

Tyndale Thought for the Day

Maundy Thursday, 9th April 2020



This year Maundy Thursday coincides with the 75th anniversary of the death of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. On this date, 9th April 1945, he with six others who had participated in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler was hanged with prolonged barbarity at Flossenbürg concentration camp. Had he been spared until VE-Day barely a month later, no doubt Bonhoeffer would have been honoured in the post-war world like other Christians such as Martin Niemöller who had opposed Hitler but had survived. Instead, God allowed him the uniquely tragic yet triumphant honour of joining “the noble army of martyrs”.

Aged just 39 at his death, as well as his example of courage and sacrifice Bonhoeffer left a rich legacy of challenging thought and insight into what it means to be faithfully Christian and truly human in the modern world. He was executed as a traitor to his country and the state. He was indeed a traitor, but only because his ultimate loyalty was to Jesus Christ, king of kings and lord of lords, not to Hitler or any other earthly ruler, and it was out of true love for his country and his desire to rid it of its shame that he was prepared to die. His example still questions us about our own priorities in our public and national life. Further, throughout his writings, and especially in the secret letters he wrote in prison, he warned of the dangers in “religion”. Religion seeks to use God for our own personal or national interests, or only as a stop-gap when things go wrong, or only as a final hope in another world. Jesus, said Bonhoeffer, doesn’t call us to religion but to life: life here and now, right in the midst of life’s joys and responsibilities, perplexities and sorrows, the life for God and for others, the way of the cross, the way to resurrection.

On Maundy Thursday, we remember how, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God (John 13:3), Jesus nevertheless didn’t look for privileges or guarantees of preservation. Instead, he took a towel and knelt to wash his disciples’ feet. That was a summing up of his life’s ministry, and of the way forward for his disciples. We never know just where that journey will lead us. For Bonhoeffer it led to the gallows at Flossenbürg, which, in his last known words, was yet for him “the beginning of life”. The church, he wrote in prison, is truly church when it exists for others. Or, as we would say at Tyndale, open to God, open for all. Let us be inspired to continue exploring what that means.

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