

Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?"

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Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me (Matt. 25:40).

The question that Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked himself, his students, and his readers remains as urgent now as when he first raised it: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Bonhoeffer by no means intended to challenge the authoritative biblical answer. What he confessed with the prophets and the apostles, he attested at the cost of his life. He affirmed that Jesus Christ is the Risen Lord who had become incarnate for our sakes in order to die for our sins and liberate us from the power of death. That was the answer presupposed in every other possible answer to his question. It was the one answer that contained all others within itself.

But Bonhoeffer knew that other answers were indeed included within that one answer. He knew that in dying for our sins, Jesus Christ had made the sufferings of the world his own. He knew that discipleship to Christ meant participating in Christ's sufferings in the present time. "The hungry need bread," he once wrote, "and the homeless need a roof; the oppressed need justice and the lonely need fellowship; the undisciplined need order and the slave needs freedom." Because Jesus had entered into our world of sorrows, and because he had taken up the cause of those in need, making their cause to be his own, Bonhoeffer could continue: "To allow the hungry to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one's neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor" (Ethics, p. 137).

That was Bonhoeffer's great insight. "What is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor." On this profound basis he saw that it made no sense to choose between evangelism and social action. He saw that evangelism without social action was empty, and that social action without evangelism was blind. Both were key to the church's mission, since both were ways of bearing witness in the world to God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. Social action against crying injustice was an indirect form of evangelism, while evangelism that led unbelievers to know and love Jesus remained an indirect goal of social action. In different ways they both proclaimed that God's love extends to the whole person at every level of human need. Feeding the hungry, as Bonhoeffer once said, prepared the way for the coming of grace.

"What is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor." This statement provides a real clue to how Bonhoeffer answered his own question. The Risen Lord, he believed, confronts us here and now precisely as the neighbor in need. That is who Jesus Christ is for us today: he comes to us in the form of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner locked away. The neighbor in need is revealed as an incognito form of Christ's presence. This epiphany does not mean that Christ and the needy are simply identical, but it does mean that by divine grace they are inseparably one. It is impossible to serve Christ here and now without serving one's neighbor in need. As you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me (Matt. 25:40).

Since what is nearest to God is the need of one's neighbor, and since Christ has made himself to be one with those in dire need, Bonhoeffer drew the right conclusion. He recognized that Christians have a special obligation to those in any society who are being persecuted, humiliated and abused. "Only those who cry out for the Jews," he wrote, "have the right to sing Gregorian

chants.” For the church in the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer perceived, the presence of Jesus Christ could not be separated from the plight of persecuted Jews. Whoever would serve Christ had to enter into solidarity with that despised and mistreated group, crying out by word and deed.

But that was then, and this is now. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Who are those who are being persecuted, humiliated and abused in our particular society? Sadly there are many contenders, and too many to be mentioned here, yet chief among them, I would suggest, are the victims around the world today of U.S. sponsored torture.

April 2006 marks the second anniversary since shocking photos were released from Abu Ghraib. These photos are difficult to look at yet impossible to forget. How can we view them without thinking of Christ? How can we view the wrenching scenes of nude male bodies stacked in postures of sexual humiliation without remembering the saying: I was naked and you clothed me? How can we gaze on the shackled man kneeling in an orange jumpsuit with terror in his eyes as a ferocious German shepherd strains at the leash only inches from his face without recalling: I was in prison and you visited me. Where is the outcry? Why the silence of the churches? Can we learn what Dietrich Bonhoeffer has to teach us? Or will we be “good Germans” all over again? Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

“The thought of Jesus being stripped, beaten and derided until his final agony on the cross,” wrote Pope John Paul II, “should always prompt a Christian to protest against similar treatment of their fellow beings. Of their own accord, disciples of Christ will reject torture, which nothing can justify, which causes humiliation and suffering to the victim and degrades the tormentor.”

The torture-abuse scandal, as first revealed by the photos from Abu Ghraib, has by no means gone away. According to recent human rights reports:

- Detainee deaths at the hands of U.S. soldiers continue around the world.
- Aggressive, painful force-feeding has been instituted at Guantanamo where prisoners are so desperate that many would prefer to commit suicide.
- Secret CIA prisons, rife with torture situations, remain scattered across the globe.
- Thousands of persons have been subjected to what is called “extraordinary rendition,” whereby suspects are essentially kidnapped and sent to countries that use torture as a means of interrogation. Yet who can deny that outsourcing torture to other regimes is the moral equivalent of practicing it ourselves?
- Finally, the department of defense has admitted to the Red Cross that “70-90 percent” of the Abu Ghraib prisoners were entirely innocent. Similar if somewhat lower figures have been estimated for other U.S. detention centers, including Guantanamo.

Not a single major human rights organization in the world believes that these abuses can be explained merely as the actions of a few bad apples at the bottom of the barrel. Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Colin Powell, has stated that top officials — up to and including the president — have given a green light to soldiers to abuse detainees. “You don’t have this kind of pervasive attitude out there,” he observed, “unless you’ve condoned it.” Yet no officials at the higher levels have seriously been brought to account.

The photos from Abu Ghraib make one thing clear. Working against torture as sponsored by our government must begin at the local and congregational level. As dismaying as it may seem, polls show that at least 73 percent of the American people believe that torture may be used at least rarely, and 15 percent say it is “often” permissible. The figures for Christians in particular are, sadly, no exception.

The terrible stain of torture — which is not only morally wrong but has many harmful consequences even from the standpoint of self-interest — will not be removed from our nation until we learn to act from higher motivations than blinding fear, narrow self-regard, and ugly resentment — to say nothing of cultural racism. If torture is not evil, then nothing is evil, for torture is the very essence of evil. Only those who cry out today for the detained Muslims and Arabs have a right to sing Gregorian chants.

Let me close with these words from Holy Scripture.

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured (Heb. 13:3).

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen (I John 4:20).

This verse might be glossed to read: Those who say, “I love God,” and torture their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who torture a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen — and the same holds true for those who turn a blind eye to torture or otherwise condone it.

Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me (Matt. 25:40).

Bonhoeffer’s searching question thereby remains: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?