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**Living into our Name (Matthew 10. 17-20)**

Sarah Bachelard

These words of Jesus are spoken to his disciples, the twelve. He's sending them out into the world to make a difference. To cure the sick and restore lepers to community; to bring peace by casting out divisive spirits and to share what they've learnt about reality from him. Jesus tells them to go out humbly, generously, undefendedly, without seeking honour or reward. 'You received without payment', he tells them, so 'give without payment'. Be part of the whole, vulnerable, present, available, as bringers of life. But then comes the surprising bit. It turns out that this life-giving, generous, healing way of being may prove threatening to some. So Jesus warns: 'they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me'.

As you know, this weekend the Dirrum Dirrum centre here at Radford College is hosting a conference. It's called 'Living into our Name: a story of humanity, reality and power'. An extraordinary group of guest speakers has been sharing their stories of seeking the world's healing. And, just as our gospel reading foretells, some of them also have stories to tell of violence and threat unleashed upon them in repayment. It's a strange world we inhabit – now, no less than in Jesus' day.

Jesus' advice about how to handle all this is not, at first glance, terribly comforting. '*When* they hand you over' (not 'if', note), don't worry about what you will say. It won't be you who speaks, but the Spirit of God, the Spirit of your Father speaking through you ... The problem is that the Spirit of God appears not, on such occasions, to

be very conciliatory. This reading is set for the feast day of St Stephen which we mark on Monday. When Stephen was arrested, brought before the council and charged with blasphemy, the Spirit of God descended all right, and gave him plenty to say. But what he said so inflamed his judges, that he was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. So when Jesus promises that the Spirit of the Father will speak through you, it may not always be to your earthly advantage. The more transparent you are to the voice of God, the worse it might go for you. For, as T.S. Eliot once said, the world can't bear very much reality.

Why then would we take the risk? Well, the difficult truth is that my reality, my authenticity, my power are all functions of the extent to which I am open to what is ultimately Real. If I collude with unreality – within and around me – I may have the illusion of security; but in the end I lose myself. And as Jesus said: 'What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul'. The invitation of my life is to become who I am, to 'live into my name'. And in the end, that is also the gift I have for the world. It's what the world needs of me.

So, we know that and – although it can take discernment and patience to 'hear' our name more clearly, although we may need courage to stay faithful to what we've heard – at one level, it seems pretty straightforward. But there's another level to this mystery of hearing and living into our name which is less often acknowledged. It's that sometimes, the very journey of deepening integrity and faithfulness leads, not only to collision with the powers of this world, but also beyond any felt sense that I'm on the right track. Just when I think I'm being truest to myself, doing what I *must* do, the way can dissolve beneath my feet. I can be overwhelmed by experiences of suffering and the seeming absence of God. And so just when I most need the assurance that I *am* growing in truthfulness and authenticity, I find I don't know who I am any more. I can't be sure

I'm not just deluded, kidding myself. And, any sense of there being a way to travel, a point to it all, melts away. I am power-less, lost, in the dark.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, fiercely convicted of the evil of Nazism and refusing to collude with genocide, suffered this mystery of self-loss deeply. Just when he most needed the consolation of a sense of his own integrity and the meaning of his life, there was nothing. Under sentence of death, in his prison cell, his name fell away.

Who am I?, he wrote. He's starkly aware of the difference between how he appears to others, and how he feels. They think – I'm calm, at peace, and sure, he writes; but

Am I ... really that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?  
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,  
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,  
Tossing in expectations of great events,  
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

And this, I think is where we glimpse the deeper mystery of what it means to live into our name. In God, we are always becoming who we are and our names do not belong to us as possessions. Sometimes *our* sense of who we are and what it's all about will be stretched to breaking point – under pressure of imprisonment, torture, affliction, and the threat of death; under pressure of shame, failure, rejection and misunderstanding. We've tried to walk truthfully, and it's led to here - to the painful dissolution of the very identity we thought we were called to be true to.

And when that happens, it might be as much as we can manage to keep trusting that God knows who we are, that the Spirit will speak for us, and that Christ who

underwent just this dissolution of meaning and identity, will hold us in our passage from death to life. In the end, that is where Bonhoeffer staked his life.

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

As we stay faithful to our journeys into reality, giving ourselves more completely to the lives to which we are called, we too may undergo times where we lose a sense of who we are, where there's nothing left but rest on this assurance. And that, paradoxically, is how we live most deeply into our names. For, as St Paul wrote: 'you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory'.