**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

9TH APRIL DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

10TH APRIL WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

--------------- WILLIAM LAW

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER [1906-45]

Bonhoeffer is perhaps the most famous 20th-century martyr, but in concentrating on his murder by the Nazis we may be in danger of missing some of the more important aspects of his life as historic figure and theologian as well as living saint.

He came from the very top drawer of turn-of-the-century German society; some of his immediate ancestors were noble, very upper class, and a ‘welter of wonderfulness’, as his biographer, Eric Metaxas, puts it. His father Karl Bonhoeffer was a leading psychiatrist who worked with Wernicke the brain specialist; one of his uncles was working with Einstein. His mother was of noble blood, and a committed Christian, although father Karl was less so, but whole-heartedly accepted his wife’s faith, and participated in family worship. Dietrich had several elder siblings, but was born ten minutes before his twin sister. Needless to say marriage added further illustrious in-laws into the family circle, including Jews.

Money and connections oiled the wheels: even when Bonhoeffer was in Tegel Prison he was accorded special treatment, as were most of the high-ranking army officers during the few years of the third Reich, and this while Hitler was hurling an ink-pot at one of his top brass who was protesting at the murderous cruelty of the SS.

It is very important to place Bonhoeffer in context with a considerable number of army officers brought up in a centuries-old military tradition of honourable behaviour towards enemies who found themselves increasingly unable to tolerate Nazi excesses. It was from this caucus that the impetus and plots against Hitler principally emanated: many of these soldiers were themselves Christians who also, one way and another, gave their lives as martyrs.

So much for background. During an idyllic-sounding childhood, Dietrich was taught to loath self-pity; not to speak unless he had something to say, and being a twin and well down in the family pecking order seems to have trained him in quite remarkable unselfishness and an awareness of the needs and preferences of others: when a dish was served that he knew was the favourite of the family governess, he would claim loss of appetite so that she could have his portion; a small but telling behaviour for a young boy!

The family were musical and gave weekly performances at home on Sunday evenings: Dietrich was such a talented pianist that at one time it was thought that he might take it up as a profession. When he chose to study theology at Tubingen the family did not go so far as to oppose his wishes but they had reservations and ribbed him somewhat.

As a student he came under the aegis of the famous liberal theologian Paul Harnack, with whom Dietrich often argued politely, with equal politeness and good humour from the professor, who was impressed. He was chosen to represent former students on the occasion of Harnak’s retirement, and spoke with great generosity, although by this time his own views had left those of his teacher far behind. When, a short while later, Bonhoeffer was able to meet Karl Barth he had found his real mentor. Barth, who was driven out of Germany into Switzerland by the Nazis, helped him throughout his life and pulled strings for him when necessary.

Bonhoeffer was trained in the Lutheran tradition, but rapidly realised that it had become rather stultified over the years. For his 18th birthday a trip to Rome was arranged for him in the company of his elder brother, and he was overwhelmed by the beauty and ceremony of the worship, particularly at St Peter’s, which left a lasting impression, and facilitated greatly in his quest for ecumenism later. He felt, however, that every splendour of Catholic worship was compromised by doctrine which he could not possibly accept.

He was awarded his doctorate ‘summa con laude,’ but at age 23 he still had to wait two years before he was old enough to qualify for ordination, but at this point in his life and in the best tradition of his family, he might have entered academia.

He took a job as assistant pastor to the German community in Barcelona, and could not quite believe the spiritual limbo in which he found them, with his boss near the end of his ministry, unwilling to support Bonhoeffer’s new ideas, and a little jealous so that he ceased publishing a preaching rota when he found that crowds flocked to hear his young assistant filling his church. It may have been three months in a rough area of North Berlin attempting to train a rabble of tear-away youth that may have confirmed his calling as a pastor: he played their insults and tricks with a perfectly straight bat and took the fun out of them. He did what he could, visiting their families, shocked by their living conditions, and comforting the sick.

