

‘Blessed is the King’: Being Christ’s Body

14 April 2019

The final in a series of six Lent Addresses on Discipleship given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, during Lent 2019:

Prior Reading: *Luke 19.28-40*



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge

We are almost at the endpoint of our Lent journey. Jesus is about to enter the Holy City Jerusalem, there to complete his ministry on earth. Right from the beginning, Jesus had called women, men and children to follow him. And right from the beginning, he had told them that to follow where he called would entail suffering, rejection and death. In our reflections, we have seen how Christ calls people from their occupations, calls them from what it is that they do, to follow, and to enter with him into the way of the cross.

Everyone who follows, we reflected, had to make an active choice: hear Christ’s call to them, and obey it by leaving behind all and following, or hearing Christ’s call and remaining behind as Christ moves on to find and call others. This choice, we observed, was a free choice: each of those whom Christ encounters on the way and calls to follow him, has to make up their minds whether that call was right for them. We saw how many followed, giving up what they had in order to follow Jesus. At the same time we saw that some determined to stay behind, not risk responding to Christ’s unsettling call into an unknown future.

Those who did follow, followed knowing full well that Christ called them not to a life of holy introspection, but a life of active doing in his name. Very early on in their journeys with Jesus, those whom followed his call were told that the end-point of his journey and theirs would be a place of rejection and suffering. That, in following, they would face death. We reflected that this suffering would not be the honourable suffering that attracts the praise or pity of the world, but a suffering that was dishonourable, even disreputable. When Jesus calls women and men, he calls them to suffer rejection with him.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer told the students at his underground seminary in Finkenwalde in unambiguous terms that their own following in discipleship would mirror Christ's: 'Whenever Christ calls, his call leads us to death', he explained. The cross which is the endpoint of the journey of the One who calls, is also the endpoint of the journeys of all those who follow: 'The cross is not the terrible end of a happy, pious life', Bonhoeffer knows: 'instead it stands that the beginning of our community with Jesus Christ'. This is true for all followers, not only those who, like Bonhoeffer and his students, follow Christ in times of adversity: From the moment a person follows the call of Christ, they receive the cross: 'the cross is laid on each Christian'.

The first experience of suffering that those who are called experience, is the cutting of their accustomed ties, we learnt last week. Just as Peter, Andrew, James and John, the first to follow Christ's call, left behind their livelihood, property and families, so we all need to be ready to cutting of ties, or burning of bridges. 'The first Christ-suffering that everyone experiences is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world', Bonhoeffer tells. That severance of relationships and letting go of habits, the hating of anything and anyone who is not Christ, is in itself a form of dying. 'It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ', Bonhoeffer knows: 'Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying; such has been the case from the very beginning' (87).

Today's gospel reading takes us another step closer on that journey of 'living dying'. It takes us to the approach to Jerusalem where Jesus will face yet the harshest rejection by the authorities, where he will face arrest, a short and slanderous trial, and a long and cruel death. Jesus commands his disciples to prepare for his entry to Jerusalem. They bring a colt, clothe it with their garments, and 'set Jesus onto it'. As he is guided into the city, people spread their cloaks onto the dusty road to make a carpet of garments. And all his followers, all those whom he had called from their previous attachment to the world, hail him as their ruler. Here was the Christ, the One who 'comes in the name of the Lord'. Here was the One who by his acts of power gave glimpses in this life of the true nature of the life to come. Here was the One who would embrace rejection and suffering, and lay down his life so that all who hear his call would have life forever.

The disciples become joyful witnesses of Christ's works and call. As Jesus enters the Holy City on a carpet of garments, they publicly affirm their confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Promised One. Their song of praise makes an important distinction: in heaven Jesus will bring peace and glory, 'peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven', they sing, while on earth he will bring division and a sword. Bonhoeffer expressed it this way:

'That is the work of Christ on earth! No wonder that the world accuses him, who brought the love of God to the people, of hatred toward human beings! Who can claim the people's love and sacrifice so exclusively, if not the enemy of humanity or the Saviour of humanity? Who will carry the sword into their homes, if not the devil or Christ, the Prince of Peace?' For the authorities that will, only a moment later, demand that Jesus make his disciples stop their testimony, Christ is that enemy of humanity, because he calls people out of this world, freed them from the demands of this world by the sword that he brings.

