

# The Way to Freedom

## Week 6: Death

### Summary

In this 6th and final week, after looking at the 4th verse, *Death*, in Bonhoeffer's poem '*Stations on the Way to Freedom*', we shall:

- ✦ Ponder the intimate connection between death and resurrection in the Holy Week and Easter story
- ✦ Ask whether some of our conceptions about the 'afterlife' divert us from the fact of death instead helping us to face and truly overcome it.
- ✦ Study how John's account of 'Palm Sunday' weaves death and life together so that through love death is drawn into life instead of life ending in death.
- ✦ Look at Paul's teaching of baptism as a sharing of Christ's death and resurrection and the significance of this for our search for Christian unity.
- ✦ Ask whether violent death can ever be justified by expediency without simply allowing and encouraging further violence.
- ✦ Look at recent examples of where the aftermath of violent death has not been a continuation of violence but an attempt to overcome it.
- ✦ Reflect on the course as a whole and what we have learnt about *Freedom* in it – and where we can go from here.

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Church of England in Britain and Ireland

## Death

Come now, highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal,  
Death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish  
the walls of our temporal body the walls of our soul which is  
blinded, that we might at last behold what here we are hindered  
from seeing.

Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action and  
suffering.

Dying, we know thee now in the visage of God.<sup>1</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in prison 1944

## The End ~ For Me The Beginning Of Life

It was to be a full eight months after writing this poem in late July or early August 1944 that Bonhoeffer actually faced 'the highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal'.

But the subject of death had long engaged him, as with so many people caught in a grim war situation, even before his arrest and imprisonment. After the failure of the July 20 plot and the renewed attention consequently being paid to all those suspected of opposition to the regime, he now could have little doubt what his end would be.

It eventually came on 9 April 1945 - barely a month before the war in Europe ended – at the Flossenbürg execution camp in Bavaria.

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Some readers may be familiar with a rather pious account of his death as recorded by a 'camp doctor', of Bonhoeffer kneeling to pray before taking off his clothes, kneeling to pray again at the foot of the gallows, and then devoutly and calmly accepting the death which 'ensued after a few seconds'. This is now known to be largely fiction. Quite apart from the fact that the SS guards would never allow such pieties, more recent investigations have established that the deaths of Bonhoeffer and the other six conspirators hanged that morning at Flossenbürg each took up to forty minutes and consisted of barbarically slow, repeated strangulations, the role of the 'doctor' being to revive the victim at intervals: a final vengeful sadism on the part of the regime.

Nevertheless – and more importantly - what we do also know is that the previous day, on being removed by the Gestapo from a transport of prisoners being taken south, Bonhoeffer's parting words to a British prisoner were: *'This is the end – for me the beginning of life'*.



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## Via the Cross to Easter

We reach the conclusion of this Lent course as we come to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Over the next few days our minds will be focusing on Jesus' cross and resurrection, on death and life. On Palm Sunday in many churches we shall hear read the whole of the passion narrative according to one or other of the Gospel writers. The next Sunday we shall once again be joyfully singing:

*'Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!'*

Members of the group may like to share with each other on how they find the move from Good Friday to Easter Day. Can we really do justice to both in almost the same breath? Can we really take seriously the agony in the garden, 'the cruel nails and crown of thorns' when we 'know' there will be a happy about-turn on Easter morning? And what are we really celebrating in the resurrection of Jesus?

Was his death so awful a thing if it was overcome so quickly? Is all the emotion of Holy Week now to be written off and forgotten? Or is there something not quite right in our usual way of observing and celebrating these events?

All this of course is bound up with our wider attitudes to death and eternal life – issues which are either hugely difficult for many people in western society today or thought to be totally irrelevant.

