

Dear sisters and brothers, in this service on the 70th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death on April 9, 1945, I would like to most decidedly commemorate Bonhoeffer in connection with one of his central texts.

The excerpt I have chosen is from a famous speech that Bonhoeffer delivered in August 1934 during the International Youth Conference of the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work under the title of "*The Churches and Peace*" that took place in Fanö, Denmark. I would like to quote: "Peace on earth is not a problem, but a commandment given at Christ's coming. There are two ways of reacting to this command from God: the unconditional blind obedience of action or the hypocritical question of the Serpent: „Yea, hath God said ...? Has God not understood human nature well enough to know that wars must occur in this world, like laws of nature? ... Must God not have meant that we should talk about peace, to be sure, but that is not literally translated into action? Must God not really have said that we should work for peace, of course, but also make ready tanks and poison gas for security? And then perhaps the most serious question: Did God say you should not protect your own people? Did God say you should leave your own a prey to the enemy? No, God did not say all that. What he has said is that there should be peace among men ...". End of quote.

Naturally, this short text conjures up the spirit of the 1930s and 1940s. Particularly German listeners will be perturbed by expressions such as "blind, unconditional obedience, or the hypocritical question of the Serpent", because the text follows the typical linguistic ductus of National Socialist propaganda. Undeniably, it was a time of black-and-white thinking - a time of all or nothing, of unconditional and total war. All this cannot be simply brushed aside - far more, it clearly reflects that it was a time of decisions in which Bonhoeffer lived, spoke and wrote. Indeed, it was a time in which one wrong word decided on life and death.

Putting emotions aside and reading this text in a dispassionate manner, it is still compelling, today, even 81 years after its publication. Although Bonhoeffer's opening lines speak of unconditional, blind obedience, the decisive aspect is far more the question of the Serpent: Did God not say? And this is followed by all those questions that we, dear sisters and brothers, know so well. I will repeat just the most crucial questions: Did God say you should not protect your own people? And then, quite personally: Did God say you should leave your own a prey to the enemy?

Questions like these evoke decidedly terrifying and powerful images in us; the direct, immediate threats, attacks against one's own people, and even more so, against one's nearest and dearest. These are spine-chilling images, a feeling of powerlessness creeps up in view of the unavoidable facts, and we experience the urge to simply bring everything to an end, regardless of how.

It is the power of facts that Bonhoeffer confronts us with. Situations in which there is seemingly no other solution than to throw all the established and familiarized ethical constraints over board and take up arms, as there is no other way of avoiding the catastrophe. Situations that we would normally not wish to experience but take as given,

and in doing so also avoid having to reflect any further on the solutions and strategies that are normally applied in such situations. These are compelling situations in which everything must be done rapidly, and only those will prevail who act immediately and radically.

The perfidiousness of this view of such compelling and constraining situations is the technical approach that cuts off emotions on the one hand, while on the other hand creating the impression that there is simply no alternative. In doing so, we are essentially devising and constructing a general excuse that suggests that there is simply no other course of action, and because this is the case, how could one be responsible here, or, put differently, taking action, destroying the straightjacket is the only possible responsible course of action. It is as if one were to act in self-defense in a situation one faces through no fault of one's own.

In no uncertain terms, Bonhoeffer calls this strategy a hypocritical question; hypocritical because a desperate, hopeless and non-culpable situation is merely suggested, that on closer sight, is revealed to be neither hopeless nor non-culpable. This is not the case of someone happening on an armed burglar in the house and being forced to act in self-defense - instead, this is a case of war. Wars are neither laws of nature, nor, as we are well aware of in the meantime, do they simply fall from the sky, and they are certainly not purely self-defense situations.

And what is more, Bonhoeffer calls this strategy a question of the Serpent. In doing so, he denounces the very question as a temptation of evil. Undeniably, Bonhoeffer's argumentation is radical.

