had plotted Hitler's downfall were set to be eliminated. Any hope for a solution to the demonic possession of Germany seemed at an end. Bonhoeffer's extended prison stay and delayed trial was predicated on the case against his brother-in-law, and beyond him the whole spider's web of officers that shielded the resistance under the pretext of military intelligence. But after July 20 1944, their exposure was no more than a matter of time. Thus Bonhoeffer began seriously to plan for escape, and persuaded his prison guard, Corporal Knobloch, to disappear with him while Bonhoeffer would don a mechanic's uniform procured by his family. The clothing was transferred on September 24 and the chaplain to the Swedish embassy was put on standby.

But on October 1 1944, just days before the planned escape, Klaus Bonhoeffer, Dietrich's brother, was arrested, along with several others whose involvement in the plot had been hidden until this point. Dietrich perceived that his window for escape had closed. Any adventure now would cast a shadow of guilt upon his brother and expose his parents and his young fiancée Maria to significant danger. Within 24 hours he informed Corporal Knobloch and, through him, his family, that there was to be no escape. Yet again 'with' had conquered 'for.' In this case 'with' meant his brother and his family and his fellow conspirators. We may look back and imagine what it could have meant if this great theologian and visionary German intellectual had escaped the demise of the German war effort, and what by this stage had become his almost inevitable death. The stench, to us, may seem unbearable. But Bonhoeffer withstood the stench. He was concerned to see the glory of God. He knew that when he would stand before the divine judgment seat he would face the question 'Where are the others?' If he was going to spend eternity with them, he had to be prepared to remain with those others now.

In *An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942–3* Bonhoeffer says, 'Christ withdrew from suffering until his hour had come; then he walked toward it in freedom, took hold, and overcame it. Christ ... experienced in his own body the whole suffering of all humanity as his own. ... We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer.' If one were to choose a title for a biography of Bonhoeffer, one could do worse than call it 'taking part in Christ's greatness of heart.' Here again the emphasis is profoundly on being 'with.'

The three key moments of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life are the places where the veil between heaven and earth is especially thin, and God's divinity is most evidently shown in his humanity. They are moments when Bonhoeffer's 'with' most aptly reflects Christ's 'with,' a 'with' that embodies God's being 'with' the world.