

One of the famous quotes from the Lutheran Pastor and Holocaust victim Dietrich Bonhoeffer was: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He might have been thinking about this when another German pastor, Hermann Gruner once said: "The time is fulfilled for the German people of Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. ... Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ." Another pastor put it more succinctly: "Christ has come to us through Adolph Hitler."

So despondent had been the German people after the defeat of World War I and the subsequent economic depression that the charismatic Hitler appeared to be the nation's answer to prayer—at least to most Germans. One exception was theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was determined not only to refute this idea but also to topple Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was not raised in a particularly radical environment. He was born into an aristocratic family. His mother was daughter of the preacher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and his father was a prominent neurologist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin.

All eight children were raised in a liberal, nominally religious environment and were encouraged to dabble in great literature and the fine arts. Bonhoeffer's skill at the piano, in fact, led some in his family to believe he was headed for a career in music. When at age 14, Dietrich announced he intended to become a minister and theologian, the family was not pleased.

Bonhoeffer graduated from the University of Berlin in 1927, at age 21, and then spent some months in Spain as an assistant pastor to a German congregation. Then it was back to Germany to write a dissertation, which would grant him the right to a university appointment. He then spent a year in America, at New York's Union Theological Seminary, before returning to the post of lecturer at the University of Berlin. During these years, Hitler rose in power, becoming chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and president a year and a half later. Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions intensified—as did his opposition, which included the likes of theologian Karl Barth, pastor Martin Niemoller, and the young Bonhoeffer. Together with other pastors and theologians, they organized the Confessing Church, which announced publicly in its Barmen Declaration (1934) its allegiance first to Jesus Christ: "We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, personalities and truths as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God. ... "

In the meantime, Bonhoeffer had written *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), a call to more faithful and radical obedience to Christ and a severe rebuke of what he called comfortable Christianity. As he put it: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

On November 9, 1938, when the synagogues burned throughout Germany, Bonhoeffer was with students in the hinterlands of Pomerania. Only a telephone call the next day alerted them to what had happened; Bonhoeffer immediately traveled to Berlin to learn more details. Upon his return, his students began debating the theological significance of the Kristallnacht. As one later recalled, several of the students "spoke of the curse which had haunted the Jews since Jesus' death on the cross." Bonhoeffer rejected this vehemently, stating that the pogrom was a case of "sheer violence" that only revealed Nazism's "godless face."

During this time, Bonhoeffer was teaching pastors in an underground seminary, Finkenwalde (the government had banned him from teaching openly). But after the seminary was discovered and closed, he came to the US for a short while for study, but he quickly felt he needed to return home. In his words: I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. . . I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the trials of this time with my people. His return to Germany in July 1939 marked a new stage in his life: active resistance.

In October 1940, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began work as an agent for Military Intelligence, supposedly using his ecumenical contacts to help the cause of the Reich. In reality, he used his contacts to spread information about the resistance movement. In trips to Italy, Switzerland, and Scandinavia in 1941 and 1942, he informed them of resistance activities and tried, in turn, to gain foreign support for the German resistance. And he continued to help Jews.

On September 5, 1941, all Jews in the Reich were ordered to wear the yellow star; the first deportations to the East from Berlin occurred on October 15. On October 17 or 18, Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Perels, a Confessing Church lawyer, wrote a memo giving details of these first deportations.¹⁷ The memo was sent to trusted German military officials in the hope that it might move them to action, as well as to ecumenical contacts and the U.S. State Department.

He helped with a plan that was conceived to get Jews out of Germany by giving them papers as foreign agents. The plan was not that far-fetched: in several cases, Nazi intelligence offices had used Jewish agents as a cover. There was also a steady underground business that helped Jews emigrate in exchange for large sums of money.

The resulting operation, called "Operation Seven," eventually spirited fourteen Jews out to Switzerland (eleven had converted to Christianity; three had not). But he was caught, arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943.

Bonhoeffer was charged with conspiring to rescue Jews; of using his travels abroad for non-intelligence matters; and of misusing his intelligence position to keep Confessing Church pastors out of the military and for his own ecumenical work.

In October 1944, Bonhoeffer was moved to the dreaded Gestapo prison in Berlin; in February 1945, he was taken to Buchenwald. He was then moved to the Flossenbürg concentration camp where, on April 9, he was hanged, together with Canaris, Oster, and other conspirators. Hans von Dohnanyi and Klaus Bonhoeffer were executed days later.