Before he reached 25, he visited Union Seminary in New York as an exchange student and found the atmosphere of easy liberalism around John D Rockefeller to be quite lacking either in spirit or in disciplined theology. What really stayed with Bonhoeffer and influenced his spiritual development were the black churches he attended regularly for the remaining time of his stay: he felt the depth of their faith in the midst of their sufferings, and was profoundly shocked when entering a restaurant with a black friend and being refused service. …

The inter-war history of Germany is fairly well known, but perhaps not as well understood. There was no tradition of democracy of any length in a relatively young nation, and living conditions and a broken spirit were unlikely to facilitate it anywhere. In 1923 Dietrich’s father Karl had had a long-term endowment come to term but in the event such was the unimaginable toll of hyper-inflation that its whole sum total amounted to the price of a bottle of wine. Between 1924-9, however, the Weimar Republic brought a measure of stability and had it not been for the crash of the New York stock exchange democracy might have become stabilised. We sometimes tend to forget that Hitler was initially elected as Chancellor.

He was, of course, prepared to take on any role and make use of any constituency he could if he thought they would assist in bringing him to power. Initially many honourable patriots supported his stated aims even if they had reservations about him personally. A good deal of research has gone into the question of which German constituencies were most likely to have voted for Hitler, and, having played the Christian ‘Card’ and assured everybody that he would never interfere with their worship or beliefs, and that Jews would be safe, it seems that it was very largely the Protestants with their tradition of a state church, who trusted him, whereas Catholics were perhaps more circumspect, and Hitler trusted them less because of their allegiance to the Pope. In 1935 a concordat was reached with the Vatican guaranteeing freedom for Catholics, which was rapidly breached.

Once securely established, with all the machinery of government under his control, Hitler was determined to bring all Christians under one head, and nominated Ludwig Muller, a very rough-and-ready former naval chaplain, as ‘Reich Bishop.’ A considerable majority of pastors, for whatever motives, fell in with the Nazi policy of forming the parody of the faith calling themselves ‘German Christians,’ and in time an ‘ethnic paragraph’ was added seeking to exclude Jews – even converts – from participation.

Bonhoeffer and his circle had always loathed the Nazis and their anti-Semitism: his conservative theology valued the Old Testament and Jesus as a Jew; as he understood it, the Jews had been our Lord’s priority in ministry, so that to discount or eliminate any association with the Jews and their religion was to eliminate Christianity itself. Bonhoeffer and the pastors, ordinands and theologians in his circle did everything they could to fight these theological ‘rough necks,’ but there were two serious impediments: when Bonhoeffer suggested pastors might go on strike – cease conducting funerals etc – the main body of his supporters opposed a tactic that actually worked later when he persuaded the Norwegian pastorate of its effectiveness. Secondly by now the Nazis simply had the power to overrule the church.

Bonhoeffer had no alternative but to effect a separation among his supporters, from the ’German Christian’ church, although he would have seen the latter as the schismatics. This was particularly painful in view of his passionate interest in ecumenism. The ‘new’ alignment was called ‘The Confessing Church’, in the sense of confessing the faith.

Bonhoeffer went to England for a while where he made valuable friends and contacts, including George Bell, the Bishop of Winchester who was to prove one of his strongest and committed supporters. At the height of the war in 1943 he was able to meet Bishop Bell in Sweden at an ecumenical conference, but in reality he was representing the German peace constituency. Bell passed on their peace proposals to Anthony Eden but by this time Churchill and the allies would hear of nothing but total victory and were not interested in any conspiracy to remove Hitler.

By 1938 Bonhoeffer had been forbidden to preach or publish in Germany, and with the outbreak of war a racing certainty, his friends, including Barth, made arrangements for him to go to New York on a lecture tour, but despite the warmest hospitality, he found himself unable to stay away from Germany although he knew that to return home would place him in grave danger.

There was a definite point at which his closest friend and confessor, Eberhard Bethge, realised that Bonhoeffer had crossed the line from opposition to conspiracy. At a conference everybody performed the salute except Bethge, and Bonhoeffer whispered to him to raise his hand like everyone else, because a stupid salute would make no difference to winning or losing their cause. Bethge understood from this that his friend had stepped over the line to become a conspirator.

Bonhoeffer had joined the intelligence wing of the Nazi Party in order to fight his cause as best he could. In this he had very high-ranking allies and family members who were already committed, and who had persuaded him that he could be useful, particularly at the diplomatic level, so that, in effect, he became something like a double agent. It was under this guise that he was able to travel, supposedly on behalf of the government.

