

Sermon for Palm & Passion Sunday, 9.iv.2006
St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Mark 11:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11
The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to Saint Mark 14:1-15:47
10:00 a.m., Holy Communion –LBW Setting 2

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to
come. ✠ Amen.

*. . . He humbled Himself
and became obedient to the point of
death—
even death on a Cross.*

--Philippians 2:7b,8

The 'Christ-Hymn' of Philippians, Chapter 2, is the oldest of Christian hymns and may well be the oldest of Christian creeds, at least as old as the Apostles' Creed which itself predates a good deal of the New Testament. And there, right at the heart of this hymn Paul quoted to his beloved Christians at Philippi, is the Cross and the Crucified. There, at the heart of their belief and their faith is mention of the cruel end of a young life, an end that is for us the beginning of all freedom from fear, the beginning

seminarians, the descendant of four centuries of patriotic German clergy, civil servants and academics, followed instructions to remove his clothing along with a group of others condemned to death on a charge of high treason and corrupting members of the armed forces. He consistently accused those who cheapen the costly sacrifice of Christ so that the Christian message amounts to nothing more than good feelings and the sermon nothing more than a pat on the back of corrupting the Church. He was allowed to kneel briefly in prayer and then stood on a stool or box with others against a concrete wall while nooses of piano wire attached to hooks on the wall were placed around their necks. The prison doctor recorded in his diary that Pastor Bonhoeffer met his death with a serenity the doctor had rarely witnessed even among patients in his private practice before the war.

He met his death without blaming anyone, neither the tyrant who had ordered him executed, no matter what, nor the state, whose right to execute traitors in wartime he never contested, nor those who had failed

provisional German government and to accept a six-month ceasefire while a free Germany put its own house in order. He had done his job and secured the Allies' answer. There would be no negotiations with any German government. There would be only the unconditional surrender of Germany, the total defeat of the German armed forces and, if necessary, the total destruction of the German people. This left the German resistance movement, of which he was a voluntary part, utterly alone. He stood alone with men who also stood alone that spring morning. Yet he did not die blaming the Allies. Instead, he looked forward to a beginning, and he accepted that hour and that moment to stand before God with Jesus Christ as his only advocate and defender. Immediately before being separated from other prisoners for his final arraignment, he said to a British POW whom he had befriended, "For us, this is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life."

On strictly religious grounds, he could have avoided almost all of the trouble he had gotten himself into. It was, after all, long-accepted

security and the aspirations of the nations, to tell the state on what terms war was to be waged or peace brokered. He could have minded his own business and, had he done so, April 9th, 1945, might have come and gone for him without incident, no more and no less dangerous a day than it was for any of his countrymen as they found themselves invaded by enemies on all sides. In taking the step he took, to conspire against the leader and commander-in-chief of his nation in time of war, Pastor Bonhoeffer was conscious of doing this not as a religious duty, not as simply part of his conscience as a Christian or of his office as a pastor. Instead, he took the step that ended his own life, a step that did not shorten the war, that rescued none of the innocent victims of state terror, not as a Christian or as a churchman but as a responsible human being, one for whom the destruction human dignity and the dishonor of his own beloved nation was an outrage, however, precisely because God had sanctified our humanity and taken it on as His own in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called on neither Christ nor the Church to

the mentally and physically defective or the hated foreigner, he opened his mouth and raised his hand against the State that named them its enemies. On his own behalf, in his own defense, he remained silent, at peace and serene in sovereign responsibility for his life and for his death. In that way, he shared in His Lord's obedient death, a death for the sake of others, a death freely and silently accepted, for which he deserves his place in the Church's calendar of memory.

Even under a heathen dictatorship, Christian martyrdom in a country that had claimed to be Christian for over a thousand years was a complicated matter. The vast majority of German Protestant and Catholic Christians and their clergy did *not* take any covert or overt stance against the government of their country, its ruling party or its policies during the twelve years of National Socialist rule, and the vast majority of them did not run afoul of the law, such as it was. By contrast with the Christian situation in most of the Muslim world today, it was not a simple matter to come into conflict with the State or its powers, and

than the simple preaching and teaching of the Gospel and care of the sick and the perplexed, it seemed to the majority, as though the preaching and teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a simple matter at all in a world such as this. In any case, Germany was at war, a war with real enemies who had vowed to destroy the German people. This was no time for dissent and certainly no time for unpatriotic activities of any sort, not while German soldiers were fighting on four military fronts and Allied bombs were falling day and night at home.

In our *own* day and place, this is easy enough to understand, for death has rained down from the skies on our own land, and we are at war. May it please God that our Church need not be called to such a witness and, on the Last Day, to such an account as that demanded of the Church in Germany, the Church of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

But the times are both dangerous and evil. It may be that such a witness will be demanded of us. It may be that those whose interest is in things other than liberty and the security and welfare of our people may

look at ourselves and those around us by the light of the Gospel and refuse to become victims of our own fear, selfish illusions and hysteria.

Obedient under the Cross, obedient if need be to the point of suffering, even to the point of imprisonment and death, and at the very least to the point of being misunderstood by other Christians, let those who profess this way and those of us who preach it be the first, not the last, to speak out for those whose nationality or race or religion makes them the most suspect and therefore the most vulnerable among us, and let us listen to the Church when she raises that cry in obedience to Christ and in our name. Mindful of our responsibility as a free people to those valiant men and women who have pledged to defend this country, its ideals and legitimate interests so far from home with their lives, let us ask fearlessly whether their continued, daily and bloody sacrifice truly serves those ends and let those who claim Christ's sacrifice demand clear and truthful answers from those who govern in our name and by our leave. Let us not be afraid of the question itself— one which they are in no

Obedient to the One Who was not ashamed of our humanity, Who shared table fellowship with all who invited Him and Who condemned no one but hypocrites, and who allowed His Body to be ripped open by sadistic torturers and exposed for all to see on the Cross, let us not be ashamed of those among us who are different in some respects from most of us, pretending, because it simply feels dangerous to do otherwise, that they and their situation do not exist, the disabled, those suffering from diseases with a social stigma and those disinherited by society because of their sexuality, the lepers of our age, all of whom some would gladly legislate and fund right out of existence.

April 9th, 1945, and April 9th, 2006, are *both* days of obedient witness for the Church and for each Christian in sovereign responsibility for the neighbor and for the future. That is our future if we follow Him not only through this Holy Week but in our life together as a people worthy to be called His own. And our God gives us the freedom, the strength to be that people. Having been baptized into the death of the

of gifts, the freedom to love without fear, costly grace indeed, for which the price has been paid once and for all. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