The SS doctor who witnessed Bonhoeffer's death later recalled a man "devout . . . brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds . . . I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God." Bonhoeffer sent one final message, to George Bell in England: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

In a letter, he asked the question "Who Stands Firm?" The answer:

Only the one for whom the final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these, when in faith and sole allegiance to God he is called to obedient and responsible action: the responsible person, whose life will be nothing but an answer to God's question and call.

Like him, we are given the same call, for we too our a prophet. And the challenge for us is are we willing to suffer for the sake of the Gospel when it means doing the right thing and being a sign of good in the world, or do we just want to go along with the crowd and never rock the boat?

The readings this week are rather disquieting, because they have the same message, namely that if you are on fire for the faith and trying to do the right thing and living as God has shown us, inevitably this will entail conflict. And this is because throughout history, the world has been hostile to the message of our faith.

In the first reading, Jeremiah is told by God to tell the Israelites to surrender to Babylon. The kings advisors want none of this, understandably so for their impression is hey we are the people who had the warrior God who led them out of Egypt. He's hated by everyone. His thanks is to get tossed into a cistern and left for dead.

In the Gospel, Jesus says He has come to set the earth on fire and He wishes that it were already ablaze. What He's talking about is the kind of fire that can destroy, but also lead to new life. On my first trip to Glacier National Park about 8 years ago I was on a ranger led hike and the ranger pointed out that the trees we were looking at in one section looked nice, but that actually we were in a "sick" part of the forest, meaning they actually needed a forest fire in that section at some point for new growth to emerge. In fact sometimes this is why there are things like controlled burns. From the fire the old is destroyed and the new can emerge clearing out the dead wood. But this can only be done through pain and challenge; as such Jesus says bringing His message into the world causes division, even within families. Jesus had to destroy certain things and clear some things out with the wrong understandings of God's law. Ultimately He was killed for it. And we will suffer too, perhaps not martyrdom, but we will suffer when we stand for what is right.

So what are we to do?

The first is accept that the virtue of fortitude is something we all are called to embrace. We have to ask ourselves do we stand for something, namely the teachings of our faith. Are we willing to be an apologist, one who defends and explains the faith? Do we have as our ultimate desire to get to heaven and do we will this for others more than anything else? If the answer to that is “yes,” it means that we have to talk more about sports and the weather.

Second, once we’ve said yes, I accept my role as a prophet, it means living out that role whenever it comes along. Every parent knows this; there’s a point where you have to say “no” and a child might not like that as they are growing up, but the parent is trying to help a child learn the things that will ultimately help them reach their potential and make them better. All of us are children growing up spiritually into sainthood. It’s a process. And all of us, whether we go to Mass not at all or every day, are prone to falling along the way, or being misinformed. This means when we are in a situation, from being concerned about someones marriage or behavior, or at a dinner party or function where a person is talking about things contrary to the faith such as being supportive of abortion, euthanasia, or using racist language towards people or talking about how they hate immigrants, whatever it might be, we need to take a stand.

Third, the question then is how do you take that stand, and this is where we use the law of gradualism, not gradualism of the law. The point is that being a prophet isn’t walking around with a bell crying “shame, shame, shame.” The prophet needs to be clever, and meet people where they are at. Think of Jesus and the woman at the well; meeting her, talking to her, gradually bringing her along so she sees the mistakes she’s made and helping her to make that choice to change. This is the hard part in today’s world where people love to shout and yell and get on social media. We need to be comfortable arguing and having a discussion. We have to know what we are talking about and study our faith. We have to be patient and know that it takes time to bring people along. We have to pray for ourselves and for one another during the process too. It takes time, but when we aren’t afraid to speak up for what we believe in and then engage people in explaining why we feel so strongly, we can see true spiritual growth.

Lastly, we have to be willing to be hated. We hear the word “tolerance” thrown around a lot, but sometimes those who use the term only mean it applies to people who share their worldview. So much of what we believe as Christians is counter-cultural up and down through the ages. And when we are saying “this is wrong,” whether it’s to a family member making a bad moral choice talking on social media or face to face with people about a Church position in a culture of moral relativism, some out there will hate us and vilify us. But what is our goal? To win a popularity contest and not rock the boat and be liked, or to get to heaven and help others to do the same?

All of us want to get to heaven. And if you’re here tonight you said yes to being a Christian. But no matter what our vocation, that also entails saying yes to being a prophet, which can be incredibly costly and painful. But at the end of the day, when we

are willing to be a prophet and also listen to the prophets who challenge us, what we'll find is that the fire that was set in our souls and we set in the souls of one another did so much to pave the way for true spiritual growth - so let's not be afraid to light the match.