By the time Bonhoeffer was arrested he had become a willing participant in the plot to assassinate Hitler, but his lenient treatment during his 18 months at Tegel Prison was partly because he was on remand, with no charges having been lodged against him. In fact it was hoped and even anticipated that the charge, when it came, may have had to do with currency movements into Switzerland that he had authorised on behalf of the Nazis, who had been persuaded to release several Jewish friends of Wilhelm Canaris into Switzerland as propaganda, letting the world believe that all Jews were being well treated: the money had been the price the Swiss authorities demanded in order to maintain them and their families. Admiral Canaris was one of the chief movers in the assassination plot of July 20th1944, and he had given nothing away on his arrest, but it was the discovery of documents in his possession that implicated Bonhoeffer in the failed plot and eventually cooked his goose.

At their trials, Dietrich, his brother Klaus and brother-in-law openly proclaimed that they had acted primarily in the interest of the Jews, but Bonhoeffer himself agonised, prayed and consulted friends before consenting to be part of the assassination plot. He realised that he would have to be willing to perform the execution with his own hand, but that before doing so he would need to have resigned from the confessing church. He was one of the greatest theologians of his generation, and a man of peace who had to think and pray through every step he took to the paradox of being a pastor and a patriotic German, yet willing to go through personally with an act of the gravest treason, breaking a commandment that he had no doubt proclaimed from the pulpit.

In January 1945 Bonhoeffer, together with some top-ranking military were transferred to a concentration camp, where, even here, they were treated better than the other inmates, and met up with friends and families of others whom Hitler had had arrested after the failure of the assassination plot. The party went in search of a facility that would accommodate the prisoners for some days, during which time three of them had been detached at Flossenburg Concentration Camp, one of whom should have been Bonhoeffer. When the guards realised their mistake they came for him after he had been conducting a service by request of the odd menagerie of prisoners who had been dumped into an empty girls’ school.

Bonhoeffer and his group were summarily court-marshalled and sentenced to be hanged: in his spite and rage Hitler had specified that the prisoners should be hung from meat hooks. The execution took place on 9th April, just a month before the camp was liberated by the Americans.

Shortly after the end of the war Bishop Bell organised and conducted a memorial service for Dietrich, with his brother-in-law, the Jewish Theologian and Pastor Franz Hildebrand speaking after Bishop Bell himself. The service was relayed to Germany, where the surviving Bonhoeffer family and connections heard it. …

Bonhoeffer believed that a Christian’s place is firmly in this world: he was a deeply cultured and educated man whose life could have gone in several other directions, but who, through the most difficult circumstances, had to learn the full meaning and application of Jesus’ instruction to be’ As crafty as snakes and as innocent as doves.’

Bonhoeffer’s inspiring letters from prison are published, and give a good account of his thinking and personality, but his principal works, which are still popular, are ‘The cost of discipleship,’ in which he particularly works out the full meaning and application of the Sermon on the Mount,’ and ‘Life Together,’ a discussion on the realities of a Christian community attempting to live as such, without the pious flannel.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer seems to have made friends wherever he found himself, although he suffered bouts of temper and depression that he worked hard to overcome and conceal, but which he shared honestly with his own confessor, Eberhard Bethge. He was thrown together with an unlikely group during his last months which included two British POW’s, both of whom observed him comforting the fearful and anxious ones, and remaining conspicuously cheerful and outgoing. The doctor who supervised his execution remarked, without knowing who he was, that Bonhoeffer had gone to his death with more resolution and equanimity than he had witnessed in fifty years.

Bonhoeffer’s conservatism was essential to his Christian journey in that he found hollowness and artifice all around him, except in the black churches in New York, where people lived and suffered in the certainty of their faith. It is this certainty that seems essential for a martyr: it would be hard to go to the stake if all you could respond to the Easter bidding: ‘Christ is risen’ might be ‘Well I’ll give you a shade of odds on that he may have!!!’

To have the life of an authentic saint and martyr closely observed, well documented and witnessed by such a variety of people is invaluable because it provides a believable and very human picture of somebody who is generally agreed to have lived the authentic life of a saint and martyr. Hagiographies are not intended as biography, but in so many cases they are all we have from which to learn. They serve as ikons that have to be painted a certain way, and may be very beautiful, but lack any sense of flesh and blood, which is what most of us need if we are serious about the pursuit of holiness.

