

Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-45



Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant pastor (church leader) who opposed the Nazi regime. Soon after Hitler was elected in 1933 Bonhoeffer made a famous radio broadcast criticising his policies. He also wrote a published essay in which he defended the Jews against the cruel persecution that had been unleashed against them. The German government took control of the national church and used it as a tool for Nazi propaganda. The church included a number of people who had Jewish ancestry but were Christian in terms of their beliefs. Hitler expelled these people. Bonhoeffer was one of a number of evangelical leaders who were disgusted by all of this and started a new organization called the Confessing Church which aimed to be a purer form of Christianity, free from Nazism. Another one of the co-founders was Martin Niemöller who was courageously to suffer imprisonment in two concentration camps for his beliefs but narrowly survived the war.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer began an underground training school for people wishing to serve in the Confessing Church. In 1937 the Gestapo (Nazi secret police) arrested twenty-seven of his former students and imprisoned them. It was after this experience that he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* from which come the extracts chapter 12 'Revenge' and chapter 13 'The Enemy – The Extraordinary'.

In 1939 Bonhoeffer left Germany and moved to New York. Although it was much safer there, he felt bad that he was no longer helping his Christian flock back at home. He decided to return at the risk of his life and he joined the German Resistance which was an organization designed to undermine Nazi rule in Germany, similar to the French resistance in France. In 1941 he was part of 'Operation 7' in which two spies successfully smuggled fourteen Jews to safety over the Swiss border. In 1944 Bonhoeffer was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. A bomb was hidden in Hitler's personal office. Hitler went out of the room just before the bomb exploded. He narrowly escaped death with only minor injuries. It might have ended the war much quicker, saving perhaps millions of lives.

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in Buchenwald and Flossenburg concentration camps where he used his Christian faith to strengthen and encourage other prisoners. He was hanged in April 1945, only a few months before the end of World War II.

13 THE ENEMY—THE 'EXTRAORDINARY'

Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the Gentiles the same? Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5.43-48)

HERE, for the first time in the Sermon on the Mount, we meet the word which sums up the whole of its message, the word 'love'. Love is defined in uncompromising terms as the love of our enemies. Had Jesus only told us to love our brethren, we might have misunderstood what he meant by love, but now he leaves us in no doubt whatever as to his meaning.

The enemy was no mere abstraction for the disciples. They knew him only too well. They came across him every day. There were those who cursed them for undermining the faith and transgressing the law. There were those who hated them for leaving all they had for Jesus' sake. There were those who insulted and derided them for their weakness and humility. There were those who persecuted them as prospective dangerous revolutionaries and sought to destroy them. Some of their enemies were numbered among the champions of the popular religion, who resented the exclusive claim of Jesus. These last enjoyed considerable power and reputation. And then there was the enemy which would immediately occur to every Jew, the political enemy in Rome. Over and above all these, the disciples also had to contend with the hostility which invariably falls to the lot of those who refuse to follow the crowd, and which brought them daily mockery, derision and threats.

It is true that the Old Testament never explicitly bids us hate our enemies. On the contrary, it tells us more than once that we must love them (Ex. 23.4 f; Prov. 25.21 f; Gen. 45.1 ff; I Sam. 24.7; II Kings 6.22, etc.). But Jesus is not talking of ordinary enmity, but of that which exists between the People of God and the world. The wars of Israel were the only 'holy wars' in history, for they were the wars of God against the world of idols. It is not this enmity which Jesus condemns, for then he would have condemned the whole history of God's dealings with his people. On the contrary, he affirms the old covenant. He is as concerned as the Old Testament with the defeat of the enemy and the victory of the People of God. No, the real meaning of this saying is that Jesus is again releasing his disciples from the political associations of the old Israel. From now on there can be no more wars of faith. The only way to overcome our enemy is by loving him.

To the natural man, the very notion of loving his enemies is an intolerable offence, and quite beyond his capacity: it cuts right across his ideas of good and evil. More important still, to man under the law, the idea of loving his enemies is clean contrary to the law of God, which requires men to sever all connection with their enemies and to pass judgement on them. Jesus however takes the law of God in his own hands and expounds its true meaning. The will of God, to which the law gives expression, is that men should defeat their enemies by loving them.

In the New Testament our enemies are those who harbour hostility against us, not those against whom we cherish hostility, for Jesus refuses to reckon with such a possibility. The Christian must treat his enemy as a brother, and requite his hostility with love. His behaviour must be determined not by the way others treat him, but by the treatment he himself receives from Jesus; it has only one source, and that is the will of Jesus.

By our enemies Jesus means those who are quite intractable and utterly unresponsive to our love, who forgive us nothing when we forgive them all, who requite our love with hatred and our service with derision, 'For the love that I had unto them, lo, they now take my contrary part: but I give myself unto prayer' (Ps.

