

Lent Course 2012

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The Way to Freedom

The Lent Course from
Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
(Weeks 1-6, including Mothering Sunday)

Introduction

Written by Keith Clements

The Way to Freedom

Introduction

Welcome

Welcome to *The Way to Freedom*!

Each Lent, Christians of all traditions seek to deepen their understanding of what following Jesus means, as they look towards Easter.

This six-week course is offered to individuals, local congregations and parishes and – wherever possible – to groups of people drawn from different churches who want to meet ecumenically in order to explore their common call to discipleship in the world today. The themes will be followed on BBC Radio 4's Sunday Worship during Lent (0810-0850 BBC Radio 4) as well as on BBC Local Radio on Sunday mornings and on the Daily Service (0945-1000 BBC Radio 4 198 LW).

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

The Theme

No word seems to matter more to us today than *Freedom*.

But what it means is often far from clear and equally often sparks controversy. It's a big word in the New Testament and in the Christian story down the ages. But what actually is '*Christian freedom*' and how does it relate to all the other *freedoms* we say we value in our lives and in society?

In this course we are taking our cues from a poem '*Stations on the Way to Freedom*' written in prison in 1944 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance to Hitler. Twelve years earlier in 1932 he had said: '*To be free is to be in love, is to be in the truth of God. The one who loves because made free by the truth of God, is the most revolutionary person on earth*'; and his last recorded words when being taken away for his final trial and execution were: *This is the end - for me the beginning of life*.

We shan't primarily be studying Bonhoeffer as such, but rather using him for jumping-off points to reflect on the quest for freedom in our own experience, the life of our churches, and what's going on in our society and the world today – and all in the light of our reading of the Bible.

Structure of the Course

The Way to Freedom

Introduction

The course comprises six weekly sessions, corresponding to the six Sundays of Lent concluding with Palm Sunday.

In weeks 2, 3, 5 and 6 the main themes are suggested in turn by the titles of the four verses of Bonhoeffer's poem '*Stages on the Way to Freedom: Discipline, Action, Suffering, Death.*'

Week 1: What is Freedom?

Jesus said: 'You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free'. How does this square with current attitudes? No idea is more popular in the Western world today than *Freedom of Choice* but why is this so important to us? How do we distinguish between *Freedom of the individual* and individualistic greed? Who are the people we know who really exemplify *Freedom* today? Are there certain important freedoms which are under threat in our contemporary society?

Week 2: Discipline

Freedom and *discipline* are often assumed to be contradictory. The temptation stories of Jesus give a different picture. What kinds of constraints and restraints ought we to accept in our consumerist society today?

What do the traditions of spiritual discipline such as in the monastic life have to teach us all today? Do science and technology simply increase the possibilities of human development or do they call for new kinds of disciplined responsibility in our world 'come of age'?

Bonhoeffer however speaks of '*civil courage*' - the readiness to challenge public wrongs and uphold justice whatever the personal risks - as an essential element in freedom. Where and how is this needed today, even right down at local level and who are the sorts of people demonstrating it?

For many people today *Freedom* means living in a safe cocoon of private enjoyment untroubled by the world around - except to condemn its shortcomings from a position of safety.

Week 3: Action

Week 4 ('Mothering Sunday'): Church as Community

Can we have freedom without community? What sort of community is the church called to be - is it simply to be in contrast to society around or is its life to be interwoven with that of the wider community? Many churches are trying to be accepting, caring and forgiving communities yet still find it hard to be 'of one mind' - and some people still feel excluded.

Do we perhaps over-idealise what the church should be?

There are however good examples of local churches finding new life and freedom through new relationships with their neighbourhoods.

Week 5 ('Passion') Suffering

Many people today cite the immensity of suffering they see in the world as the chief reason why they cannot believe in God. Yet many people who do believe in God have themselves suffered greatly and some even say it is this which has brought them close to God. Bonhoeffer speaks of faith as 'sharing in the sufferings of God in the world'. As we reflect on the actual stories of people and communities that have suffered greatly in our own time, and their struggles of faith, can we indeed think of suffering as being a way to freedom?

You should note, that while in weeks 4, 5 and 6 there is a clear link respectively to Mothering Sunday, Passion Sunday and Palm Sunday there will not be an exact correspondence in any week between the Bible readings suggested for study and the readings in the commonly used Sunday lectionaries. For example the story of the temptations of Jesus, customarily read on the first Sunday in Lent, appears in Week 2 of our course. This however should not prevent the overall linking of the themes to Sunday worship and sermon topics, and vice versa.