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WILLIAM of OCKHAM [?1288-1347] – Most people have heard of Ockham’s razor, but he was no barber, but one of the three greatest philosophers of the late middle ages, together with his possible teacher, Duns Scotus, and the formidable Thomas Aquinas.

As with so many mediaeval luminaries we know little enough of William’s life: scholars can only calculate the possible date of his birth from what they know about the procedures and regulations in the ’studia’ and universities that he attended, and there was even confusion over the date of his death until very recently.

Ockham in the 14th century was a little village in Surrey, two days’ walk, and one day on horseback, from London. We have no idea of his family’s social standing, nor do we even know whether his native language was Middle English or French, although once established in Academia and while travelling abroad, he would have spoken and written in Latin. William was offered to the Franciscans to be brought up and educated under their supervision. He would have received his early schooling from the local parish priest, or possibly the Augustinian canons at Newark, before being sent to Greyfriars Convent near Newgate in London. Education in philosophy and logic usually began at age 14, so we are to assume that William was probably in London in or by 1302.

Greyfriars was the largest of the Franciscan convents in England, with around 100 friars, in order to evangelise the largest city in England, and to be near the Royal Court and the various episcopal palaces along the Thames. England’s Provincial Minister would have resided there when he was not abroad on the business of the Order. In addition to teachers appointed for the convent, Greyfriars was a point of transition between students and masters travelling between the universities of Oxford and Paris, who would have brought the latest ideas and manuscripts so that the convent was likely to have been in touch with the best of contemporary learning.

Having completed his primary studies in logic, rhetoric and grammar William was ordained subdeacon – a very minor order – in February 1306 by Robert Winchelsey, Archbishop of Canterbury at Southwark. He would have completed his training in Philosophy by 1308-10 and gone on to study Theology either at the advanced ‘Studium Particularum’ – still under Franciscan tutelage, or perhaps at Oxford, where he would have commenced in the Franciscan run facility attached to the university; we do not know which.

Having taken the traditional ‘philosophy-based subjects, students in the middle ages had the option of further training in Law, medicine or theology, and the last was the most thorough and exhaustive of the three. The best and most promising of these students would be chosen to go on to study Theology, and clearly William had been selected.

The standard mediaeval theology training was to read, write commentaries and lecture upon the Sentences [opinions] of Peter Lombard which had become the basic text for theology. Peter Lombard [d 1160] selected various texts; summarised everything that had been written upon them by the fathers, in the second part, and in the third gave his own opinion [sentence] upon them. At this level the student would be undertaking some junior teaching under supervision, and his commentaries and lectures could be published, and we have manuscripts by William in various stages of his progress through them which form the basis of most of what we know of his studies. William commenced reading the sentences in 1317, aged 29, which was the usual age for this study. Once he had cleared this hurdle and by the time he was around 35, he would become Doctor of Theology, and be qualified to take up a professorship.

Unfortunately this did not happen. William’s doctoral studies remained unfinished because one of his teacher/supervisors – we are not sure which one – attacked him on some of his opinions, and William would not budge, so charges of heresy were laid against him in 1324 with Pope John XXII at Avignon, where William was summoned for examination.

During his time in Avignon – 1324-8 – William became involved in the controversy between the Franciscans and the Pope over ownership of property; the former contending that as the apostles had owned nothing, the Franciscans should maintain their devotion to ‘Lady Poverty’ which had been at the foundation of the Franciscan Order. The order had originally made an arrangement with the Pope whereby all their actual property was held in trust for them, but John enjoyed the privileges of a mediaeval prelate, and had no wish to be embarrassed and shown up by the uppity Franciscans’ supposedly greater spirituality so he decreed that from now on they would have to make other arrangements.

William, whose career in the church was in process of crumbling around him, probably took the view that he might as well ‘be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb,’ and got stuck in on behalf of his order, turning the tables on his persecutors by pronouncing the Pope to be in error; and as to be stubbornly in error constituted heresy, William maintained that John was a heretic, and that as no heretic could be a Pope, that John, as an unrepentant heretic, was no Pope at all.

In this William was supported by Michael Seneca, superior of the Franciscans, but both realised that they were in danger, and planned their escape from Avignon. So it was that on 26th May 1328, under cover of darkness, William and his superior stole out of the Episcopal palace in Avignon into exile, carrying among their legitimate baggage the official seal of the Franciscan Order, so that Pope John was temporarily powerless to make any alterations to the order’s rule. In truth the seal was Michael’s responsibility but the question at issue had been whether the Franciscans actually owned it or not and by accusing William of theft Pope John had unwittingly come down with his opponents on the original dispute!

