



AIM What will our response to the Lord be?

Introduction

When the Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer left Germany for America in 1939, he did not expect to return. His homeland was heading inexorably towards war under the tyranny of the Nazi regime. Yet scarcely had Bonhoeffer crossed the Atlantic, when he was gripped by the conviction that Christ was calling him back, to "share the trials" of his countrymen. Bonhoeffer had no illusions about the cost of his discipleship as he returned to Germany. As a conscientious objector who served the Prince of Peace and opposed Hitler's rule of violence and injustice, he suffered imprisonment and was eventually executed. Yet in these circumstances, his Christian life made a profound impact. A fellow prisoner in Buchenwald described how Bonhoeffer's "soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison...he seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness". Bonhoeffer's humble confidence of his place in Christ's loving purposes kept him steadfast in hope, and he died at peace as one who had run the race of faith to the end.

Presentation

When Jesus called Peter, he responded immediately, leaving his life as a fisherman in the family business by Lake Galilee. Yet the insecurities of life on the road made discipleship feel difficult. Peter's losses in this world felt real, whilst the gains of the kingdom seemed elusive. What, he asked Christ, was for him when he had left everything he knew and owned behind?

Paul was already on the road when he encountered Christ. His call also involved change and loss, from the status of his scholarly Jewish pedigree, to the lowly life of a travelling apostle; from wielding power against Christians, to losing face by joining them in proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Such changes were especially challenging for Paul: He had been so sure he was doing God's will by hounding these followers of a "false Messiah". But Jesus warns against making assumptions about people's eternal destiny based on human values and judgements. Paul assumed he was one of God's foremost: he tells the Galatians he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his peers. Yet his confidence in his religious authority was cut to shreds when Jesus revealed himself as the true Messiah on the Damascus road. His command now evaporated, Paul had to be led into the city, blind, powerless and humbled. And he ended up preaching the gospel – the last message he had planned to proclaim when setting out from Jerusalem 150 miles away. Paul would travel many more miles on different roads, spreading the word he once strove to silence, and it would mean further suffering for his faith, as Paul was uprooted from his background to become rooted in Christ and his call.

Only knowing Jesus and trusting in his wider purposes could sustain Paul in such circumstances: in Galatians he talks of God having set him apart for his task at birth and Jesus reigns over our future as well as our past: in our passage he declares that for those who put him first, the priceless gift of eternal life is assured.

There are three conversations in today's reading from Acts. Firstly, the exchange between Saul and Jesus. Next, God talks to Ananias, telling him to go and find Saul, who is recovering from the shock of his encounter with Christ. Finally, the conversation between Ananias and Saul is a moving account of one man acting in faith to help another. Saul, who was once so powerful and purposeful, is reduced to speechlessness and sightlessness, a position of real humility, having to be helped.

Today's Old Testament reading also consists of a conversation – this time between the Lord and the prophet Jeremiah. When Jeremiah protests that he is only a boy, God gently chastises him, reassuring him of his destiny as a great ruler.

Have you ever noticed how much of the Bible portrays people connecting and communicating with one another, and with God? Each of today's readings contains at least one exchange between God and a human – and it's generally a

human in need of reassurance. In Matthew, we find a conversation between Jesus and Peter. Actually, it follows on the heels of another well-known conversation – the one between Jesus and the rich young man, whose wealth is a stumbling block to discipleship.

Nowadays, we are used to the idea of virtuous poverty, but for the disciples, living in a culture where wealth was equated with virtue, this idea was astounding. So you can imagine that today's Gospel reading opens with a stunned silence as the young man walks sadly away. Nobody really knows what to say. Then as so often, with his knack of saying what everyone is probably thinking, Peter pipes up: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" This prompts Jesus' reply. While reassuring, at the same time he pulls no punches. Discipleship is costly, he says, but the rewards are incalculable.

The conversion of the anti-Christian zealot, Saul, to the prophet of Christ, Paul, is clearly related in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles but it has to be remembered that this was a beginning. Saul took some time to become Paul and some time to begin to understand that his call to preach – to Jew and Gentile – the saving power of Jesus, the Son of God, was something that was a whole life's journey for him. Paul says in his letter to the church at Galatia, "God set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace....Three years after (the Damascus Road conversion) I went up to Jerusalem." The preparation for this moment of his conversion was his whole life. This feast has been celebrated in the Church since the sixth century but became universal in the twelfth century.

Conclusion

As we have seen, today's readings provide some biblical examples of people connecting with God. Whether, like Peter and Jeremiah, we pipe up when we are anxious or unsure or, like Paul, we simply ask, "Who are you, Lord?" when something has taken the ground from under us, we are always – but always – invited to connect, communicate and converse with God.

Of course, we are talking about prayer. And the first thing to say about prayer is that nobody can teach it. Nobody is the expert, but each of us has to find his or her own way through it. Whether that's silent meditation, or reciting a prayer (and, by the way, there is no better starting point than the Lord's Prayer said with real heart), or addressing God in words – each of us needs to find what works for us. Moreover, we need to try different ways, and keep trying different ways.

The second thing to say is that we can only truly connect with other people if we first connect with God. (Do you imagine that Ananias would have gone to that room in Straight Street, had God not reassured him that it was his plan?) Connection with God is the basis for all good human connection. Through prayer, we are fortified, we gain perspective and insight, and we learn love and compassion.

No doubt some of you know the story of the enthusiastic young woman who, having got into a railway compartment and found herself sitting opposite a bishop, without more ado she asked him, "are you saved?" To which, the bishop replied, "do you mean have I been saved; or, am I in the process of being saved; or, shall I be saved?" You, perhaps, see the point. Conversion comes when we repent and believe the Gospel for the first time but that repentance and belief has to affect all areas of our life. Great tracts of our individual selves are unredeemed. That process takes a lifetime. In the end of the day whether we shall be made fit to live for all eternity in God's nearer Presence is wholly dependent upon His grace. Our response needs to be 'yes' to the promptings of the Spirit within our hearts. That 'yes' has not only to be spoken once but repeated again and again, day in and day out whilst we live on this earth.

William Temple excelled, it would seem, not as a scholar, but as a moderator, and above all as a teacher and preacher. In 1931, at the end of the Oxford Mission (what is known in many Protestant circles as a Revival Meeting), he led a congregation in the University Church, St Mary the Virgin, in the singing of the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Just before the last stanza, he stopped them and asked them to read the words to themselves. "Now," he said, if you mean them with all your heart, sing them as loud as you can. If you don't mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little and want to mean them more, sing them very softly." The organ played, and two thousand voices whispered:

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.'

We may assume we are going the right way, but the risen Christ can still face us with the challenge to change our lives. Responding to his call involves loss as we leave our past priorities behind, let go of old loyalties and move in a new direction. This can make us feel vulnerable and insecure as we move out of our comfort zones to follow the Saviour.