

‘We’re All in This Together’ a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Jay Robinson on Sunday 21 May 2023, Ascension Sunday.

Readings: Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of our hearts
Be acceptable in your sight, O Lord.
Amen.

Today I will speak about “Christ existing as community.” That’s us, acting in community as the Church, and that’s us, acting toward each other as disciples of Christ. As read in today’s gospel, at John 17:11, what Jesus prayed for the disciples: “that they may all be One, even as we are One.” Or, in another way to put it, “We are all in this, together.”

“*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*,” or “Christ existing as Community” was the basic theological underpinning of the doctoral thesis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in early twentieth century Germany. He was best-known for his foundational work establishing the “Confessing Church,” that would stay true to Christ, over against the “Reichskirche” that supported the Nazis. When he submitted his thesis in 1927, he would not have known of this coming split in the German Protestant Church, which happened after the rise of Hitler to power in 1933. But this principle, this single-minded adherence to Christ, was what it took to resist the Nazi worldview, when it did raise its ugly head.

In explaining this concept, Bonhoeffer came to state it this way, “The church is nothing but the part of humanity in which Christ has really taken form.” This means, first, that the church results *from* divine initiative (that is, Christ taking form), and second, that this initiative is *for* humanity as a whole and produces a “new humanity.”

Bonhoeffer developed this further, to define this Christian community. The church is established and real in Christ. It is a divine reality, that comes from God’s action and presence. It is the social form of divine revelation. The church is also a human reality, fully human even as it is divine. Note here that he is not speaking of “church” as an organisation, but as a community of Christ, a community grounded in God’s revelation of Christ.

This community is addressed in both our readings today, from Acts and from John. In Acts 1, Jesus speaks to the disciples the final time before his ascension to heaven, instructing them to wait together for the Holy Spirit to come and empower their work as disciples in Christian community. Luke, the author of this text, even provides a roll call of the extant disciples (“All present and accounted for”). Jesus, mother Mary and Jesus’ brothers were there as well, alongside the women who were with Jesus in his ministry. All those who had worked with Jesus were there, ready to pick up the next steps after he had left this earth in any physical form.

In John 17, Jesus give his pastoral prayer for the disciples to receive God's protection from evil. In these last words to them before his arrest, Jesus is the go-between for God and the disciples. He effectively hands over God's work done by him, now to be God's work done by them.

It is this work, God's work, that those in Christian community must do. Bonhoeffer called this, "vicarious action on behalf of others." One form of this action is "being-*with*-each-other": Christian life is a shared life of "bearing each other's burdens," as Luther had put it. The other form of this action is "being-*for*-each-other." This includes: "self-renouncing, active work for the neighbour," intercessory prayer, and mutual forgiveness of sins, in God's name.

In 1935, Bonhoeffer became director of the Preacher's Seminary in Findenwalde. There he put these principles of Christian community into action. They shaped the life of the college, in these ways: It was a community, not an academy. It had a daily pattern of worship, Bible study, meditation, prayer, lectures, sermon practice, meals, and recreation. The community members prayed for one another, and actively helped one another.

Fundamental to life at Finkenwalde was "Christ existing in community." This meant that all relationships were mediated by Christ. By "mediated," here I mean that all experiences are culturally mediated. And by "cultural mediation," I mean that all that goes on around you, affects you. For example, modern advertising turns you into "consumers," who are conditioned to buy things. But in the case of Christian community, you would see others, and yourself, through the eyes of Christ. This way of seeing and being, with Christ being between us, really changes our lives. It is really powerful. It is living life that is truly Christ-centric.

In 1937, the Gestapo shut down Findenwalde, and Bonhoeffer and his students had to go underground. Bonhoeffer then wrote his book Life Together which chronicled the life in Christian community that had been experienced at the seminary. He also that year wrote Cost of Discipleship. These two books are amongst his best-known, and they complement each other, with the latter book expanding more on what it means to single-mindedly follow Christ.

Bonhoeffer himself was a disciple. This included offering to God the unknown and unpredictable future. He knew he could receive suffering or joy at the hand of God. In what would be his last poem, Bonhoeffer wrote of his readiness to take the cup of suffering, or to receive release to "life's enjoyment and its good sunshine." He didn't set out to be a martyr, but to be a disciple, following the will of God. "Not my will, but Thy will, be done."

On 8 April 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was tried for his connections to the failed July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler and stage a coup against the Nazis. In his work Ethics, he had outlined the responsibility to confront evil. He took that responsibility seriously. On April 9th he was executed.

Pastor Bonhoeffer paid the Cost of Discipleship. He joined the long line of disciples who had paid the ultimate price, with their lives.

As recorded in John 17:6-11 and in Acts 1:8, Jesus commends the disciples to continue God's work in the world, the mission that Jesus started. He mediates between God and the disciples, praying God's protection for them. He prays that they stick together, that "they may be one."

We are descendants of the disciples that are called to do God's work. From Jesus' time, to Bonhoeffer's time during the horrors of the Nazi era of the last century, to the many challenges of today's world, we are to "be as one" in Christian community.

What are these challenges today, and how might we apply Bonhoeffer's ideas to address them? Take one of our biggest challenges: climate change. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on "Christ existing as community" applies here also. Here we find that Christ is the centre of our existence, as Lord of the world. In Christ, God became human, not sitting above creation but rather living within it. This is the Christ event, that is God's incarnation among us.

Similarly, thus as disciples, it is not for us to sit above the world but rather live within it, in Christian community that cares for it. We have both the capacity and the responsibility to be in relationship with creation, not attempt to be dominant over it. Bonhoeffer's theology can lift our consciousness about what it means to live on this planet and be in community relationship with it and with each other.

One would have to ask what his Ethics would have to say about how to respond our current predicament. Is it any less vital, or any less vexing, than the predicament of his day? What choices would that examination bring about, do you reckon? Well, "stay tuned." That will have to be a topic for another sermon, on another day.

For today, it remains for us to take up the call, of God's mission handed to us by Jesus. How do we carry on that work? First, we must understand that we are all in this together: as *disciples*, each of us called to follow; and as *Christian community*, all together, *living* that call.

We can feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted, confront war and violence, take care of God's creation, and look after one another, in loving community. We can do it! We are *one*.

Let us pray:

God *protect* us, in your name,

God *bless* and *enrich* us with your Holy Spirit, and

God *strengthen* us through the love of Jesus Christ,

that love which we freely pour into your world today.

Amen.

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made known in Jesus, given in grace*



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