

13th Sunday after Trinity – St Andrew's Church – Year A – Matthew 16:21-end

'From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering'. In domine...

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters from Prison* are what I found myself reading during the early part of the summer...The nature of my holidays, with children like mine, means poolside novel reading is something of a fantasy. Instead this is what I stumbled across on the bookshelves where we were staying at 6am when all was quiet before anyone else woke up...

At the beginning of WW2, Bonhoeffer was in New York, exploring whether he should stay there as a lecturer and pastor to German emigrants. He'd made himself deeply unpopular with the German regime being publicly critical of Hitler and running a secret training institution for pastors in Germany.

After an exhausting inner struggle, Bonhoeffer decided to travel back to Germany knowing he was returning to real danger. Six years later he was executed. He'd left behind the chance of a quiet life instead getting involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler, living as a double agent, risking arrest, torture and death. Just a couple of years before this struggle, in his work *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote these words...*'When Christ calls a man, he bids him 'come and die''*.

Bonhoeffer's story was one of suffering; the suffering that came as a consequence of the choices he made to remain faithful, the suffering he endured and the suffering he could not simply choose to ignore. His *Letters* – which have been described as *'one of the greatest treasures of modern Christianity'* (RW – Luminaries) speak often about freedom but for him, freedom was never an escape from suffering. It was bound up with the demands of following Jesus – with discipline, action, suffering and ultimately death (*Stages on the Road to Freedom*).

For Bonhoeffer faithfulness did not mean being kept safe. It meant being willing to remain with Christ, and with others, in the midst of hardship and trial. This did not mean that suffering itself was somehow good, or that Christians should accept injustice passively. But suffering can become the place where faithfulness, solidarity and trust in God are tested and lived out.

The question as to why God allows suffering is hardly original. In the midst of pain, it will never be satisfied with easy answers. Today we pray for all those affected by the terrible suffering being experienced in Nepal in recent days. We will all know people personally suffering in different ways; friends, family members, colleagues. Perhaps a recent diagnosis or bereavement or a relationship breakdown. We know too that so often, at such times, we are called to walk alongside others rather than offer what can sound like trite explanations. Perhaps just as deep a mystery is how in the midst of awful suffering, people like Bonhoeffer and others are able to maintain and even deepen their faith and profess experience of profound closeness with God. Bonhoeffer's witness demonstrates that suffering can become a place where faithfulness, solidarity with others and trust in God are lived out.

In our gospel, Peter cannot countenance the idea that Jesus could undergo great suffering and be killed. Notice he has been told by Jesus that he will be raised and yet it's the idea of his Lord suffering that Peter cannot bear – *'this must never happen to you'*. But in a stern rebuke, Jesus suggests Peter's attitude, his desire to protect Jesus, is a stumbling block – *'Get behind me Satan'*.

It was clearly an exchange of significance. Only if the gospel writers were quoting a confident oral tradition of the early church could they dare to label the rock on which Christ builds his Church the devil himself – *'for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'*...*'When Christ calls a man, he bids him 'come and die''*. The cross isn't an invitation to

seek misery but the willingness to stop making the preservation of our own comfort, safety and life the ultimate goal.

Following Jesus – taking up our cross – does not mean being protected from hardship, but being willing to bear the cost of faithfulness. When suffering comes as the cost of love, discipleship and living faithfully for others and so for God it need not be meaningless.

Despite facing isolation, uncertainty and death, Bonhoeffer continued to show concern for his family, friends and fellow prisoners. He wrote prayers and poetry for them. He sought to reassure them and comfort them. In his mind, the Christian life was lived *'for others'*. Just a few months before his death he wrote to his mother – *'I want you to know that I am constantly thinking of you and father every day, and that I thank God for all that you are to me and the whole family...thank you for all the love that has come to me in my cell...and has made every day easier for me...with most loving wishes dear, dear mother for a happy birthday'*.

For Bonhoeffer, suffering became an opportunity to remain committed to others and a sharing in the life and suffering of Christ. He wrestled honestly with fear, death, uncertainty and the reality of evil, while continuing to place his hope in Jesus. Christian hope is not dependent upon favourable circumstances or the immediate removal of suffering. Instead it rests upon the belief that Christ remains present even in the darkest circumstances and that suffering and death do not have the final word. It can neither be romanticised or explained away but can point us towards the hope we find in Jesus. Perhaps we only ever truly come close to understanding this in the midst of it. No sermon or theological rationale can do the job. Instead we look towards the lives of those like Bonhoeffer's. Extraordinary witness and faith that can inspire us to the very end. We don't follow Jesus because he promises to keep us from suffering. We follow Him because he promises to be with us and because his way of love is worth following even when it costs us. Amen.