

A COURAGEOUS WITNESS

Tomorrow, April 9, will be a day quietly remembered by thousands of Christians. It was on this early spring day in April 1945, as allied forces were nearing the center of Nazi Germany, that the celebrated Lutheran Pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was brutally hanged by the Gestapo in the Flossenburg Concentration Camp. By any standard and by any creed, Bonhoeffer was a great witness to his faith and an advocate for human justice.

Bonhoeffer grew up in Germany and studied for the ministry in the Lutheran Church. As part of his theological preparation for ordination, he did some work at the Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan and lived and worked for a time in Harlem. Upon Bonhoeffer's return to Germany, Hitler was assuming power. Bonhoeffer was one of the few voices publically raised in challenge. Censured by the Gestapo who literally terminated a broadcast of one of his sermons in progress, Bonhoeffer continued to be a leader of the opposition and eventually, an active member of the underground German Resistance as well as a founder of the German Lutheran "Confessing Church". Yet, in the midst of this turmoil, he managed to write a number of influential and celebrated books, including "The Cost of Discipleship" and "Life Together".

By 1938, he had returned to New York City and escaped the crushing Nazi regime then tightly in control of all of central Europe. But in inner turmoil, he reconsidered and took the last ocean liner which sailed before the outbreak of the war, back to Germany. He wrote the great Professor Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Seminary, "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... Christians in Germany will have to 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 civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security."

With courage and conviction, and at obvious risk to himself and his family, he became a courier for the Resistance. He assisted groups of Jews to make their way over the Swiss border to safety. Eventually, his activities with the Resistance and in particular, his involvement in the attempted plot to assassinate Hitler were discovered and he spent the last 18 months of his life in prison. His courageous life was ended April 9, 1945, 66 years ago tomorrow.

Christians are soon to remember the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Jews are soon to commemorate the deliverance of the Children of Israel in the Passover observance. Both communities of faith will then pause at the end of April and recall how some 66 years ago, the death camps were liberated and the terrible dark truth which was the Holocaust was brought to light. We still live with these scars.

Some will say that all of this evil and suffering proves that there is no God; "How could a just God allow" innocent people to be exterminated on such a massive scale?" Of course, Christians will answer in faith, "This is the same loving and just God who allowed his son to die upon the cross". Dietrich Bonhoeffer was but one of the courageous witnesses. He knew all about the

“Cost of Discipleship”. He knew about evil. Like Jesus, he chose to confront the sin of the world with love. And like Jesus, he was killed in response.

Yet, as the weather turns to spring and life returns to the earth, so people of faith remember in these weeks that God has the final answer. Tyrants may have their season. But the power of sacrificial love will always triumph. Still, there is a precious cost to discipleship. We give thanks for those who have witnessed to their faith and who have paid the highest price. They inspire us and give us hope and courage to face our fears. May peace rest in the hearts of Jews and Christians as we gather to celebrate Passover and Easter. And may we claim and reclaim with courage our voices as witnesses for justice and peace.

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