109.4). Love asks nothing in return, but seeks those who need it. And who needs our love more than those who are consumed with hatred and are utterly devoid of love? Who in other words deserves our love more than our enemy? Where is love more glorified than where she dwells in the midst of her enemies?

Christian love draws no distinction between one enemy and another, except that the more bitter our enemy's hatred, the greater his need of love. Be his enmity political or religious, he has nothing to expect from a follower of Jesus but unqualified love. In such love there is no inner discord between private person and official capacity. In both we are disciples of Christ, or we are not Christians at all. Am I asked how this love is to behave? Jesus gives the answer: bless, do good, and pray for your enemies without reserve and without respect of persons.

'*Love your enemies.*' The preceding commandment had spoken only of the passive endurance of evil; here Jesus goes further and bids us not only to bear with evil and the evil person patiently, not only to refrain from treating him as he treats us, but actively to engage in heart-felt love towards him. We are to serve our enemy in all things without hypocrisy and with utter sincerity. No sacrifice which a lover would make for his beloved is too great for us to make for our enemy. If out of love for our brother we are willing to sacrifice goods, honour and life, we must be prepared to do the same for our enemy. We are not to imagine that this is to condone his evil; such a love proceeds from strength rather than weakness, from truth rather than fear, and therefore it cannot be guilty of the hatred of another. And who is to be the object of such a love, if not those whose hearts are stifled with hatred?

'*Bless them that persecute you.*' If our enemy cannot put up with us any longer and takes to cursing us, our immediate reaction must be to lift up our hands and bless him. Our enemies are the blessed of the Lord. Their curse can do us no harm. May their poverty be enriched with all the riches of God, with the blessing of him whom they seek to oppose in vain. We are ready to endure their curses so long as they redound to their blessing.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

'Do good to them that hate you.' We must love not only in thought and word, but in deed, and there are opportunities of service in every circumstance of daily life. *'If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink'* (Rom. 12.20). As brother stands by brother in distress, binding up his wounds and soothing his pain, so let us show our love towards our enemy. There is no deeper distress to be found in the world, no pain more bitter than our enemy's. Nowhere is service more necessary or more blessed than when we serve our enemies. *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

'Pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.' This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them they will not despitefully use and persecute us. They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us, so long as we pray for them. For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves. Every insult they utter only serves to bind us more closely to God and them. Their persecution of us only serves to bring them nearer to reconciliation with God and to further the triumphs of love.

How then does love conquer? By asking not how the enemy treats her but only how Jesus treated her. The love for our enemies takes us along the way of the cross and into fellowship with the Crucified. The more we are driven along this road, the more certain is the victory of love over the enemy's hatred. For then it is not the disciple's own love, but the love of Jesus Christ alone, who for the sake of his enemies went to the cross and prayed for them as he hung there. In the face of the cross the disciples realized that they too were his enemies, and that he had overcome them by his love. It is this that opens the disciple's eyes, and enables him to see his enemy as a brother. He knows that he owes his very life to One, who though he was his enemy, treated him as a brother and accepted him, who made him his neighbour,

and drew him into fellowship with himself. The disciple can now perceive that even his enemy is the object of God's love, and that he stands like himself beneath the cross of Christ. God asked us nothing about our virtues or our vices, for in his sight even our virtue was ungodliness. God's love sought out his enemies who needed it, and whom he deemed worthy of it. God loves his enemies - that is the glory of his love, as every follower of Jesus knows; through Jesus he has become a partaker in this love. For God allows his sun to shine upon the just and the unjust. But it is not only the earthly sun and the earthly rain: the 'Sun of righteousness' and the rain of God's Word which are on the sinner, and reveal the grace of the Heavenly Father. Perfect, all inclusive love is the act of the Father, it is also the act of the sons of God as it was the act of the only-begotten Son.

'This commandment, that we should love our enemies and forgo revenge will grow even more urgent in the holy struggle which lies before us and in which we partly have already been engaged for years. In it love and hate engage in mortal combat. It is the urgent duty of every Christian soul to prepare itself for it. The time is coming when the confession of the living God will incur not only the hatred and the fury of the world, for on the whole it has come to that already, but complete ostracism from "human society", as they call it. The Christians will be hounded from place to place, subjected to physical assault, maltreatment and death of every kind. We are approaching an age of wide-spread persecution. Therein lies the true significance of all the movements and conflicts of our age. Our adversaries seek to root out the Christian Church and the Christian faith because they cannot live side by side with us, because they see in every word we utter and every deed we do, even when they are not specifically directed against them, a condemnation of their own words and deeds. They are not far wrong. They suspect too that we are indifferent to their condemnation. Indeed they must admit that it is utterly futile to condemn us. We do not reciprocate their hatred and contention, although they would like it better if we did, and so sink to their own level. And how is the battle to be