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Structure of the Course

Week 6 (Palm Sunday): Death

Just how do we conceive of 'heaven' and 'eternal life'? Jesus in going to Jerusalem shows us the ultimate in freedom – the freedom of love in laying down his life for us and opening the 'gate of heaven' to us. But others in our world today give up their lives in markedly different contexts, such as terrorists who carry out suicide attacks. Such actions are universally and quite properly condemned, but in fact killing is not always seen to be wrong. The killing of Osama Bin Laden was seen by many as just and necessary, as was the conspiracy against Hitler in which Bonhoeffer was implicated at the cost of his own life. Is there such a thing as 'just assassination'? Is there any way out of the cycle of violence in our world? In the context of our own lives can 'carrying the cross' – that ancient symbol of death – be some kind of answer? And what kind of hope does the resurrection really offer us?

The Materials

Each week contains a mixture of materials for reflection, Bible passages and commentary for study and discussion, contributions and 'testimonies' from contemporary people (sometimes the 'good and the great' but often so-called 'ordinary' Christians), poetry, questions and ideas for discussion, and sometimes suggestions of things to do. Please do not be daunted by what may appear to be too much material to get through in one session! *You will need to be selective according to what is felt to be most useful (or challenging) for yourselves in your own context, and which questions you think are most pertinent.*

How to Use

We're envisaging the course being followed by individuals or fairly small groups such as would meet in a home, church or other suitable location for informal study and discussion – or by larger gatherings which for part of the time can break up into smaller groups. This of course makes the role of leaders very important, particularly in the preparation for each meeting.

As already suggested, some selection of materials and topics for discussion will be necessary each week. It will be important however always to include at least some of the Bible study material.

Leaders of groups, it will be seen, *will need to prepare the sessions well in advance* and this will include involving some other members of the group in various tasks like looking for appropriate items in current newspapers, magazines or TV programmes, sharing in the readings, taking part in role-play, and so on. Material for prayer during the meetings is not included, as we imagine groups or their leaders will have their own ideas on what is appropriate for them. Much of the course materials may in any case be found to provide themes for prayer and meditation, or even be readily developed into prayers themselves.

The aim of the course being to help build up both our personal discipleship and our common life in Christ, there are at various points suggestions for reflection on the practical implications for ourselves, our churches and the communities in which we live. At the end of the final session, in particular, there is a short check-list on where we find ourselves at the end of this Lent in our understanding of 'freedom' – and where we hope and plan to go next!

A number of suggestions for further reading will be found in the material, together with some links for online access to other useful sources. The specific sources of significant quotations are generally referenced in end-notes.

For background on Bonhoeffer the following recent publications are suggested Keith Clements: Bonhoeffer and Britain (CTBI Publications 2006) & The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer (SPCK 2010), Gillian Court: His Heart of Flesh (CTBI, 2006).

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Bonhoeffer: An Outline

Introduction

Not everyone will be familiar with Bonhoeffer, or have time to read up much about him. Here is a brief outline of his life and thought.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 into a close-knit, very cultured upper class family, and was brought up in Berlin. He decided while still a boy that he wanted to be a pastor and theologian and was a prodigious student, gaining his doctorate at 21. He studied in Rome and the USA as well as in Germany and in 1931 started lecturing in Berlin University. That same year he began to be involved in the ecumenical peace movement and became firmly committed to non-violence as concrete obedience to the Sermon on the Mount. At the same time he believed the church had to recover its place alongside the poor and oppressed and he chose to work in a deprived working-class parish in Berlin. The theology he was teaching was centred on the Bible as the place where God's revelation is heard – but it is a revelation which becomes real and concrete in Jesus Christ, the centre of human life and in whom human life in all its aspects finds its true form.



Photo: <http://www.dafes.net/bonhoeffer/ecumenism.htm/>
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Both he and his family were disgusted by the coming of Hitler to power in 1933, the imposition of dictatorship and the early attacks on Jews. He became a radical and outspoken figure in the Confessing Church, that section of Protestantism which withstood the attempts to 'Nazify' the church. For 18 months during 1933-35 however he

was pastor in London, in charge of two German parishes. Here he made important ecumenical contacts and friendships, especially with George Bell, Bishop of Chichester.

Back to Germany

In 1935 he was recalled to Germany by the Confessing Church to direct its illegal seminary at Finkenwalde on the Baltic coast. He developed the seminary not only as a place for training ordinands but as a kind of 'monastic' community new to German Protestantism. It was here that he wrote two of his most famous books, *Discipleship* (earlier English editions titled *Cost of Discipleship*) and *Life Together*. German Protestants, he believed, had largely forgotten what Martin Luther had really taught and had opted for 'cheap' instead of 'costly' grace, had substituted easy-going citizenship for discipleship under the cross, and so had all too readily compromised with Hitler. Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo in 1937 but the ordination training continued underground.

As war loomed nearer, Bonhoeffer sensed the threat of military call-up but knew that a stance of conscientious objection would not be understood by most even in the Confessing Church.

