

Appeal to Bonhoeffer Conference - Help us face the reality of sin in society

A homily delivered to the International Bonhoeffer Congress at the Stellenbosch United Church on 19th January 2020

John 1: 29-34

May I speak in the name of God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Fellow students of the Gospel;
Sisters and brothers in Christ;

Good evening! And to those who have travelled here from afar, welcome to our country!

It is a great honour for me to have been invited to speak at this 13th International Bonhoeffer Congress, hosted and organised here at Stellenbosch and the University of the Western Cape.



Bonhoeffer statue at Westminster Abbey

You will, I hope, find as scholars in your particular field that our welcome is especially warm. This is because Dietrich Bonhoeffer – as one whose theology was centred on the fact that Christ is the one in whom the world and God are reconciled,

as one who presented a suffering God, and as one who was disillusioned by the weakness of the church in challenging the status quo – for all these reasons and more, Bonhoeffer has inspired and continues to inspire Christians in South Africa. Our excitement at you bringing your conference here this year reflects our reverence and deep gratitude for the life and witness of this extraordinary Christian and human being.

I have to admit being nervous about addressing such a distinguished and expert audience on what Bonhoeffer has meant to us and, as I will argue, what Bonhoeffer should continue to mean to us. Just looking at our own John de Gruchy, I question what I can say that is of value to you. As the British say, me telling all of you about Bonhoeffer is a bit like teaching one's grandmother to suck eggs.

But let me put that nervousness behind me and tell you why, as a practitioner of our faith on the coalface, as someone exposed on a daily basis to the everyday challenges, problems and opportunities experienced by ordinary South Africans, I believe that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology can indeed help us to discern, as your conference theme says, "How the coming generation is to go on living".

Let me say at the outset that – as I have said at Stellenbosch before – I speak simply as someone who is a Christian and remains a Christian because our faith begins with a young Palestinian on a donkey. I expressed it this way in a memoir I have written about my ministry to Nelson Mandela in his last days:

"... [S]ince Roman times we have perverted the Word and the mission of Jesus Christ, and its message about what God is up to in our world. Over the centuries we've allowed ourselves to be pointed to imperial agendas. Christ's message has been attached to national flags, to military might and to the AK-47."

To that I might add, Christ's mission was perverted by the German Christians of the 1930s and 1940s, and by those who found theological justification for apartheid. However, as I continued in my memoir:

"But that is not the Gospel. Christianity is not imperialism. Christianity is not colonialism."

To that I would also add: Christianity is not National Socialist ideology. Christianity is not apartheid.

For me, my own life and faith experience – including all I know and have read about Dietrich Bonhoeffer – tells me that:

"Christianity is how do I love my neighbour as myself and as others. The man who links us to God is he who enters Jerusalem a nonentity, riding a borrowed donkey. He is humble and he is marginalised but his message of love and simplicity is powerful; powerful enough to challenge the perversion of common humanity that empire engenders."

You've all no doubt heard before of the areas in which South Africans identify with Bonhoeffer's ideas:

- Of how the concept of a *status confessionis*, retrieved by Bonhoeffer, became central to the South African Reformed churches' rejection of apartheid in the 1980s.
- Of how Bonhoeffer's willingness to join a plot against Hitler's life resonated in the debate in South Africa whether taking up arms against the apartheid regime was justified.
- Of how strongly South Africans have identified with Bonhoeffer's contrast of "cheap grace" with "costly grace". (As John de Gruchy has written, "This contrast, perhaps more than anything else in Bonhoeffer's writings, provided the language we... have so often used to distinguish between the costly reconciliation of restored justice, and cheap reconciliation without justice.")
- And you've heard of our explorations of how Bonhoeffer's emphasis on, as Nico Koopman has described it, "the communal character of humanity" can help us renew and enhance ubuntu.

But what I want to highlight tonight is the relevance of Bonhoeffer's work on forgiveness to "how the coming generation is to go on living..."

You don't have to visit South Africa for very long today, especially on university campuses, to learn that forgiveness and reconciliation have become discredited concepts for many. Nelson Mandela is seen as having sold out to white interests and having failed to take those oppressed under apartheid into the Promised Land.

