

That Quality Of End Time Living
Advent 1, Year C
1 Thessalonians 3: 12 - 4: 2
29 November 2009

When Adolph Hitler took power in Germany in 1933 the National Socialist party began to work its way into a controlling influence in just about every aspect of the nation's life. This included the Church, especially the Lutheran Church, which had always had a close association with the state. The result was that the Lutheran Church divided between those who were prepared to co-operate with National Socialism, and those who resisted it, calling themselves the Confessing Church.

In this struggle for the soul of the Church, the Confessing Church resorted to some unusual tactics. One was the establishment of an underground seminary for the training of the Church's ordinands, away from the corrupting influence of the collaborationist Church. At Finkenwalde near Stettin, the Principal Dietrich Bonhoeffer introduced some novel training methods. Shared common prayer several times a day, a time of daily silent meditation for everyone, the discipline of confessing their sins to one another, and a strong emphasis on lots of communal activities, and acts of mutual service. Bonhoeffer had learned a lot from his travels overseas, including, I am proud to say, from his visit to the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, where I was trained.

The Finkenwalde seminary only lasted for a few years, but its graduates found that the unusual communal formation process was a Godsend in the ordeals that were ahead of them. Some were drafted into the forces as chaplains, others had to fight in

the army, and others ended up as Pastors of congregations in the path of the conquering Red Army. The nightmare and catastrophe that overtook the German people in 1944 and 1945 is well summed up in military historian Max Hastings's recent book entitled, "Armageddon."

In trying to sum up the process that had equipped his graduates so well to cope with disaster, Bonhoeffer wrote these words about the kind of good Christian loving that helps us to be better than we think we can be:

I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died and rose again...Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my brother, before I could begin to act, I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person that he already is in Christ's eyes.

We heard Paul saying the same thing a different way in his prayer for the Thessalonians this morning. He has recently got this Church started, but had to leave abruptly when the local synagogue became intensely annoyed at his success in attracting their gentile fringe membership. Since it is not safe to return, he sends in Timothy to find out how they are doing. To his huge relief he hears that they are doing fine, despite they're recent rough handling. In fact they are as keen as mustard – and they have certainly cottoned on to that part of the gospel that expects the Kingdom to break in on their lives with sudden, vitalising freshness. You could say that they are very Advent oriented Christians.

Of course there are a few missing bits in their faith, as you would expect with new Christians. They are about to get a good talking to, for instance, on the subject of sexual immorality. This bit of the letter concentrates on two topics – they're capacity for love, and that disciplined standard of behaviour summed up by the codeword "holiness."

The ability of Christians to love one another, and to extend this quality of loving beyond the borders of their faith community, is apparently a key marker of the Church's life. Of course becoming a more loving person is a big ask of any of us. We might be tempted to think that it is matter of grimly concentrating on behaving better, as we repeat to ourselves, "I must be more loving, I must be more loving, I must be more loving!" Or we might set about devising elaborate strategies for relating more effectively to people we find difficult to get on with. But that isn't actually what Paul has in mind.

Apparently he believes that God can pour this extra capacity for loving directly into Christian's hearts, if they ask for it. This power to love can infuse its way in to a Christian's life by subtle, almost stealthy means, creating helpful change in their attitudes and habitual actions. Is this magical thinking on Paul's part, the kind of wishful thinking that ignores just how intractable human bad behaviour can be?

Fr Thomas Weinandy is a contemporary American Catholic theologian who has developed a very useful idea of how the Holy Spirit operates, that I have found helpful in this connection. He talks about the Holy Spirit as the personalising person. By that he means that the Holy Spirit draws out the identity of the Father and the Son within the life of the Trinity, to make them real and present to one another. He

interprets them to one another, while at the same time communicating them to us in such a way that we make sense of them, and can latch on to Jesus and his loving heavenly Father as the centre of our faith and belief.

And his personalising role doesn't stop there. When invited into the life of a Christian, he draws out of us that personal identity that Christ always had in mind for us to become. He personalises us, fleshing us out with a greater existential depth, pointing us in the direction of our new destiny as an alive Christian. Within the decision making part of our character and personality he begins to create Christ's psychic disposition, so that we can begin to relate to the Father, and to the people around us, with the kind of mind set that he had on earth.

And that brings a new dimension to the way that we begin to relate to others around us. As Bonhoeffer put it, "I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person that he already is in Christ's eyes." When we begin to look at our sisters and brothers in Christ with that sense of Christian destiny as our primary focus then new possibilities of relationship arise.

I have called this sermon, "That quality of end time living." In the Lukan apocalypse Jesus was preparing his followers for the destruction of the Jewish nation, and for the time of persecution that would fall on the Church. In his leadership of the Finkenwalde seminary Dietrich Bonhoeffer was preparing his trainee Ministers for the destruction of Nazi Germany, and for the costly kind of ministry that they would have to offer as the world fell apart around them. The prescription in both cases is the same. The quality of Christian's life together will

speaking volumes to those they come into contact with about what God has to offer when their world comes to an end.

The end that Advent talks about is both the end that there will be of the life of each one of us, and the catastrophic end that has happened to some human societies in history, and the end that God will bring about to the human story when he rings the curtain down at a time of his unexpected choosing. What we heard about this morning is how to live well in any of those challenging circumstances, and apparently the secret of how to do that is a gift from God, rather than just the results of our own efforts.