Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

After a two-year imprisonment, Bonhoeffer was hanged in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, for complicity in an assassination plot against Adolf Hitler. A Lutheran pastor and theologian, Bonhoeffer had objected to Germany’s anti-Jewish legislation in 1933, consequently being forced from his pulpit and into exile. In London, he temporarily ministered to German congregations. Just before World War II, he was invited to the U.S. for a lecture tour and refused the political asylum that was offered. He returned to Germany as the war began, joining the Resistance forces in his homeland. Bonhoeffer’s best known works are The Cost of Discipleship (1948), Letters and Papers from Prison (1953), and Ethics (1955). His writings attest to an emerging theological system that, though incomplete, is rich in suggestive detail. A persuasive and unifying theme is that there is no separation of the religious realm from the secular. Significantly, when he spoke of the earth, Bonhoeffer frequently added “in which the Cross of Jesus Christ is planted.” The Christian, in other words, must identify with and suffer for the world as did Christ. In the summer of 1944, while imprisoned in Tegel, Berlin’s military prison, Bonhoeffer wrote “Who Am I?”

Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell’s confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Am I then 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 expectation 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.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

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