At the decisive moment, as Jesus enters his own city, the disciples' testimony is to the kingdom and the life that lasts forever. They witness about what it has been like to follow Christ, to contend daily with evil and suffering, witness about what it has been like to see Christ bring justice and peace, healing and grace to those who sought him out. And the authorities demand that their voices be stilled: 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop', some Pharisees said to Jesus. But just as the daily struggle with the world is an integral part of the daily pattern of faithful discipleship, so the very fabric of the city is a living testament to the rejection of those sent there to save it: 'I tell you', Jesus responds to the Pharisees, 'if these were silent, the very stones would shout out'. The stones of the city by which the prophets had been slain, which had been soaked in the blood of faithful messengers of God, would testify to the call of Christ to turn from the ways of this world to the peace and glory, the freedom and sanctuary of heaven.

If these disciples were silent, the very stones would shout. But the disciples sing with confidence the song of Jesus' triumphal return to his own city. Because the final element of discipleship is one of

active witness. Disciples are called to witness proactively to the One who gave his life so that all may have life. Christ's disciples are called to witness to the One who gives them life by being life-givers to others. Bonhoeffer tells us that when we do what Christ calls us to do we become Christ-bearers to others: 'Those who carry Jesus' word receive one last promise for their work. They have become Christ's co-workers and helpmates. They are to be like Christ in all things. Thus, for the people to whom they go, they are also to be "like Christ."

When we witness to Christ through our words and actions, we bring Christ to the world, carry an inestimable gift to others. Disciples are 'bearers of Christ's presence', Bonhoeffer tells: 'They bring the people the most valuable gift, Jesus Christ, and with him, God, the Father, and that means forgiveness, salvation, life, blessedness. That is the reward and the fruit of their work and their suffering'. As disciples we are entrusted with showing forth the precious gift of Christ's own presence to our world, and we show forth that presence through our actions. We witness to the One who carries their cross by carrying one another's burdens, by sharing in shouldering the injustices others face, as well as by advocating and fighting on their behalf. And this aspect of witnessing has implications not only for life within the community of faith, but for life in the society in which we live, particularly if that society oppresses its members.

Bonhoeffer told his students at the Finkenwalde underground seminary: 'Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide them relief. Where the world subjects them to dishonour and insult, Christians will sacrifice their own honour in exchange for their disgrace. Where the world seeks gain, Christians will renounce it; where it exploits, they will let go; where it oppresses, they will stoop down and lift up the oppressed. Where the world denies justice, Christians will practice compassion; where it hides behind lies, they will speak out for those who cannot speak, and testify for the truth. For the sake of brothers or sisters—be they Jew or Greek, slave or free strong or weak, of noble or of common birth—Christians will renounce all community with the world, for they serve the community of the body of Jesus Christ. Being a part of this community, Christians cannot remain hidden from the world. They have been called out of the world and follow Christ' (236-237).

As followers of Jesus Christ, then, we cannot remain hidden, and leave the witnessing about the One who called us to the stones of Jerusalem. Nor can we leave the witnessing to the costliness of Christian discipleship to the war memorials of Flossenbürg and Buchenwald. It is true that all these places (and many more the world over) serve as silent witnesses to the personal sacrifice of those who followed in the footsteps of Christ. They testify to those who gave their lives, or of their lives, in order to carry the inestimable gift of Christ's presence into the suffering of our world. These stones will continue shout and witness when our own voices are silenced. But if we are serious about our Christian discipleship, then we also need to make our voices heard, need to speak out for those who have no voice, or whose voices are being silenced. And that means standing up to unjust structures and rulers, as well as serving and tending to those who have become victims of those structures or injustice.

At the time the Nazis took power in early 1933 Bonhoeffer expressed the church's obligation in this way: 'When the church witnesses that the state exercises too much or too little order and justice, it is placed in the position not only of having to bandage the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel, but to drive a spoke into the wheel itself'. He then elaborated how the church would need to resist injustice and oppression: 'There are three possibilities for action that the church can take vis-à-vis the state: first, questioning the state as to the legitimate state character of its actions, that is, making the state responsible for what it does. Second is service to the victims of the state's actions. The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community: "Let us work for the good of all." These are both ways in which the church, in its freedom, conducts itself in the interest of a free state. In times when the laws are changing, the church may under no circumstances neglect either of these duties. The third possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.'