Pope John XXII was a notorious grouch, who, among other things, issued a bull forbidding the use of the euphonious third and sixth interval in the composition of church music, but such was his impotent fury against William that when he learned that he had been staying in Tournai he threatened to burn the city down if they failed to hand him over, but they refused to release him, and John thought better of his threat.

John had another seal made soon enough, but William died excommunicated. In the meantime he arrived at the court of Louis of Bavaria who at the time was Holy Roman Emperor, i.e. ruler of the German lands and a few other territories, and at loggerheads with the Papacy. Louis promised his protection to William if the latter would continue pumping out anti-papal propaganda which he was more than able and willing to continue doing, so it was here in Bavaria that William eeked out the rest of his life, and where he wrote and had published all his important political tracts establishing the separation between church and state.

Until very recently it was thought that William had effected a death-bed repentance; handed back the seal and been received back into the arms of mother church before dying in 1349, supposedly of the Black Death. Gedeon Gal, a noted Ockham scholar, however, has concluded that this was a different English William, and that Ockham must therefore have died unrepentant and excommunicate in 1347.

It is difficult to understand how such a seemingly minor character, a failed academic tainted with heresy, and a thief, if only a mischievous one, could possibly be counted among the greatest minds of the Middle Ages. The answer is that the majority of his considerable achievements came in the field of philosophy, and in particular those of language and logic, although William saw himself always as a theologian. Even the Franciscans seemed to find him a little embarrassing until the 20th century when the logical positivists pounced on him as a precursor of their own. The Cambridge Companion to William of Ockham quotes David Knowles, whose field of expertise is, in any case, mysticism, but he sums up the church’s ‘sentence’ as follows:

‘Neglected for centuries save as a bogy to scare young Thomists, he was rediscovered as an historical figure by students of mediaeval thought who, followers as they were of Thomas or Duns regarded him as Apollyon, the grand deceiver and destroyer who ruined the fabric of the golden age of mediaeval thought. Others again, in more recent years, have seen in him one of the great creators, one of that of contemporaries to whose writings Cartesian philosophy, anti-papal reform, modern science and the secular state can be seen in embryonic form. ‘

The editor of the Cambridge Companion to Ockham Paul Vincent Spade, comments on this:

‘Fortunately, recent scholarship permits a more realistic assessment of Ockham’s position in mediaeval thought. Although it is true that he contributed to, and was part of, the intellectual transformation that was taking place in fourteenth century Europe, he did not originate them, cannot bear sole responsibility for them [whether credit or blame], and did not even approve of all of them. In fact, the true situation is far more complex. At the beginning of the 1970’s English philosophers of a broadly ‘analytic’ training came to regard Ockham as a kindred spirit. This development was prompted by the realisation that Ockham and certain other mediaeval figures were not only sophisticated logicians and philosophers of language but had also – like 20th-century analytic philosophy – applied their logical techniques and skills to a wide variety of philosophical problems.

Bearing in mind that William saw himself primarily as a theologian, apart from his major achievement in separating church from state rule, he used his gifts of logic to unpick the knot Aquinas had seemed to tie conclusively between faith and reason, and in doing so came to acknowledge, as do most of us, that not only is it impossible to integrate them so tidily in this way, but, on the positive side, faith needs to be faith and not certainty, and that God even requires space to be available so that we may remain free to choose him rather than be driven to him either by reason or by force.

William was no saint, but may we hope that those who devised our calendar included him for his achievements and not because there are a few blank spaces in early April! If this is so, perhaps we can have hope!

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WILLIAM LAW [1686-1772] – He was born at Kings Cliffe, and educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he was ordained deacon and became a Fellow in 1711. When George I came to the throne Law refused to take the oath of allegiance as a non-juror, and was deprived of his fellowship.

In 1728 he was ordained priest and wrote the book for which he is still famous; ‘A Serious Call to a Devout Life,’ which influenced Samuel Johnson and the Wesleys and became a spiritual classic. His other work is on prayer: both are still available.

In 1740 he returned to Kings Cliffe and led a life of devotion and asceticism, looking after the poor; and died there in 1761.