In the summer of 1939 friends in Britain and America therefore arranged for him to go to the USA indefinitely. He went, but very soon after arrival in New York decided he must return home, despite the dangers, before war broke out. Once back in Germany he was able to continue his work for ordinands despite ever tighter restrictions on his movements and public speaking. In the autumn of 1940 he agreed with a suggestion by his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, who was a leading civilian figure in the resistance, that he too should be involved in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler. His main role was to be a link with allied countries, using his ecumenical contacts, to inform them of the resistance and to seek their assurance of support for a non-Nazi government if Hitler was overthrown.

This Bonhoeffer was able to do on several travels to neutral countries, most dramatically to Sweden in 1942 where he met with Bishop Bell. Involvement in such a conspiracy was undoubtedly a serious step for one who had previously counselled non-violence. But knowing – more than most Germans did at that time – of the appalling scale of the Nazi crimes being committed especially against the Jews, Bonhoeffer knew that a clear choice had to be made between becoming guilty by complicity in a plot that would involve assassination, and becoming even more guilty by doing nothing while millions were being murdered. This was the background against which he wrote – but never finished – his wartime book *Ethics*.

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Bonhoeffer: An Outline

(Continued)

Bonhoeffer in Prison

By early 1943 Bonhoeffer was under increasing suspicion of using various ploys to evade conscription, and also for his role in a scheme (rightly) suspected of enabling some Jews to escape to Switzerland. He was arrested in April 1943 and placed in the Tegel Military Prison in Berlin. On any count this was a sore trial for someone who had enjoyed freedom so much, being so active, physically strong and artistically gifted (as accomplished on the tennis court as at the piano), devoted to the good things of life and to those who mattered most to him in friends and family – and recently engaged to a woman, Maria von Wedermeyer, much younger than himself. But for various reasons the case against him was never actually brought and he settled down to many months of confinement during which the main danger was not the Gestapo or SS but the allied bombing of Berlin. He was able to have letters, gifts and visits from family, friends and fiancée. In late 1943 he started a secret correspondence with his close friend and former student Eberhard Bethge. In late April 1944 these letters took a new theological turn when he started to explore the questions ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ and what was the real nature of Christian faith in a ‘world come of age’ where religion was being outgrown. What would a ‘religionless Christianity’ look like? These were the letters that would create such a theological stir when published after his death.

Bonhoeffer was transferred to Gestapo headquarters in central Berlin for more intensive interrogations, thence to Buchenwald concentration camp in early 1945. Just after Easter he was put on a transport taking selected prisoners into Bavaria. On Low Sunday he was taken by the Gestapo to the Flossenbürg execution camp and with six other members of the conspiracy subjected to court-martial and found guilty of ‘high treason’. Next morning, 9 April, he and the rest of the group were hanged. He was aged 39, and it was barely a month before the end of the war in Europe. His brother Klaus, brothers in law Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher, were also among the many who died under Hitler’s final revenge.

On 20 July 1944 the attempt on Hitler’s life was made by Claus von Stauffenberg and failed. Suspicion now grew upon all suspected of any disloyalty to the regime and in the autumn truly incriminating evidence was discovered against Bonhoeffer and his circle.

Bonhoeffer’s Legacy

Bonhoeffer’s prison writings and his unfinished Ethics were gathered, edited and published by Eberhard Bethge after the war. These and all his other writings have been translated into English and many other languages and have deeply impacted theology worldwide and in many different religious traditions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is widely acknowledged as one of the outstanding Christians of the 20th century, many of whose prophetic insights still lie ahead of us and whose life and death continue to inspire and challenge. His statue stands with those of nine other twentieth century martyrs above the west door of Westminster Abbey, unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II in 1998.

Photo: Stefan Kryszczak/ "In front of block 23" Drawing by Stefan Kryszczak survivor of Flossenbürg concentration camp.
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For more information and updates on Bonhoeffer publications, studies and events of interest, go to the website of the International Bonhoeffer Society:

<http://dietrichbonhoeffer.org>. The main forthcoming event is the XIth International Bonhoeffer Congress to take place in Sigtuna, Sweden, 27 June – 1 July 2012 on the theme “A Spoke in the Wheel: Reconsidering the Political in Bonhoeffer’s Theology.”

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Text excerpts from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition, SCM Press 1971 © SCM Press. Used by permission of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd.
& Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press 1954 © SCM Press.
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Author Biography

Keith Clements is a Baptist minister who throughout his career has been deeply involved in ecumenical life from the local to the international level. After ten years in local pastorates he was Tutor at Bristol Baptist College from 1977 to 1990 and taught in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Bristol University.

From 1990 to 1997 he was International Affairs Secretary for the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, and from 1997 to 2005 served as General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches (Geneva). He has written, broadcast and published extensively. As well as four books on Dietrich Bonhoeffer his works include *Learning to Speak - The Church's Voice in Public Affairs* and the biography of the ecumenical pioneer J.H. Oldham, *Faith on the Frontier*. With his wife Margaret he now lives in 'active retirement' near Bristol and enjoys giving lecture as far afield as Australia, South Africa and the USA, as well as bird-watching, singing in the local choral society and being taught many things by his grandchildren.