For us today, such a radical approach is often somewhat alien. But even though we may tend to shy away from addressing these intricate ethical issues, we would agree with Bonhoeffer insofar as there is considerable danger of becoming entangled in these issues, and the temptation of becoming hypocritical cannot be simply dismissed. At the same time, we would not denounce these questions as essentially Evil.

At this juncture, however, I think we must be honest with Bonhoeffer; Bonhoeffer not only spoke and wrote radically, he was radical himself. There is a tendency to push this aspect to the background, and to blithely present Bonhoeffer as a readily accessible role model of a saint. But Bonhoeffer is hardly suitable for such a position. And, most certainly, he would not have wanted to fulfill such a role. No, Bonhoeffer is not only a figure of his time, he has rough edges, he is unwieldy, and yes, in the final instance, he is radical.

This is reflected by his elitist way of life, his uncompromising inquisitiveness, his attempt to take the Sermon on the Mountain literally, the early attack against Hitler, referring to Hitler as a seducer in a radio speech as early as 1933 - calling him a "Verführer" instead of the "Führer" - his adoption of Mahatma Gandhi as role model, and the attempt to organize the training of priests in the underground as a monastic community shaped and determined by

its strict obedience to the word of God. In the final instances, the fact that he became a liaison officer and an assassin is only the ultimate consequence of his radical concept of life.

Dear sisters and brothers, today, in our day and age, we may find all this somewhat too radical, at times even a bit narrow minded and old fashioned. Indeed, there is quite a deep dividing line between the time of the Second World War, and National Socialism, and our present day and age.

Nevertheless, I believe that Bonhoeffer is right - also to this day. We are once again dealing more carelessly with complex ethical issues, the decision between war and peace, and increasingly often we find that mention is made of situations in which there are supposedly no other alternatives. It is as if the burden of decision making had already been resolved within the settings of the situation, and any further reflection would not only be meaningless, but quite unsuitable for solving the situation. As a consequence of this way of thinking and the resulting patterns of action, our world is so full of unrest, so violent and belligerent as never before. Bonhoeffer calls this Evil, and I would perhaps say that it is irresponsible, too plain and too simple. The consequences, however, are devastating. Therefore, it is more than justified to refuse to readily accept superficial answers and merely refer to the power of facts. Bonhoeffer, dear sisters and brothers, forces us to take a very close look, to take the issues strictly and seriously, and not simply carry on with our agenda and the order of the day. Naturally, this is difficult and often also uncomfortable, and there will certainly be no simple answers - but there is no other course in view of the significance of war and peace. Any other course - and here too, Bonhoeffer is right - ends with Evil.

But what, dear sisters and brothers, is the answer that Bonhoeffer gives; the answer to the question: "Did God say you should leave your own a prey to the enemy?" Bonhoeffer answers quite plainly and simply: " No, God did not say all that. What he has said is that there should be peace among men ..."

Bonhoeffer's first statement is closely linked with what he calls the question of the Serpent, when he says: "No, God did not say that!" As such, Bonhoeffer does not discredit these questions, but he negates their connection with God. The concern with my fellow man and brethren is justified, but here, it is the very fundamentals of life that I must face, and I cannot shrug off these issues and simply pass them on to God. Here, I am called on as a responsible individual, and I cannot simply sidestep or evade the issues. The responsibility rests firmly on my shoulders, and remains with me, and neither with God, nor with the given circumstances.

Bonhoeffer continues: "God said there should be peace among all men." This takes us by surprise. There is no argumentation, no persuasion, instead, just a simple demand; perhaps one can also say that it is a commandment of God that Bonhoeffer cites as an ultimate answer. This disarmingly simple answer is reminiscent of the Gospel of St. John (Joh. 14:27): Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. It is not as the world gives that I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not let us be afraid.

Dear sisters and brothers, Peace is a commandment for Christians because it is they who already have Peace. They have the plain and simple task of being the advocates and guardians of the Peace of Christ, whatever may come.

This is what Bonhoeffer - shortly before the outbreak of World War II - demands, emphatically, uncompromisingly and radically. To recall this, to bring this to mind more often and not only on his 70th death day, would be a blessing for the world.

Amen