

## SERMON 3 SEPTEMBER 2017

In the 1930s, Germany was engulfed in enormous social, political and economic upheaval, led by the extraordinary personality of Adolf Hitler. He spoke into the shame that the country carried following their defeat in World War 1 and the break-up of their territory by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler appealed to nationalistic pride and preyed upon the country's weakness as he began to impose his ideas of racial superiority that would have such terrible consequences. It is still spine-chilling to listen to his powerful outbursts in speeches delivered to adoring throngs of thousands. Heil Hitler, with arms raised up. It is spine chilling to see echoes of that in the world today.

In 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young man of 27, gave up his academic career. He was one of the few who realised, even before Hitler came to power, that National Socialism was a brutal attempt to make history without God and found it solely the strength of people. By 1935 he was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church, the church that refused to acknowledge the Fuhrer, the "Lord". Friends managed to spare him from having to serve in the army, and Bonhoeffer and others ran a kind of underground seminary to train clergy. Young ministers came from all over the country to live together in community and learn what it meant to be disciples of Christ. Bonhoeffer himself became engaged to be married. He was very close to his family, his twin sister and three other brothers and three sisters. He spoke out against the new regime and was a marked man. He could have left the country and find safety. Indeed he did, for a while, go to UK and to US on the encouragement of friends who wanted to protect him. But he returned. He said that "Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this decision in security." He was arrested, along with his sister and her husband, at his parents' house in 1943.

In prison, he got permission to minister to the sick and his fellow prisoners. He brought great comfort to those who were sentenced to death every week by the military court. His

fellow prisoners were amazed at his calmness, even when explosions from bombing raids terrified many of those around him. His earned the respect of the prison guards. His writing from this time, which were smuggled out because the guards turned a blind eye, have had an impact on many, many people.

Even before this Bonhoeffer wrote about the cost of discipleship. I remember being deeply engaged by this book when I read it a long time ago now. I took it off the shelves this week when the reading from Matthew's gospel that we heard this morning brought it back to mind. It is both inspiring and challenging, as the gospel is and must be. It isn't easy. Bonhoeffer speaks of the costly grace that following Jesus asks us to trust. Too often we settle for cheap grace. Bonhoeffer describes this cheap grace as the enemy of the Church. He talks of it as grace without price; grace without cost. "We suppose that the account has been paid in advance; and because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing." And, later, "Cheap grace amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God."

This is not easy. Mostly we would like discipleship to be. Often we get used to our comfort but maybe also have a nagging awareness that the gospel is something more. Of course, the gospel brings us comfort and hope, the promise of life in all its fullness. But it cannot just be that dispensation of cheap grace. The world challenges us as we look around and see so much that is dark around us. Our own lives challenge us. Our lives can bring us pain and struggle. This is not life separate from the gospel. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Bonhoeffer says "The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world."

So how, in the apparent heaviness of all this, can we possibly take this on? It seems too much. What can it mean for us in our ordinary lives on the North Shore in Sydney, or wherever we are situated? Don't let's imagine that Bonhoeffer didn't wrestle with all of this, as we all do. His situation has given us a particular example of the cost of discipleship

and taking up his cross that brings Jesus' call somewhat closer to home. That call is not a demand. It is an invitation: "***If*** anyone wants to follow me..." There is always a choice. We all make choices, not always so clearly, every day of our lives. So let's think about what those choices are.

When we pause and think, the choice is about how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. We are all aware, I'm sure, about the pushes and pulls that go on inside us, because we cannot relate to other people without being even a little conscious of what others may think of us; of how, we may find we have very different opinions from someone else, disagreements perhaps about religion, about politics, here and overseas. Then we can feel a gut reaction as our buttons are pushed and sometimes it is hard not to get stirred up. I have found that happening a lot recently, and have become more and more impressed by those who show what is really meant by living non-violently, not reacting angrily when we feel threatened and so on. This is especially true when people fear losing control over a situation. Those who manage to speak peace in these times of quick over-reaction have a deep self-understanding and a hold on what is important. How our world needs that right now! Everyday, really, we are faced with choices about how we respond, be it about little things or big ones.

