

FOREWORD

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is usually not remembered as a preacher. Although he preached throughout his adult life, there were only two relatively brief periods in which he actually preached every Sunday to a congregation. Both periods were in parishes outside Germany. In 1928, he served as pastoral assistant vicar to the overseas German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, Spain, and then from October 1933 to the spring of 1935 he was the pastor to two German-speaking congregations in London. In addition, he served briefly as a student chaplain in Berlin, and over the years he preached to students, confirmation classes, Sunday schools, and as the occasional guest preacher in churches, and of course he lectured extensively on preaching to his seminarians at the illegal Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde from 1935 to 1937. There are seventy-one complete sermons or homilies in the collected works—more, however, if we include the Bible studies and the circular letters he wrote to his students (many of which are indeed sermon-like; they are certainly reflections on Scripture and how he thought it was speaking to the concerns of his students and the issues of the times).

Bonhoeffer believed that preaching—the proclamation of the word of God as revealed in Scripture—was the very heart of Christian life and worship. But it became something more than that after January 30, 1933. During the Nazi years, Bonhoeffer understood his sermons both as a way of confessing his faith and as a prophetic means to call his church and his

students to withstand the ideological spirit of the times. In addition, the act of writing and preaching a sermon became for him a source of spiritual discipline and strength—in fact, I do not think that we can understand Bonhoeffer the resistance figure or Bonhoeffer the theologian without understanding Bonhoeffer the preacher.

Simply in terms of their language and theology, many of Bonhoeffer's sermons have a beauty and power of their own. Yet when read in the immediate historical context of when they were preached—whether in Barcelona in 1928 or Berlin in 1933 or London in early 1935 or in Finkenwalde in 1938—they gain an added power and depth, for only then can we begin to understand how Dietrich Bonhoeffer was actively engaging the issues of his times and his church through his preaching.

This volume of sermons selected from the new English translations of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works is a significant and long-overdue addition to the literature on Bonhoeffer. Here for the first time is a carefully chosen collection of his sermons, taken from throughout his preaching life, that gives us a full portrait of Bonhoeffer the preacher. Translator Isabel Best, who translated volumes 12 (*Berlin: 1933*) and 13 (*London: 1933–1935*) of the Bonhoeffer Works and contributed to several other volumes, may be considered an expert on the sermons, their nuances and their power. In addition to selecting these sermons, she has provided a helpful introduction to the collection as well as an introduction to each sermon that gives us not only the crucial historical background for each one but also conveys how Bonhoeffer's audiences—whether they were diplomats in Barcelona or young seminarians in Finkenwalde—would have heard and understood his words.

Most importantly, she understands how we—today—might hear these words. This anthology is a powerful illustration of the extent to which these sermons, preached so long ago and in a very different world, nonetheless speak to Christians today. Bonhoeffer's writings are remarkable not only because of his poignant life and powerful message under National Socialism but also because he wrote and spoke in a language that has stood the test of time. He had a gift for expressing the very essence of the Christian message and what it means to live the Christian life of faith in this world, and as a result his writings are still read and pondered by Christians around the world and at all points of the theological spectrum.

Nowhere is that clearer than in his sermons. In October 1933, in his very first sermon in London, Bonhoeffer preached on the relationship between pastor and congregation, and he spoke at length about what it meant to preach:

This is what makes a sermon something unique in all the world, so completely different from any other kind of speech. When a preacher opens the Bible and interprets the word of God, a mystery takes place, a miracle: the grace of God, who comes down from heaven into our midst and speaks to us, knocks on our door, asks questions, warns us, puts pressure on us, alarms us, threatens us and makes us joyful again, and free, and certain. When the Holy Scriptures are brought to life in a church, the Holy Spirit comes down from the eternal throne into our hearts, and the busy world outside sees nothing and does not realize at all that God could actually be found here.

God is with us. In the midst of our own busy and very troubled world, this book of the sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer will be welcomed by those who seek to understand their own path in our own times.

Victoria J. Barnett
General Editor
Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English Edition