

Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
St. Thomas the Apostle Church – West Springfield, Massachusetts
August 18, 2019



Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 ✕ Psalm 40:2-4, 18 ✕ Hebrews 12:1-4 ✕ Luke 12:49-53

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a professor of theology at the University of Berlin in Germany in 1930's. At this time, German Christians were divided over Hitler. One group allied themselves with Hitler; they wanted a "pure" German nation. They formed an official German church, which supported Hitler and banned Jews from holding official positions in the church.

Bonhoeffer was among those who could not go along with Hitler's anti-Jewish and radical vision. With others, he set up an underground church, which explicitly refused to ally itself to Hitler's Third Reich vision. It was dangerous.

Eventually, he fled to London. Two years later he was faced with a choice: He was offered one of the most prestigious theology appointments in the world – lecturing at Union Seminary in New York - or returning to Germany to head up an illegal, underground seminary for the churches who refused to go along with Hitler.

He chose New York but, shortly after he arrived, he regretted his decision. He decided his faith was meaningless if he took the easy option. So, he headed back to Germany and found Hitler so evil that he abandoned his commitment to non-violence and got involved in a group that was related to multiple plots to assassinate Hitler. The plots failed and, in 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested.

In prison he led worship services for his fellow prisoners, until April 9, 1945, when he was executed by the Nazis.

Throughout his final years, what distressed Bonhoeffer most was the way so many Christians could sell out to Hitler's evil vision. He wondered, how people who claimed the name of

Christian so betray Christ. How could they pray in a church that banned Jews from holding office?

It convinced Bonhoeffer that religiosity, in and of itself, was worthless. It didn't matter how fervently a person believed in Jesus, how many times each day they prayed, how earnestly and sincerely they sang hymns on Sundays. In the end, the measure of spirituality is not how we are in the church but how we are in the whole of life. In the end the measure of spirituality is to live in the world as a man or woman who is for others.

The true disciple is the one who mirrors the vision of Christ in today's Gospel reading. The true disciple, in the best sense of the term, is one who stands apart from the whims and demands of society and stands by the truth of the Gospel. To live by the Gospel has always been a contradiction to society and that's why it has always been very demanding. The person with great integrity of faith is the one who can stand by that Gospel regardless of what society says and regardless of outside pressures.

The Gospel has never been easy to follow. It has always been difficult, and God knows this. But this is the life that we are called to live. It is the Gospel to which we are called to give witness, by our words and actions. It is the Gospel that leads us to everlasting life.

As we pray to God this day, let us pray for the courage and the stamina it takes to truly lead a Gospel life, that by our lives, we may lead others to the message and the kingdom and the glory of God. ✕