I have digressed like this because we are all made up of what Richard Rohr calls our False Self and our True Self. The false self is not all bad. It relates to our ego and we need our egos. It becomes false when it wants to hold us in self-protective security. We all need that security as we grow and it is what, hopefully, has given us necessary protection when we were young and vulnerable. But there comes a point at which, if we are to continue to grow, we have to risk the big world around us and all its challenges. This is a faith journey story, not just a psychological one. Some people find it much easier to turn back to the security of what they grew up with and these can become very fixed, well-defended ideas. The danger, obviously, is that they become limiting. But our false self likes that security. We can make quite a trite example if you like, as when we may really dislike the way someone puts the mugs away – topside up or down, because that is not what our mothers did. That

is a rather extreme example, but can you relate to that sort of thing? I can! On the other hand, our authentic self is the part of us that recognises a truth that addresses us more deeply, that carries with it a wisdom that holds true over the ages, that is connected to the common yearning of humanity for what is good and just and makes for peace for all, even if it questions how we are living. Richard Rohr says: “The True Self is always humble. It knows that we didn’t do it right and that it isn’t even about doing it right; it's just about doing it. Our True Self knows that everything belongs. That means holding together the good and the bad, the dark and the light, the sinner and the saint—which are two parts of me and two parts of everything. It is our participation in divinity which allows us to be this large.” Then “when we allow God to hold together the opposites within us, it becomes possible to do it over there in our neighbour and even our enemy.” This is all held within God’s forgiveness of us, which is about us also forgiving ourselves and others. It is costly grace. So, knowing that, accepting that, also carries with it an awareness that we are being called away from our false self and our egoistic leanings, and in that, we are being called to deny ourselves. It is life-giving denial. It is denying what is ultimately negative. It is not limiting.

This is a daily struggle for all of us, all the time. Who are we really? What is it that is real in me? Bonhoeffer knew this well. He wrote a poem from prison called “Who am I?”

*Who am I? They often tell me*

*I stepped from my cell’s confinement, calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a squire from his country house.*

*Who am I?*

*They often tell me I used to speak to my warders  
freely and friendly and clearly,  
as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I?*

*They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I really then that which other men tell of?*

*Or am I only what I myself know of myself?*

*Restless and longing, and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,  
yearning for colours, for flowers, for voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,  
tossing in expectation of great events,  
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.*

*Who am I? This or the Other?*

*Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?*

*Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?*

*Or is something within me still like a beaten army  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!*

How human is this struggle to follow, to deny oneself, to take up one's cross! But in this struggle, let us not allow the focus to be on the difficulty, the cost, the apparent negativity. Because that is not the real picture. The real picture is that discovering authentic life, uncovering and so, finding our soul, is to discover the source of joy. Joy that is not restricted by what is happening to us at any particular moment. It is joy that knows that grace is the incarnation of God, as Bonhoeffer expresses it. It is the knowledge that the yoke we take is not a yoke of weighty burden but of knowing that the weight is being shared, and we are being led, by the companion, by Christ, who is beside us along the way. When we make the choice to follow, we know that it puts us on a path that has no guarantee of ease and comfort, nor of escape from the realities of life. So many things around us these days seem to try to convince us that if we buy into this thing or that thing, we will find a lifestyle that comes with images of success and contentment and, yes, happiness. It is alluring. It is what, at one level, we would really like to have. But we also

know how fleeting and vulnerable these images, these lifestyles can be. The gospel offers us a different kind of choice, one that, yes, speaks of denying ourselves, but also brings together with our fellow pilgrims. We know we are sharing in the real struggles of life with one another in a way that tells the continuing story of God's grace and love. It is the story this conflicted world hungers to hear. We come together around a simple table that offers us nourishment born from the life-giving pain and victory of the cross and resurrection. We will continue to struggle with the tension of who we are, between the voice of our false self and the call of our true self. It's a personal struggle that no-one else knows about except God, and, as Bonhoeffer said, "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!". He knew what he was choosing each day. He chose to take up his cross. He was executed and lost his life. But he gained his soul and has continued, in the way of Jesus, to tell the story of the kind of life that understands authenticity and fullness and joy.