fought? Soon the time will come when we shall pray, not as isolated individuals, but as a corporate body, a congregation, a Church: we shall pray in multitudes (albeit in relatively small multitudes) and among the thousands and thousands of apostates we shall loudly praise and confess the Lord who was crucified and is risen and shall come again. And what prayer, what confession, what hymn of praise will it be? It will be the prayer of earnest love for these very sons of perdition who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us. It will be a prayer for the peace of these erring, devastated and bewildered souls, a prayer for the same love and peace which we ourselves enjoy, a prayer which will penetrate to the depths of their souls and rend their hearts more grievously than anything they can do to us. Yes, the Church which is really waiting for its Lord, and which discerns the signs of the times of decision, must fling itself with its utmost power and with the panoply of its holy life into this prayer of love.¹

What is undivided love? Love which shows no special favour to those who love us in return. When we love those who love us, our brethren, our nation, our friends, yes, and even our own congregation, we are no better than the heathen and the publicans. Such love is ordinary and natural, and not distinctively Christian. We can love our kith and kin, our fellow-countrymen and our friends, whether we are Christians or not, and there is no need for Jesus to teach us that. But he takes that kind of love for granted, and in contrast asserts that we must love our enemies. Thus he shows us what *he* means by love, and the attitude we must display towards it.

How then do the disciples differ from the heathen? What does it really mean to be a Christian? Here we meet the word which controls the whole chapter, and sums up all we have heard so far. What makes the Christian different from other men is the '*peculiar*' the *περισσόβν*, the 'extraordinary', the 'unusual', that which is not 'a matter of course'. This is the quality whereby the better righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

¹ A. F. C. Vilmar, 1880.

It is 'the more', the 'beyond-all-that'. The natural is τὸ αὐτὸ (one and the same) for heathen and Christian, the distinctive quality of the Christian life begins with the *περισσόν*. It is this quality which first enables us to see the natural in its true light. Where it is lacking, the peculiar graces of Christianity are absent. It cannot occur within the sphere of natural possibilities, but only when they are transcended. The *περισσόν* never merges into the τὸ αὐτὸ. That was the fatal mistake of the false Protestant ethic which diluted Christian love into patriotism, loyalty to friends and industriousness, which in short, perverted the better righteousness into *justitia civilis*. Not in such terms as these does Jesus speak. For him the hall-mark of the Christian is the 'extraordinary'. The Christian cannot live at the world's level, because he must always remember the *περισσόν*.

What is the precise nature of the *περισσόν*? It is the life described in the beatitudes, the life of the followers of Jesus, the light which lights the world, the city set on the hill, the way of self-renunciation, of utter love, of absolute purity, truthfulness and meekness. It is unreserved love for our enemies, for the unloving and the unloved, love for our religious, political and personal adversaries. In every case it is the love which was fulfilled in the cross of Christ. What is the *περισσόν*? It is the love of Jesus Christ himself, who went patiently and obediently to the cross - it is in fact the cross itself. The cross is the differential of the Christian religion, the power which enables the Christian to transcend the world and to win the victory. The *passio* in the love of the Crucified is the supreme expression of the 'extraordinary' quality of the Christian life.

The 'extraordinary' quality is undoubtedly identical with the light which shines before men and for which they glorify the Father which is in heaven. It cannot be hidden under a bushel, it must be seen of men. The community of the followers of Jesus, the community of the better righteousness, is the visible community: it has left the world and society, and counted everything but loss for the cross of Christ.

And how does this quality work out in practice? The 'extra-

ordinary' – and this is the supreme scandal – is something which the followers of Jesus *do*. It must be *done* like the better righteousness, and done so that all men can see it. It is not strict Puritanism, not some eccentric pattern of Christian living, but simple, unreflecting obedience to the will of Christ. If we make the 'extraordinary' our standard, we shall be led into the *passio* of Christ, and in that its peculiar quality will be displayed. This activity itself is ceaseless suffering. In it the disciple endures the suffering of Christ. If this is not so, then *this* is not the activity of which Jesus speaks.

Hence the *περισσόν* is the fulfilment of the law, the keeping of the commandments. In Christ crucified and in his people the 'extraordinary' becomes reality.

These men are the perfect, the men in whom the undivided love of the Heavenly Father is perfected. It was that love which gave the Son to die for us upon the cross, and it is by suffering in the fellowship of this cross that the followers of Jesus are perfected. The perfect are none other than the blessed of the beatitudes.