In response I have argued that when Mandela began negotiations for bringing about democracy, our country was at war, our liberation armies had no prospect of imminent victory, and that if we had not compromised by reaching a negotiated settlement, the civil war would have intensified. As a result many of those now criticising their fathers' and mothers' generation would probably not have been alive to do so.

But that doesn't take away from the fact that we have one of the most unequal societies in the world today. The analyst and writer Moeletsi Mbeki has calculated that only 12 percent of South Africans of working age earn more than 800 US dollars a month. Of the rest, 38 percent are blue collar workers earning less than that. And fully 50 percent – half of those of working age – comprise the unemployed and what he calls an "underclass".

That is an unsustainable situation, and although we can blame our government for many failures, we also have to acknowledge that a large part of the problem is that our society has indulged in what Bonhoeffer has referred to "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance..." Apartheid was a sin, but too many of those who implemented it or benefitted from it have tried to get away with "cheap grace", and with holding onto the privileges which the transfer of wealth across generations endows them with.

Listen to these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted by Gregory Jones, dean of the Duke Divinity School in the United States in his book, *Embodying Forgiveness*:

"[T]he preaching of forgiveness must always go hand in hand with the preaching of

repentance, the preaching of the gospel with the preaching of the law. Nor can the forgiveness of sin be unconditional – sometimes sin must be retained. It is the will of the Lord himself that the gospel should not be given to the dogs. He too held that the only way to safeguard the gospel of forgiveness was by preaching repentance. If the Church refuses to face the stern reality of sin, it will gain no credence when it talks of forgiveness. Such a Church sins against its sacred trust and walks unworthily of the gospel. It is an unholy Church, squandering the precious treasure of the Lord's forgiveness."

As you meet this week to reflect on Bonhoeffer's life, his work and his theology, and ponder ways in which generations to come can fulfil his dream of a society that is Christ-like, I appeal to you: please help us. Please help South Africa at this critical time in our history.

We need you, our theologians, to help us face up to the stern reality of sin in our society. We need you to help us preach repentance. We need you to help us to work out what that means in practical steps so that we transform our society to fulfill the vision of Jesus promised in John's Gospel – that "I came so that you may have life and have it in abundance."

Will you help us do that?

Allow me to conclude this focus on Dietrich Bonhoeffer by weaving in the core of the lessons set down in our lectionary for today. How do we describe our identity in Christ, and what are the values that characterise our lives and witness?

The humility of John the Baptist, his clarity in pointing others to Christ and his witness to who Christ was, and is for us today, set before us a vital example to us as we are called to account before God for how we live out our faith. And Paul's message to the spiritually arrogant Corinthians is relevant for us if we are to speak with confidence and authority to erring followers of Jesus today. Like Isaiah, we are called to acknowledge our inadequacy and recognise the power of being able to draw on God's strength as we embark on his mission to restore the world.

What is our clear message today? Does God's message of salvation ring true against unjust structures, arrogant leaders and spiritually inept and arrogant churches? In our current context in South Africa, I believe we as church leaders are called to challenge church and society to come out in active opposition to the forces of greed and what we call "state capture" in order to prevent our country from sliding into economic ruin. In my Christmas sermon, I said I hoped 2020 would be the "year of the orange jumpsuits" – the year in which those who drove our country to the brink of disaster – will start going to prison. In the coming weeks, we hope that in his annual State of the Nation address, our president, President Ramaphosa, will give us a clearer vision of how he intends to deal with the erring politicians and civil servants – as well as the business people who corrupted them – who as we speak are conducting a fight-back to try to defeat our efforts to root out corruption.

Let us all renew our vocations and, like John, give a bold, united witness and testify that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world; that we did not know him, nor have we seen him, but we nevertheless believe in him and seek to be in alignment with and intimate with him in our prophetic ministry.

Congratulations on the successful preparations for this 13th International Bonhoeffer Congress and I wish you the best of times together.

God loves you and so do I.

Amen