

Year A

Matthew 11:2-11

On April 9th 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged in Flossenburg Concentration Camp. In those days there was only one exit from prison and that was in a coffin. Bonhoeffer knew for some time that he was going to die and in waiting and preparing, in the final Advent of his life, he wrote and wrote. We are privileged today to have his writings which have so much more than merely survived him. These writings have inspired and continue to inspire Christians to this

day and I would imagine until the day when Christ will appear again. The writings are characterised by a searing honesty and I would like to read one small piece this morning. It is a poem entitled, *Who am I?*

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell
of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in
a cage,

Struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,

Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the
voices of birds,

Thirsting for words of kindness, for
neighbourliness,

Tossing in expectations of great events,

Powerlessly trembling for friends at an
infinite distance,

Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at
making,

Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?

Am I one person today and tomorrow
another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible weebegone
weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten
army

Fleeing in disorder from victory already
achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!”¹

Who am I? That’s really the question that John the Baptist was asking in prison when he was certainly facing a similar fate to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But he doesn’t ask the question that way. Instead he sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question; “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” That was a strange and remarkable question for John to pose considering that he had already

¹ <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/who-was-db2.htm>

acknowledged who Jesus was as he baptised him. So what has happened to this incredible prophet; a man hardened by a rough ascetic existence who would be no stranger to pain and suffering? Where have all the doubts come from? And what have the doubts done to him? Can you imagine John the Baptist's reaction when his disciples returned with the answer to his question? They told him that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Very good, said John, but what

about me???

Here I am, locked up in a terrible place with a terrible prospect. Who am I? Am I really a disciple of the Messiah or has my life's cause been a waste of time? Who among you here has not asked that question more than once? If we're being honest like Dietrich Bonhoeffer we know that we have asked, and still ask that question. The asking of the question and the doubts about the answer are not unique to you neither does it indicate that you are not a disciple of Jesus Christ. In fact, the question is an ever present part of discipleship.

Norman Shirk wrote the following in his poem, *Doubt*. The references are American but the message is universal. He wrote this:

“Let me meet you on the mountain, Lord,
Just once.

You wouldn't have to burn a whole bush.
Just a few smoking branches
And I would surely be ...your Moses.

Let me meet you on the water, Lord,
Just once.

It wouldn't have to be on White Rock Lake.
Just on a puddle after the annual Dallas rain
And I would surely be...your Peter.

Let me meet you on the road, Lord,
Just once.

You wouldn't have to blind me on North
Central Expressway.

Just a few bright lights on the way to chapel
And I would surely be...your Paul.

Let me meet you, Lord,
Just once.

Anywhere. Anytime.

Just meeting you in the Word is so hard
sometimes

Must I always be...your Thomas?"²

The honest answer to that question is yes, for that is the nature of Christian discipleship. Remember this is the challenge of Advent. As we wait and prepare what are we learning about our lives and how we should respond to God? When John's disciples left Jesus with news for John, Jesus turned and addressed the crowds. What did you expect to see when you went out to the desert to meet with John: a reed shaken by the wind, someone dressed in royal robes, a prophet? What did you expect

² Norman Shirk, April 10, 1981, KQ (Dallas Seminary)

to see? What does a disciple of Jesus Christ look like? Is he or she like a reed in the wind; like a holy man living a solitary existence as a hermit? Christians have sought to be like that throughout the long history of Christianity. There have always been movements which have called people out of society to live for Jesus in the barren, lonely place. But what good is that for its own sake? What does a disciple of Jesus Christ look like? Is he or she like a person dressed in soft robes; a ruler in authority who will influence others for Christ? There have always been people since the emperor

Constantine who have used their authority to influence others for Christ. But what good is that for its own sake? What does a disciple of Jesus look like? Is he or she a prophet; a preacher who pronounces the way of God's kingdom? There have always been preachers, some who have thought more highly of themselves than they should have, but what good is that for its own sake? No, all these things are not adequate for the disciple of Jesus Christ. As great as John was, the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Imagine the following letter was sent to Jesus by Jordan Management Consultants who have looked into his choice of disciples.

“To: Jesus, Son of Joseph

Woodcrafter's Carpenter Shop

Nazareth

From: Jordan Management Consultants

Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have picked for managerial positions in your new organisation. All of them have now taken our battery of tests;

and we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

The profiles of all tests are included, and you will want to study each of them carefully.

As part of our service, we make some general comments for your guidance, much as an auditor will include some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultation, and comes without any additional fee.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a

questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew had been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend

Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

Sincerely,

Jordan Management Consultants³

Our ways are not God's ways. Our measure is not God's measure. We will continue to ask the question of ourselves: who am I?

³ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/d/disciples.htm>

In this Advent season we need to accept one another the way that we are, as people called of God to be followers of Jesus Christ. That *is* who we are.