

LENT 2 (2024)

As you will know, I have chosen the title for our Lenten addresses – “Movers and Shakers” of the Christian Faith – by which I mean, heroes and heroines: people whose influence lives on in our hearts and minds today.

Peter chose Dietrich Bonhoeffer last week. I have chosen someone who knew Dietrich well, George Bell. If you look up Hymn 345 you will find his dates, but more importantly the words of his hymn “Christ is the King, O friends rejoice!” If you take out all the Alleluias, or at least hide them, they make a wonderful prayer for our Lenten journey as, together, we choose to follow the way of the cross.

He was Dean of Canterbury from 1925-1929, and Bishop of Chichester from 1929-1958. Despite recent false and unsubstantiated claims of historic allegations made against him (for which two different Archbishops have since had to apologise for), a new statue is to be installed at Canterbury of this very great figure who reflected Anglicanism at its very best. For me that would be - a commitment to worship, to learning, to history and tradition; a commitment to social justice, to speaking the truth to those in positions of power, to being tolerant towards those of other churches and other faiths; a commitment to the power of the arts to communicate meaning when ordinary words fail. George Bell, the Bishop I never knew and sadly, never had, embodied all those things to an exemplary degree.

This is what a former Dean of Worcester recently said:

“Who spoke up for refugees from Nazi Germany whom the British government foolishly interned as enemy aliens? Who spoke out against the British government’s policy of fire-bombing German cities, even in the final stages of the war? Who campaigned against those who demanded that the people of post-war Germany be left to starve? Who insisted that if the churches were to have any voice in the post-war world, it must be a united voice, and so helped to found the World Council of Churches? Who had the vision of communicating the Christian message through art, poetry, and drama – commissioning paintings from sources as diverse as the German refugee Hans Feibusch and the Bloomsbury Group, and engaging T.S.Eliot to write the most famous of his plays, *Murder in the Cathedral*? Who invited Mahatma Gandhi to stay in his house in Chichester at a time when Churchill was calling Gandhi a “half-naked fakir”? Who made friends with the prophetic German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and who was it to whom Bonhoeffer sent his final message to the world, while he was being led to the scaffold for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler? The answer is that it was the short, dumpy, mild-mannered, softly-spoken bishop of Chichester, George Bell.”

It is wishful thinking on my part to suggest that in our own day, he could turn around the fiasco which was the House of Commons last week or, actually change the hearts of today’s political dictators. But I do know this. Bishop Bell did not court controversy, he was not a combative person, he simply and painstakingly tried to speak the truth. Of course he was

not in physical danger, as Bonhoeffer was, or Ghandi. Nonetheless, what he did required moral courage to high degree, which I think did not come to him easily; for instance to make a speech in a packed House of Lords, knowing that not one person there agreed with him; or being told by the dean of Chichester that he would not be welcome to preach in the cathedral on Remembrance Day. There is always a price to pay when unwelcome truths are told to those in positions of power.

And here I think of Friday's meditation by the Bishop of Blackburn as we stopped at the powerful artwork of Nicholas Markell at the 5th 'Station', 'Jesus judged by Pilate'. Philip North said this:

"Really it is Pilate who is on trial here. Two thousand years later, there are plenty of people who abuse their power, Pontius Pilate is alive and well in those who underpay their staff and subject them to poverty, in those who exploit the vulnerability of others as they lure them into gambling or addiction, in those who cover up the crimes of others and in those who deliberately spread lies and misinformation. Such people may think they are in control. But their power is a sham. It cannot last. For one day we will all be judged on our use of power by the one whose power it is that threw the stars into space. Real power is to trust in his power."

And down the centuries, faithful followers of Jesus have been and done the same, speaking truth to those in positions of power: Peter and Paul before Caesar, Hilda at the Synod of

Whitby, our own Wulfstan before the Bristol slave-traders, Catherine of Siena before the Pope, Joan of Arc before the English, Thomas More before Cromwell, Bonhoeffer before the Gestapo, Janani Luwum before Idi Amin, Oscar Romero and Jean Donovan before the death squads of El Salvador; so too, within a different religious tradition, Gandhi. Truth-telling at a price: of such is the kingdom of heaven; so too Bishop Bell.

May he rest in peace in the company of all the angels, saints and martyrs, and enjoy the heavenly banquet for ever.

For those of us still following the way of the cross on earth, however tentatively, be encouraged, emboldened, by the last verse of Hymn 345, enough to convert others to the Gospel of truth, justice, and perfect freedom:

Let Love's unconquerable might

God's people everywhere unite

In service to the Lord of light.

Amen.