

Christ Church Morningside SC003009 Lent 2 February 21st 2010
Jesus and Power Genesis 15, Psalm 27, Luke 13, Philipians 3.

When we hear the name Bonhoeffer, we probably see that plump-faced neatly dressed bespectacled martyr to the tyranny of the Nazi regime: a man worthy of our respect and admiration whose very human wish to have the cup taken from him, not to die, makes him more human. We tend to stop there, rather than go on to see that his humanity makes his faith, his courage, more of a challenge to ours.

But when I say he was born in Breslau, and was thus a Prussian, does the image change? Do we immediately, without thought, start ‘explaining away’ his virtue as something special, different from ‘other Prussians’ We’ll hit a problem if we do, because those killed after the failed 1944 plot against Hitler were also Prussian. Maybe we say, Bonhoeffer was a goodie, and so was Stauffenberg and von Moltke, and thus keep our prejudice intact. Or might we wake up and accept that each and every church, country, bank, political party is a motley assemblage of people: kindly, controlling, thoughtful, blunt, courageous, cowardly, and that each person here today has such aspects, worthy of respect and of reform, in their character and their life.

This issue comes up today in Luke. It wasn’t Jewish Galileans or Gentile Samaritans who warned Jesus: it was a group of Pharisees, those ‘wicked people’ who did him to death and who are usefully used to exemplify pure hypocrisy, just as we make Bonhoeffer exemplify pure courage. If we heard ‘Pharisee=Goodie’ as we listened, did we, would we, then say, ‘oh, they’d be the [only] good Pharisees.’ But what about Joseph of Aramithea, Nicodemus, Gamaliel? They were crucial to the life of Christ, and each was a Pharisee. What about Saul/Paul? He was too – and not just as Saul. Towards the end of his ministry, he still says, ‘I am a Pharisee.’ Added to those from today’s reading, that’s a fair few honourable and courageous Pharisees to challenge the category.

Thinking by categories, whether about people ‘like us’ just as about people ‘not like us’, is not *thinking*: it is rather conforming to received attitudes and giving in to mental sloppiness, uninformed worldly prejudice against which we are warned by Jesus. He did sometimes speak harshly of Pharisees- but in relation to particular ways in which they carried out their religious obligations, *not as a blanket dismissal of all aspects of their lives*. Paul didn’t talk scathingly about *all* members of the church in Philippi in the Epistle today. He picked out just those whose bragging behaviour, with thought neither for the morrow nor the needs of others today, rejected both locally appropriate *and* Christian rules of inter-personal conduct.

One outcome of such ‘thinking in categories’ is that we can either feel cockily comfortable because ‘the other’ is useless or, defining ourselves as hopeless and the other good, give up making any effort. But there *are* things we do and refrain from doing which go a fair way to building and re-finding our oneness with God, *and* things we do and refrain from doing which separate us. Each of us, anywhere, everyday. Yes, we know that. But it’s so easy to speak in categories – Pharisees are bad – and easy to overlook evidence to the contrary.

Is there an alternative? Well, given that thinking in categories is part of everyday behaviour, it’s rather demanding to pull ourselves up short and think of the individual person. It’s even more demanding to think of the right and wrong, the moral responsibility, in a particular act done by a group of people, by a person. Take the person with a permanent job, money, security who joins in mobbing an office colleague or by silence colludes in it. That person has a heavier responsibility for their sin- for sin it is – that the contract employee just beginning a job there, with

dependents and an empty bank account. She too may collude by silence from fear of losing her lifeline and thus sins – but she bears less moral responsibility than the well-heeled sinner. As the Pharisees spoke up for Jesus, so too did Rosa Parks of Alabama for the human rights of black people in the USA of the 1960s. This poor black woman, like Bonhoeffer, decided to oppose authority: she acted with shocking courage by refusing to stand up for a white person on the bus.

How do *we* find the strength to reflect honestly on our choices, not to follow like sheep in thinking in categories, not to hide under the shelter of a potentially amoral category: good disciples, bad Pharisees, good Christians, bad or sad atheists, and so on. Well, look to the Psalm for a start! David, as usual, was in a bit of a pickle – so he's a useful image for us! He feels got at and is trying to find courage. And in verse 4 (in the Jewish translation) he says 'One thing I ask of the Lord, *only* that do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life: to be accepted, to be sheltered in his pavilion...' And it ends, 'Look to the Lord, be strong and of great courage.' Look for the Lord: that doesn't mean 'business as usual,' but grasping what that shelter is and the consequences of accepting the hospitality of God.

God *will* shelter us in his house, says the psalmist – and an even more vivid image of cossetting loving care is given in the Gospel. Jesus wants to embrace all the people of Jerusalem in the same way that a hen rounds up her chicks under her wing – but some scurry away from that embrace. Jesus uses that female image for himself in this verse, the only time hens are mentioned in the entire Bible, and the image of Jesus as mother was an everyday one in medieval times.

If we listen, if we acknowledge he is the one who came, who comes, who will come, Christ will indeed enfold us, he will guide us over the busy roads of life, past the fangs of the foxes wielding power for their own benefit: he will lead us to the solid foundation of a life lived in faith hope and love. Yet even given that security, each of us knows that we too wield power, do wrong, for our own benefit.

In this Lent season, let us think not of simple categories: wicked Herod and good us, hypocritical Pharisee and good us. Rather let us know that each person has the capacity for abuse and for assistance, for cruelty and kindness: each person is both saint and sinner. Christ offers us shelter under his wings, in his hen-coop. If we take up that offer, it surely demands that we see others not in crude and limiting categories, but in their individuality – as we would have others see us. Let us make the effort *to know and live with and to live out knowing* that we are all equal children of God.

Elizabeth Koepping