

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Bonhoeffer

Credits:

Production: NFP Teleart/Norflicks/ORB 1999

Running Time: 90 Minutes

Director: Eric Till

Screenplay: Eric Till, Gareth Jones

Producer: Karla Krause, Gabriela Pfandner, Christian Stehr, Deanne Judson
and Richard Nielsen

Editor: Roger Mattiussi

Cast: Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Maria von Wedemeyer
Manfred Roeder
Hans von Dohnanyi
Sabine Leibholz
Gerhard Leibholz

Ulrich Tukur
Johanna Klante
Rober Joy
Ulrich Noethen
Susanne Lothar
Dominique Horwitz

Précis – Allen Krumm

In a letter of counsel to the church at Corinth Saint Paul remarked that “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an earthen vessel who continues to engage and interrogate us almost 60 years after his execution by the Nazis. His life and legacy will probably continue to intrigue and inspire people for generations to come, if not for centuries. Why is this so?

Bonhoeffer has appealed to movements and communities of faith across the theological as well as the political spectrum. The breadth and depth of this appeal is readily demonstrable among groups as disparate as Latin American marxist liberation theologians and North American evangelicals. Whatever the locus and essence of this appeal may be, no one group or movement has succeeded in exclusively appropriating his legacy.

Perhaps in the end all such groups seeking to claim Bonhoeffer as their own should be reduced to silent acquiescence of the last verse of his famous poem Who am I? “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

Remarkably, his life and words resonate not only with people of faith but also with many who profess no particular faith tradition at all. Although he wrote much, and some of his works have become Christian devotional classics, the answer to his appeal is probably not to be found in his writings. Neither is the answer likely to be found in his role as a member of the resistance, heroic as that role was.

Many commentators have noted the universality of both Bonhoeffer’s faith and his thinking: Theodore Gill called Bonhoeffer a “...universal man...at home in the whole word. He gloried in his freedom to identify with everyone everywhere...” Others have spoken of his prescience – he has been referred to as a “...prophetically gifted man...”;

Harvey Cox said that Bonhoeffer "...still has his finger on the very issues which continue to torment us."

But ultimately Robert Coles probably came the closest when he wrote: "The heart of Bonhoeffer's spiritual legacy to us is not to be found in his words, his books, but in the way he spent his time on this earth." Simply put, Bonhoeffer strove to live out the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount. This struggle was epitomized by the oft quoted phrase from his most famous work, *The Cost Of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The words and phrases he coined in trying to develop a vocabulary adequate to this task in a fallen, war torn, seemingly Godless world still retain their purchase on our moral imagination: in terms of confronting and resisting a monolithic state which was pursuing murderous policies, he said it might become necessary "...to jam a spoke in the wheel..." of state. In trying to relate to people utterly alienated from traditional religious forms, he spoke of "religionless Christianity" and "worldly holiness" in a "world come of age."

When it came to gaining compassion for the downtrodden, he spoke famously of "der blick von unten (the view from below)", that is, of seeing the world from the perspective of those who are powerless and suffer. Concerning the easy believe-ism of the 20th century gospel, he spoke of "cheap grace"; freedom, he asserted, was from God, because "God is not free of man, but free for man..." In describing the sense of helplessness felt by members of the resistance, he spoke of having "no ground under our feet", but in the same text added the challenge "Who stands fast?" The message he passed on the night before he died was a simple affirmation of his faith: "This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life."

Privileged, charismatic, intellectually gifted, Bonhoeffer chose to become a theologian despite his family's lack of intense religious conviction. He rapidly developed into a promising academic theologian, but at some point, perhaps in part because of his experiences during his

post-graduate sojourn in America, his interests and sympathies turned toward pastoral work and the community of the church, or, as he put it "...Christ existing as community."

Bonhoeffer was only 27 when the Nazis took over, but he was one of the first in either the academic or the church community to recognize and speak out against the idolatrous, pagan implications of the Nazi state. He aligned himself with the group of pastors and theologians who broke away from the mainstream German Christian church to form the Confessing Church, but, frustrated by what he saw as the feebleness and timidity even of the latter movement, he twice left Germany, once for an extended stay in London, and once for a brief second stay in the United States.

That second stay in America lasted scarcely a month, from June through July of 1939. To an American theologian Bonhoeffer concluded that "...I have made a mistake in coming to America." He returned to Berlin and began to work for the Abwehr (German military intelligence), ostensibly to gather intelligence for the Wehrmacht, but in reality making contacts on behalf of the resistance. In April 1943 he was arrested and imprisoned and in 1944 the Gestapo discovered documents implicating Bonhoeffer as a double agent. Offered the chance to escape through the aid of a prison guard who had come to admire him, Bonhoeffer declined, fearing it would endanger other members of his family and the resistance.

Bonhoeffer's demeanor and sincere faith inspired many who encountered him in the nearly two years he spent in prison. He continued to write and exchange letters with his family and friends, and his prison writings have exerted a powerful influence on Christians and theologians around the world. He was hanged by the Gestapo at Flossenburg on April 9th 1945.

So who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In him one can discern the radical either/or outlook of the twice born believer; the both/and perspective of those who embrace Christ

and culture; and the here/now intensity of the disciple whose daily calling consisted of the words “follow Me.” Perhaps the only thing that can be said with certainty is that he was an earthen vessel with an ample measure of the treasure of which Saint Paul spoke.

Biography:

Eric Till was born in London and worked in the BBC Television Music Department. Moving to Canada, he became company manager to the National Ballet of Canada before joining the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, directing classical music productions, most notably with pianist Glenn Gould. Moving into drama and feature films, he returned to the United Kingdom, then later to the United States and Canada. His feature films have been produced for movie theaters, and both network and public television.

Selected Filmography:

The Girl Next Door
All Things Bright and Beautiful
A Fan's Notes