I encourage you to reflect on three things this Holy Week:

- Firstly, how can you be a more effective witness to Jesus Christ? Do you feel confident enough to give an account of your followership of Jesus to others or are there more tools you need in order to speak of why you have chosen to respond to Christ's call? If so, what are they, and how could you develop those skills? Do you need to join a small or Bible Study group to enable you to speak with greater confidence in your witness to Jesus' transforming power in your lives?
- Secondly, how do you translate your words of witness into action? Are there things you need to be doing in bearing witness through your actions on behalf of your own community, or for others? How do you work for the good of all in your daily life? How will you endeavour to overcome evil with good? Are there causes your faith makes you passionate about, and what are you doing about them? How can your positive action underpin your witness?
- Finally, are there areas in our society where your witnessing to Christ leads you into opposition to the authorities, leads you to protest or resistance of injustice? What are the darkneses, the injustices of our age that you need to stand up for? How will you let your voice be heard in your advocacy, your protest, your intentional voting and campaigning? Bonhoeffer was part of a movement of resistance: are there others who can help your voice be heard better: interest groups that you can join in order to make your resistance of injustice more effective?

As he enters Jerusalem, in their song of praise the disciples bear witness how inextricably linked the realm of faith is with the affairs of our world. Heaven and earth are linked, they sing in their hymn 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven'.

In the same way in which his disciples witness to his deeds of liberating power, so Jesus will witness to them in the time of their trial and suffering. This is what true discipleship means: stand by Christ in his suffering. Stand by the members of the body of Christ in their suffering. The people who have heard and responded to his call, who have taken on their share of the cross in suffering and self-denial, who have confessed Jesus in this world, those are the people with whom Jesus will stand forever.

'Those who remain faithful to the word and the confession here will find that Jesus Christ will stand by them in the hour of judgement. He will know them and stand with them', Bonhoeffer encourages us on our own journeys of courageous following. When we live as disciples in this world, he will help us bear our burdens of faith-filled living and sacrificial action in this world. Bonhoeffer assures us that when we witness to Christ in this world, he will bear witness for us in the world to come: 'Those who have held onto Jesus in this life will find that Jesus will hold onto them in eternity'.

STUDY QUESTIONS

LENTEN STUDIES, STUDY SIX

Read Luke 19:28-40

1. Previously in his Gospel, Luke has made it clear that Jesus knew what his ultimate goal was although his disciples did not (see Luke 9:22; 44 – 45; 13:32-33; 17:25; 18:31-34)
 - (a) What was Jesus' goal? Consider how this goal must have made Jesus feel in the light of his obedience to his heavenly Father.
 - (b) If the disciples (both the inner group of 12 and the much wider group of those general followers of Jesus) had understood why Jesus had come to Jerusalem, do you think they would have reacted in the way that they did? Why or why not?

- (c) As 21st century disciples of Jesus, what can we learn from the example of Jesus in his determination to go to Jerusalem? How does this relate to Jesus' instruction that his disciples must take up their cross daily and follow him?
2. Why do you think the disciples who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem were so exuberant? (See Luke 7:22; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 17:11-19; 18:35-43)
 3. When the "Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem" of Jesus is discussed, people often contrast Jesus' entry with that of a mighty King who might ride a great stallion, and make the point that Jesus approached Jerusalem humbly. However, such a contrast is ill informed. See 1 Kings 1:33 which describes the coronation of Solomon, and 2 Kings 9:13. The song the people sang was actually part of Psalm 118 (see Psalm 118:26). Although the disciples did not understand why Jesus was riding into Jerusalem, what had they finally realised? (See Luke 1:32; 18:38-39) Why is this important for us who are Jesus' disciples today?
 4. In his sermon the Dean stated that *"the final element of discipleship is one of active witness."* He contended that this is why the disciples could not be silenced as the Pharisees had asked. The Dean further stated *"When we witness to Christ through our words and actions, we bring Christ to the world, carry an inestimable gift to others. ... As disciples we are entrusted with showing forth the precious gift of Christ's own presence to our world, and we show forth that presence through our actions. We witness to the One who carries their cross by carrying one another's burdens, by sharing in shouldering the injustices others face, as well as by advocacy and fighting on their behalf."*

How should we so witness, (a) as individually, and (b) as a church community?

Questions posed by the Dean at the end of his sermon for us to reflect upon during Holy Week:

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Prayer

*O God, the fountain of life, to a humanity parched with thirst you offer the living water that springs from the Rock, our Saviour Jesus Christ: stir up within your people the gift of your Spirit, that we may profess our faith with freshness and announce with joy the wonder of your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen***