

## Preaching from the depth: Bonhoeffer and the challenge of contemporary preaching

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### Abstract

Responding to a letter that lamented the lack of aesthetics and erudition in the church's liturgy and preaching, Bonhoeffer indicates that he thinks the simple language of the bible must be retained, but crucial for him is the “*depths* out of which it arises”. Expanding on what he means by the “depth”, Bonhoeffer points his questioner to the books of Bernanos and how they reflect something of what the daily and personal encounters of preachers with the crucified Christ looks like. What does this mean in the context of contemporary preaching and how does it help us to better understand and practise the *art* of preaching at a time and in a world that is home to diverse cultures and largely values very different and more popular aesthetic and cultural expressions? Which lessons can we learn from Bonhoeffer's “preaching from the depth” for contemporary preaching?”

### Keywords

*Bonhoeffer; preaching; depth; reality; silence*

### Introduction

Bonhoeffer deeply valued preaching. Eberhard Bethge (2000:234) states that for Bonhoeffer's understanding of his own calling meant that nothing competed in importance with preaching. It was the great event for him, something that he could pour himself into without reservation or qualification. His sermons revealed both his exegetical care and his concerns about the situation in Germany and the world at the time of his preaching (Best 2012:xviii).

This does not mean that he was universally regarded as an excellent or particularly gifted preacher. In London, where parishioners were familiar with the “mild, folksy and pious sermons” of his predecessor, some experienced Bonhoeffer’s sermons in comparison as “too oppressive and emphatic” (Bethge 2000:330). His catechism students in Berlin did not appreciate what they viewed as his somewhat hesitant style of preaching, especially the sound of his voice and his habit of frequent pauses (Wendell 1985:20).

Yet there were other occasions, such as what was later referred to as Bonhoeffer’s “peace speech”, a sermon delivered at the morning worship at the Fanø conference, which Otto Dudzus recalled in the following way: “From the first moment the assembly was breathless with tension. Many may have felt that they would never forget what they have just heard ...” (as cited in Bethge 2000:489).

What is obvious from Dudzus’ observation is the importance of the context that Bonhoeffer lived and preached. This sermon was at a peace conference at a time when the drums of war were becoming louder and louder. However, it was not only the threat of war that informed and formed the context of Bonhoeffer’s preaching, but also the role of the church during these times. Even though Bonhoeffer was deeply critical towards the church and her proclamation, he was equally strongly committed to the proclamation of the Word and its role in the renewal of the church. For Bonhoeffer, as Bethge (2000:viii) points out, preaching was a contemporary witness, not just a voice or witness from the distant past. It was a witness that sprung from the very real and specific context and a moment when the church was facing the existential threat of Nazism. In Bethge’s words: “For Bonhoeffer, this encounter of God through preaching was the true sensation of his lifetime: it was, it is and so it will remain” (1991: viii).

However, in the context of the renewal of the church, it was not only the political realities that informed Bonhoeffer’s preaching, but also his grappling with the language of preaching. How do we preach in a world come of age? More importantly, how do we preach when the church’s words themselves have become powerless? Powerless not because the Gospel has lost its power, but because the church has been fighting only for the sake of her own survival, thereby rendering her words powerless (Bonhoeffer

2010:389). In his baptismal sermon for Dietrich Bethge, he anticipated the day when the church will change again, turn around again and be able to speak the word in such a way that the world itself will be renewed. This new language, Bonhoeffer said, will be “perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus’ language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power – the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God’s kingdom is drawing near” (Bonhoeffer 2010:390).

Bonhoeffer’s fragments of a novel, published in English as *Fiction from Tegel Prison* (2000), offers fascinating insights into the church and her place in the German world at the time. It also provides us with a window on how Bonhoeffer viewed the popular reception of preaching. Reading the novel, one suspects that there is more than a hint of Bonhoeffer’s own sentiments in the proclamations of Frau Karoline Brake on the status of preaching, especially Frau Brake’s harsh judgement on the enthusiastic musings of her neighbour, Frau Warmblut, about the “beautiful sermons” of their “dear preacher” as “nonsense”. But perhaps most telling is when Frau Brake wonders whether there is anything one could do to combat this *shallowness* in the suburbs.

Responding to a letter (published in *Gesammelte Schriften*) that lamented the lack of aesthetics and erudition in the church’s liturgy and preaching, Bonhoeffer reflected extensively on the way that words such as “grace” and “sin” were received in a contemporary setting and the general value of preaching, as well as the theological language used in sermons. Countering the sentiments of the writer, Bonhoeffer indicated that he thought the simple language of the bible must be retained, but crucial for him was the “*depths* out of which it arises and the *context* it comes from” [my emphasis] (1961:43).

From this it looks as if Bonhoeffer linked the malaise of preaching with shallowness and that he contrasted this with proclamation that came from the depth. Expanding on what he meant by the “depth”, Bonhoeffer pointed his questioner to the books of Bernanos and how they reflected something of what the daily and personal encounters of preachers with the crucified Christ looked like.

As the church in the Western world continues to suffer declining numbers and preachers are grappling with ways to communicate the Gospel in languages and ways that engage congregations and attract those outside the church, the question that interests me is what preaching from the depth would look or sound like now. Bonhoeffer was equally scathing of superficial sentimental preaching as he was of preachers who felt it was their duty to entertain congregations with their erudition and deep immersion in culture.

Even though the sentiments of the cultural elite seemed to annoy him, Bonhoeffer nevertheless used the writings of Bernanos as an example of the depth he had in mind. Looking at Bonhoeffer's response, it appears as if words such as "depth", "weight" and "context" were brought together as the forces to counter pulpit shallowness. However, he was also deeply aware of the fact that the cultural landscape in Germany had changed and that the words of preachers often did not resonate with the life experiences of modern people (Bonhoeffer, 2010:500). This has to do with two things that Frits de Lange calls the "performative power of the word" and the "pragmatic context" (1995:24). First, it is about the reality that people are not necessarily convinced or conquered by words anymore; something that has profound consequences for preaching.<sup>1</sup> But second, the people too have changed, and, one could add, they continue to change. It is not only the words or their meaning and the world that have changed, but also the people that are the hearers of the word.

In this context, Bonhoeffer's response in the letter (that is deeply consistent with his wider theological convictions or approach) alerts us to a few very important issues regarding preaching. Discussing these issues, I would like to draw three literary authors into the conversation. These are Bonhoeffer's contemporary, George Bernanos, and two writers from the twenty-first century, both familiar with Bernanos and whose writing style captures something of what Bonhoeffer had in mind, doing it in a way and in words of their own time and in a way that could be very helpful to preachers. These two are the American Pulitzer prize winner Marilynne Robinson and Australian author Tim Winton.

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1 It is not always exactly clear what Bonhoeffer has in mind; most likely the way that the communication media had changed.

## The depth dimension of reality: The suffering Christ

Following his observation that the simple words of the bible should be retained, Bonhoeffer made the following enigmatic comment: “Aber es kommt eben darauf an, aus welche Tiefe sie kommt und in welcher Umgebung sie steht” (What matters is the depth from which they come and the context in which they stand) (1961:43).

Looking beyond this letter to his meditations and sermons, Bonhoeffer used the word “Tiefe” (depth) a few times. For him, depth had to do with reality or even what he referred to as the “centre of everydayness” (1961:276). But at the same time, it also included or constituted what was often the deepest truth, the hidden reality of our lives. He referred to this truth as the realities of our sickness or sin; a true (deep) understanding of who we are before the face of God (Bonhoeffer 1961:428).

Following his comment about the depth from which words come, Bonhoeffer asked his correspondent whether he could conclude with something a bit pious. When the priest speaks in the books of Bernanos, Bonhoeffer said, his words have weight. That is because his words did not come from some or other linguistic consideration or observation, but simply from the daily, personal interaction with the crucified Jesus Christ. That is the depth from which the word should come if it is to have weight. He added that one could also say that this happens where we direct ourselves to Christ, and where the word, so to speak, comes from himself, from the cross (Bonhoeffer 1961:43).

It was during his time in America that Bonhoeffer was perhaps first alerted to this. After hearing the African American preacher Adam Clayton Powell in the Abyssinian Baptist Church, he concluded that there he truly heard the reality of Christ preached, hidden in suffering and weakness. Here Christ crucified was truly and really present in the preaching and the suffering of people (Bonhoeffer 2008:31). Even though Bonhoeffer had a good sense of the hidden presence of Christ earlier, it was here that he was challenged to see Christ not among humanity in general, but concretely and specifically hidden in the fellowship of suffering people. This, for him, became a tangible and concrete expression of Luther’s *theologia crucis* (see also Pasquarello 2017:78).

One could surmise that when Bonhoeffer referred to Bernanos and the words of the priest in the novel<sup>2</sup> that had weight, perhaps it was Adam Clayton's preaching he had in mind. German theologian Dorothee Sölle says it was the person of Christ himself that brought her to theology. Growing up in an environment where the doctrines of the (Lutheran) church were taken for granted and largely left her unmoved, it was the person of Christ who demanded her attention; he who even in the suffering of death did not allow nihilism or cynicism to mark him. However, it was also during her stay in New York, during a visit to a black church, that the crucified Christ became a reality that spoke deeply to her. She describes this visit in the following way (Sölle 1995:106):

There I went to Harlem to a black church named Canaan Baptist Church. A few sentimental songs are kept alive by the beat and by an electronic organ. The dragging music, the sadness therein – it kindled the big feelings of trust, hope, and power – *there is power, there is power, there is power in the blood of the Lamb*. I cried and asked myself: Why? One of the reasons was certainly that I could not imagine any white German congregation giving expression to so much comfort, community and (mutual) responsibility. It was as if everyone was crippled. [my translation]

What strikes one in Sölle's description of her experience in the church is a deep sense of how the limping congregation becomes not only a symbol, but also the representative reality of another living presence, the presence of the crucified Lamb. The reality of Christ does not lie in a spiritualised experience, but in the real experience of fellowship, mutual caring and a sense of safe comfort.

In Bernanos' (1937:23) novel, the young priest reflects to himself in a similar way:

... we Catholics preach a Spiritualist's Deity, some vague kind of Supreme Being in no way resembling the Risen Lord that we have learned to know as a marvellous and living friend, who suffers our

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2 Even though Bonhoeffer does not directly mention this, the work of Bernanos that he had in mind was most likely his very famous novel *Diary of a country priest*.

pain, takes joy in our happiness, will share our last hour, and will receive us into His arms, upon His heart.

Reading through *The diary of a country priest*, one becomes deeply aware that the priest does not talk about Christ and the earthly body of Jesus Christ, either in abstraction or simply as historical realities. In his daily encounters with the parish, something of what Albert Schweitzer called the “fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain” (1998:128) becomes visible. This is an integral part of what Bonhoeffer noted as the priest’s daily encounters with the Crucified; encounters that made his words saturated with meaning and importance (weight).

Bonhoeffer was adamant that there is no historical access to the person of Jesus Christ that compels us to faith. Access through the historical Jesus is only possible through the Risen One, and then through the proclamation of the Word, the way that Christ bears witness to himself (Bonhoeffer 2008:330). However, the risen Christ proclaimed thus is not a heavenly version of the Christ who once lived, but is, as Bonhoeffer phrased it, “the whole Christ” (2001:202).

And this “whole Christ” was for Bonhoeffer the foundation of reality, of *all* reality. It becomes clear that what Bonhoeffer was doing was, in Ott’s words, to “develop Christology as the ontology of all that is real” (1971:169). For Bonhoeffer, the real is not simply the factual, the empirically verifiable; *it has a new dimension of depth* (Ott 1971:174–175). God is the ultimate reality, the deepest ground of reality. This does not mean that God is dissolved in reality, somehow lost in the world, but exactly as standing above the world, God’s being and pathos, is *for* this world. In Bonhoeffer’s words: “God is in human form! ... The human being living out of the transcendent” (2010:501).

When Bonhoeffer talked about “the whole Christ” and “Christ as the foundation of all reality”, there was an even deeper question at the back of his mind. This is the question that seemed to have captured so much of his attention in his letters and papers from prison. This question also informed his insistence that God be recognised “in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering” (Bonhoeffer 2010:406) and hence we should speak about God not at the

boundaries, but at the centre (Bonhoeffer 2010:366). The ground for this, he said, is in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

This question that he said was “gnawing at him” was: “... who is Christ actually for us today?” (Bonhoeffer 2010:588). It is the answer to this question that marks the ministry and preaching of Bernanos’ priest, that provides the depth from which he spoke. In a certain sense one could say that unless preachers can answer that question, they should not preach.

In Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, the old minister in his letter reflects on the moment that Christ came to him (2004:200):

When I was a young man, the Lord came to me and put His hand on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And He spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He said, Free the captive. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land. That is all Scripture, of course and the words were already very familiar to me at the time. But it is clear enough why He would feel they needed special emphasis. No one lives by them, unless the Lord takes him in hand. Certainly I did not, until the day He stood beside me and spoke those words to me.

What strikes one about the minister’s words is the “sensoriness” of them. There is no doubting the reality of the encounter: It is not only inscribed in his hearing, but also inscribed in his flesh. Who Jesus is, is not a matter of intellectual or academic interest. As Otto Dudzus says, this reality of Christ’s power liberated him from the notion that the Gospel required some or other relevance or something else to make it effective in preaching (1984:38).

The Word of God, for Bonhoeffer, is a living Voice, an active word, a deed-word (*Tatwort*); it is not merely a symbol, but it speaks and hence acts where it is spoken. Bonhoeffer clearly understood the word in its Hebrew meaning: as *dabar*. The word, in the biblical sense of *dabar*, is not something timeless or abstract, but something in which word and deed, speaker and speech are deeply united: acts that speak and the word that contains the acts (see Lose 2019:112; Miskotte 1948:230). Therefore, when the Word is proclaimed, the hearers are confronted by the Living Word. Realising all of this, in the words of Dutch theologian Miskotte (1966), is the Spirit of God,



the presence of God, the Name through which the letter becomes spirit, the story becomes witness, the witness deed and the deed presence.

Bonhoeffer insisted that the proclamation of Christ will not be credible today if Christ is preached “onto reality” (from outside) or if he remains a “part” or reality (there is nothing partial in Christ) (Ott 1971:186). For Bonhoeffer it was simply the reality of God; not the idea of God or God as a symbol, but the reality of Christ as revealed in the world, that made proclamation possible: “What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today* and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God” [emphasis in the original] (Bonhoeffer 2005:55).

This brings us to the second aspect of the depth dimension of reality, something that is illuminated in Bonhoeffer’s response to his correspondent.

### **The depth dimension of reality: Concrete worldliness**

As mentioned earlier, in the correspondence with the woman about the language of preaching, Bonhoeffer referred his correspondent to the work of Bernanos, where he says that when the priest speaks, his words arise from the depth and therefore have weight. Reading through *The diary of a country priest*, one is struck by Bernanos’ literary skills and his insight into humanity. However, what is perhaps even more striking is that there are never any forced attempts at being profound or even “spiritual”. The depth of his writing comes from its directness, from his penetration into the ordinary life, from his personal understanding of the hidden motivations that inform most human thinking and action or often simply from his powers of observation. It comes from his daily encounters with the crucified Christ and the crushed in the world. In a sense it reminds one of what the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal once wrote: “Depth must be hidden. Where? On the surface.” (as cited in Miskotte 1984:328). The deepest truth of life is “hidden” there for all to see in the realities of the world and to encounter in the everyday experiences of the ordinary life.

One sees this concentration on concreteness and worldliness running like a golden thread throughout Bonhoeffer’s writings. The reality of God is

revealed, is seen, and experienced entirely in the reality of the world. In his prison writings this theme took on a more specific character when he referred to this concreteness as “worldliness”. If Christ is the essential Real One, the One who is the origin, essence, and goal of all reality (Bonhoeffer 2005:263), it follows that the encounter with Christ is also an encounter with and within the reality of the world. However, the surprising thing is the place that Bonhoeffer gave to proclamation in this context. He wrote: “A life in genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of Christ crucified; true worldly living is not possible or real in contradiction to the proclamation or side by side with it” (Bonhoeffer 1991:69). What Bonhoeffer was saying here is that the proclamation of Christ reveals the world for what it really is before God. In Christ the world rediscovers its own “worldly” nature and is hence emancipated, liberated by Christ. Hence the danger of secularism lies exactly in a re-religionising of the world. It is only the proclamation of the news that God’s Kingdom has been brought into the world by Christ that allows people to understand the danger of the worship of the world; in other words, the danger of their own self-made religion (Bonhoeffer 1991:70).

And it is exactly in this concrete worldly living where we encounter depth. According to Bonhoeffer, “this-worldliness” was not a shallow worldliness, but one in which we come to know Christ in the midst of our responsibilities, constantly aware of both the reality of death and the hope of resurrection. (Bonhoeffer 2005:246). Bonhoeffer does not expand on what he means by a “shallow worldliness”, but one gets the impression it is what happens when the world becomes separated from Christ, when the world becomes an idol instead of being an icon.

Bonhoeffer deeply valued his encounters with people in their concrete living. It is here where the reality of God is found among the abandoned and the lonely, on the streets. He could revel in the way that the Easter light transfigures, makes the world effusive, allows us to be encountered by the Resurrected Christ (Bonhoeffer 2008:491–492; see also Pasquarello 2017:43–46).

In *Gilead* there is a moment when the old priest was walking up the street to the church. Ahead of him was a young couple strolling in the same direction. The sun had just reappeared after a heavy rain, glistening on

the leaves of the trees. On some impulse the young man grabbed a branch, causing a shower of water to drench the couple, upon which they started running further, laughing exuberantly. The priest comments: "... it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash" (Robinson 2004:31-32).

What both Bonhoeffer and Robinson express is the way that the world becomes the place where God acts, but also how the world becomes the window on God's actions. There is no romanticising of the world, no worship of the world; the world is valued for what it is: not God, but God's creation. And perhaps it is only when preaching becomes "sacramental" in this sense that it has the power to become an encounter with the living God.

Tim Winton captures something of the visceral experience of the preaching that he experienced as a child. He says that not all sermons had the same effect. The worst of them were "like tax seminars or PowerPoint presentations about occupational health and safety". (Winton, 2016:98) But the best of them had the power to sweep them up as fellow wayfarers on a wild ride (Winton 2016:98):

Once the minister got to his feet and took the pulpit in both hands like a man at the wheel of a windjammer, we were all pilgrims and wayfarers in his hands. We sailed with him in search of enlightenment, heavenly treasure, and, in cases of epic length, deliverance by any means ... They [sermons] softened you up, stalked you around corners, and ended up as muggings of the first order. They scrambled your wits, reduced you to rubble, and left you to assemble yourself again as best as you could in the aftermath.

Both what Winton describes and the way he describes it evoke something that is both palpable and real. What happens there is nothing theoretical or abstract, but is deeply anchored in the fears, yearnings, and joy of the ordinary life. Perhaps it is exactly this worldliness that can kindle a sense of wonder, exactly the practical and palpable that power the words.

## The depth dimension of reality: Language

What arise from the depth are words. Words do not merely describe reality. Reality expresses, articulates itself in words. Words are the ways that we commune with the world. For the preacher, this is of utmost importance. And for the woman who corresponded with Bonhoeffer, this was where her most important objection against the preaching of her time was: preachers who allow big and final words – words that people once could barely utter – to casually roll from their lips (Bonhoeffer 1961:41).

Bonhoeffer agreed with her on the need to use big words in a respectful and careful way and that words such as “sin” or “grace” did not have the same sound in the ears of people as they had 2000 years ago, but also insisted that it was not as easy as simply replacing certain well-worn words with more contemporary ones. For example, one cannot simply replace “cross” with “guillotine”. Furthermore, after some time, new words themselves will become worn out in the same way as the old words.

This is the priest’s experience in *Gilead* too: “... how the times change, and the same words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one generation are irksome or meaningless in the next” (Robinson 2004:201).

Bonhoeffer already deeply felt and sensed this, even more towards the end of his life, and particularly in his prison writings. His plea for a non-religious interpretation is very well known in this regard. Many books have been written about it and it has been interpreted in various ways. I concur with many Bonhoeffer scholars that even though Bonhoeffer’s thinking developed over his lifetime, there is nevertheless a greater consistency and coherency about it. (See, among others, Dramm 2007; Feil, 1985; Wüstenberg 1998, and most recently Hooton 2020).

With his non-religious interpretation, Bonhoeffer was not making a plea for the elimination of cult, prayer and preaching, but was rather asking how these could be renewed in a world come of age. New language, said Bonhoeffer, did not so much distinguish itself from the old language in what it can describe, but in what it can beget (see De Lange 1995:24). An important part of this for proclamation is the incarnation, the way that God has become “worldly” in the person of Jesus Christ. A crucial consequence

for Bonhoeffer of this was understanding God, not in a metaphysical sense (behind reality), but in a worldly sense, deeply part of concrete reality. It is my contention that the language of preaching should itself contain something of this concreteness. The places where one sees the power of this type of language are often in literature or in the language of the poets (as shown here in Bernanos, Robinson and Winton). This does not mean that preachers should become poets or that they should aspire to some form of literary excellence in the first place, but rather that the preachers could learn from these writers how to use words that allow the hearer to sense God as concrete a reality as the words that are spoken.<sup>3</sup> In Bonhoeffer's mind, the best potential in this regard was to think about these big words in a new, concrete way, in the way that the Old Testament speaks about them, as words that became flesh (Bonhoeffer 2010:373).

The non-religious future that Bonhoeffer anticipated did not come about in equal parts in the world today, but it certainly has come to fruition in the greatest part of the so-called Western world. Increasingly there is a generation of people that has little or no knowledge or experience of Christianity. We are increasingly seeing people who enter theological colleges or seminaries who had no contact with the church until very much later in their lives. This means that there is now again an opportunity for preachers to think entirely in a new way about the so-called big words of faith, or at the very least that many of those who may potentially sit in the pews will hear these words in an entirely new way.

What I mean by this was illustrated recently in Alexander Deeg's Beecher lectures. He recalled the story of Christian Lehnert, German pastor and poet, who was born and raised in the former German Democratic Republic, where the Christian teachings were completely absent in public life and education. It was in the 80s when he was still a teenager when he found himself one evening attending the gathering of a youth group in Dresden. He describes the experience in the following way (Deeg 2023):

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3 In his letter to the woman who bemoans the lack of erudition in sermons, Bonhoeffer asked, almost rhetorically: "Is it not more important to live and act and die in a Christ-like way with sentimental hymns rather than to ignore necessary decisions with good sixteen hundred hymns?" (1961:44)

I entered into a darkened room. A group of young people sat at a long table. Most were my age; 15 or 16 and as I entered, it suddenly became silent. The table ended in front of a window that was covered with a black blind that at first looked like a hole in the wall. Here Dresden was still a pile of rubble in the early eighties ... Since my childhood I was used to speaking two languages: one at home and one outside. I was brought up to conform. At the same time I was starved of linguistic formulas. Now I was standing in this space capsule. It was floating. Its engine was the light of a slide projector which threw a picture on the wall on which you could see two folded hands. What the pastor was talking about, I don't remember. Nor do I remember how I found a seat at the table. I only remember how my brain got stuck in a language in which the words had a very unusual meaning. A vibration, as if nothing named remained itself. And something jumped at me, spinning me faster and faster round an unknown axis. What the word "peace" meant here had nothing to do with a nuclear threat from the West. When there was talk of truth, no scientific worldview stood threateningly in the room. Only a nebulous pull, groping words which had a magical character that sounded like magical formulas: "Trinity", one in three and two natures. And again and again, the riddle-word "God". From then on nothing was clear anymore. The Christian faith was a permanent irritation for me.

Words that come from the depth have a permanent irritation; they haunt us, they confront us and they do not leave us alone. Perhaps it is exactly because these words do not come from a "religious" context, because there are no religious preconditions to them. Relieved of their "religious" interpretation, they can speak in an altogether different, in a "non-religious" way.

And yet, words could have the same irritation when they come from the depth of a church life. Canadian poet Anne Michaels describes the lasting influence of Greek poetry on her life as follows: "... planting rows of words in me that would grow for the rest of my life" (1998:85). Tim Winton (2016:106-107), whose family was embraced by a Pentecostal group after the motorbike accident of this father, recalls the new language he was exposed to in church:

... it was church that taught me the beauty and power of language. Recited and declaimed from the pulpit week after week and year upon year, these stories, and their cadences ... were deeply imprinted ... I began to see how potent words really are ... [talking about words such as “wine”, “slave” and “fornication”] For some of us, though we didn’t know it yet, there were family traumas lying buried like landmines in those words.

Words are irritations, landmines, potent with a power that comes from their connection with reality, but especially the way that preachers respect them in a way that allow them to have weight and do justice to their depth. Proclamation, as the word of God spoken by God, should be characterised by what John Piper calls a “glad gravity”; not solemnity or a facade of seriousness, but by a deep intensity (see Langley 2018:98). As Bernanos also testifies: “The Word of God is a red-hot iron. And you who preach it, “ud go picking it up with a pair of tongs, for fear of burning yourself, you daren’t get hold of it with both hands” (1937:42).

### **The depth dimension of reality: Silence**

There is a last thing that Bonhoeffer linked with depth in his letter: “The word which springs from a long silence has much more weight than the same word from a chatty person ...” (Bonhoeffer 1961:42). He added that as a pastor, one often has the experience that a bible word, spoken from the mouth of an ill, poor, or lonely person, has a different sound and feel to it. Again, one hears that the meaning and weight that words convey do not necessarily lie in the semantic field of the word only, but in the context and the experience from which it speaks. The words of preaching are deeply embedded and grow like rows of words also from the preacher’s life.

This theme of silence is one that surfaces very often in Bonhoeffer’s writing. Silence represented for Bonhoeffer something of the waiting for the Word. In this sense it functions almost like a symbol. If God’s Word can only be spoken by God, then it means that the reception of that word requires the hearer to be silent. In the introduction to his Christology lectures in the summer of 1933, Bonhoeffer said: “The silence of the church is silence before the Word ... To speak of Christ is to be silent, and to be silent about

Christ is to speak ... The church's speech through silence is the right way to proclaim Christ." (Bonhoeffer 2009:300–301).

In the first sentence of this lecture, Bonhoeffer clearly demarcated the silence before the Word from the silence of the mystics: It has nothing to do with the chattering of the soul to itself. For Bonhoeffer, the silence before the Word pointed to the human inability to speak the Word of God, to the reality of the Holy Spirit as the real speaker in the room. In *Life together*, Bonhoeffer further expanded on this by saying that "we keep silent solely for the sake of the Word" (1954:79). In other words, we are silent so that the Word can speak.

Therefore, silence as the depth dimension of reality is the condition of proclamation. It is, as Winton rightly says, a peculiar task to describe silence. The silence into which the Word speaks is never an empty silence, but a silence saturated with anticipation and longing. Silence is our humility before the Word, but also our respect for the deep mystery of being and hence the vulnerability of words. Silence is the recognition of the truth of Bonhoeffer's claim that the problem is not too much preaching, but too much false preaching (2000). Silence is the paradoxical bind that preachers continually find themselves in: We cannot preach and yet we have to speak. Silence is the affirmation of Leonard Cohen's plea: "O bless thee continuous stutter of the word made into flesh."<sup>4</sup>

Silence in this sense is both a gift and a discipline. It is something that the Spirit mediates, but at the same time it requires work and practice. The discipline of this silence, says Bonhoeffer, requires the daily courage to open our deepest thoughts and desires before God and allow ourselves to be judged by them (Bonhoeffer 2008:504). When this happens, the prayer of the Psalmist (Ps 62:2) for his soul to be silent before God is realised.

The depth dimension of silence lies in what Frits De Lange calls "the excess of the Word, not a silence that arises from the Word withdrawing itself" (1995:82). Or one could say it arises from the silence of the depth of the eternal Logos itself.

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4 From the song "The Window" on the album *Recent Songs* (1979).



## Conclusion

There is a strange paradox to the way words function today. On the one hand, through the influence of, among other things, social media, words are often used lightly, perhaps unthinkingly and without much care. On the other hand, words also seem to have become hand grenades that could violently explode on the marketplace of public discourse; they require “trigger warnings”, and people’s entire right to speech could be “cancelled” due to the sin of an inappropriate or wrong word.

One could only pity preachers who are expected to say something profound but also not too much or too long, who have to navigate their words through the narrow channels of meaning, carefully avoiding the dangerous cliffs of boredom and offence. Perhaps, more than relevance, this is the crisis of preaching today: how to plant rows of words that can not only grow in us but grow *us*.

In this regard, the times we live in offer both a challenge and an opportunity: The challenge is that the words we use are often worn out by the erosion of shallowness or the casual way we take big words on our lips. In this regard, Bonhoeffer’s correspondent did not only articulate the crisis of her time, but also the crisis of our time. And I would like to suggest that we listen closely to Bonhoeffer’s advice, that the preacher’s response to this should not be to aim for fewer words or more fashionable words, but for words that arise from the depth, words that are nourished by the fertile soil of reality.

It is here that Christ, who is the truth and the way and the life, becomes again incarnated in the lives and the words of the preachers, filling their words with presence, silence and grace. And it is here that the preacher again discovers the truth of Bernanos’ advice: “You can’t go offering the truth to human beings as though it were a sort of insurance policy, or a dose of salts. It’s the Way and the Life. We only look as though we were bringing it to mankind; really it brings us, my lad” (1937:67).

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