In the first place, do we even as Christians take death seriously enough? Some argue that Christianity by its particular and sometimes detailed conceptions of the 'afterlife' has in effect bypassed rather than faced the stark fact of death. In her recent novel *Great House* Nicole Krauss has one of her Jewish characters saying caustically:

*How do people in the group feel and think about 'heaven' and 'eternal life'? At all?*

*With definite pictures or concepts in mind?*

*"The Christian has populated death so fully that he has excused himself altogether from the need to wrap his mind around the end of his existence."* <sup>3</sup>

*Or as something so far beyond our ken it's not worth bothering with?*



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## Speaking of Heaven

*“Some people may decide that biblical language of heaven is too far removed from our own world view to allow us to use it today. Others, myself included, would prefer to continue to use the language because it is so important in the biblical tradition, but to find ways of reflecting on how we can make it more resonant today. Either way, biblical language of heaven challenges us into an act of poetic imagination which takes seriously the reality of God and the reality of a realm beyond our own, governed not by the principles that so easily drive us but by a different way of being ruled by love, compassion, justice and righteousness.”*

*Paula Gooder, Heaven (SPCK 2011).*

In a well-known poem, often quoted at funerals, Canon Henry Scott-Holland (1847-1918) said that ‘Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped through the door into the next room’. Isobel de Gruchy, South African Christian poet and painter, offered her own comment on this after the death by drowning of her grown-up son Steve in 2010:

*The poet says that “Death is nothing at all,  
I have only slipped through the door  
into the next room” –  
but what help is that to us?  
for the door is firmly shut,  
and there is no coming back.  
“Those who believe shall never die” –  
but what help is that to us?  
for they do, really:  
they are no longer with us,  
to fetch the kids,  
to pay the bills,  
to call and say Hi!*

*Even if “Death is nothing at all”,  
and the dead live  
and see us and know,  
from that next room,  
What help is that to us,  
who wake on this earth,  
and go about our daily tasks  
with a black hole in the middle  
of our world?*

### A black hole in the middle of our world

The question is, what do we do with that ‘black hole’?  
Pretend it is not there, in a state of denial? Attempt to  
fill it in with sentimental trivia?

Or, can we hope to see it as something that is maybe not  
removed but transformed in the service of life?



*Turn over  
for the First Palm  
Sunday Bible Input...*



# Bible Input (1)

## The Way to Freedom Week 6: Death

### John 12:12-36: Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!' <sup>14</sup>Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: <sup>15</sup>'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' <sup>16</sup>His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. <sup>17</sup>So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. <sup>18</sup>It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. <sup>19</sup>The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

### Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

### Jesus Speaks about His Death

<sup>27</sup>'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. <sup>34</sup>The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' <sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. <sup>36</sup>While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.' After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

?

What do these passages  
say about the meaning of death?

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## Interpretation

In this passage, John the Evangelist tells the Palm Sunday events in an extraordinary way that seems to blend Jesus' forthcoming death and his resurrection at almost every turn. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem with the story of the recent raising of Lazarus buzzing in everyone's ears (v.17) – a sign whose public impact in turn prompts the Pharisees to even greater opposition to him (v.19) and thus ironically adds to the momentum leading towards Good Friday. That Jesus is the resurrection and the life leads to his own crucifixion! Jesus' response to the Greeks' desire to 'see him' (v.21) is to speak of the hour of his being 'glorified' as having now arrived (v. 23). But as we saw last week, the climax of his being glorified will, strangely, be his death. In verse 24, Jesus uses the picture of the grain of wheat as the simplest yet greatest parable of all: the necessity of its disappearing, burial and dying to itself if it is to bear fruit. It is not despite, but because of, the seed's dying to itself that there will be a harvest of life. The following verses speak again of the unique 'glorifying' of Jesus by his Father, and the double meaning of his being 'lifted up' – on a shameful instrument of public torture to death, which is at the same time his exaltation as the Son who fully reveals the love of his Father for 'all people' (v.32).



We might say, then, that according to the Gospel message death is defeated not by being denied, or the pretence that it is illusory (*"Death is nothing at all"*). It is very real. It is not however more real than God, and God has chosen death as the way of revealing his own eternal life of holy love. Life is not finally swallowed up in death, but death is drawn into life, the way of self-giving love which we see in Jesus. Of course we have the Christian hope. We can be confident that death does not have the last word. It is God who will have the last word, the God who is eternally alive and who wills to draw us up into his life for all eternity. But God also has the *first* word, the word that claims us and offers us life-through-death now in the midst of our earthly life. That word calls us to follow Jesus and share the cross now and each day (vv 25-26).

Bonhoeffer writes from prison:

*The Christian hope of resurrection is different from the mythological in that it refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way . . . Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity. Like Christ ('My God . . . why have you forsaken me?') they have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and risen with Christ.* <sup>5</sup>

In this vein of not rushing too quickly to other-worldly consolation, here is another poem by Isobel de Gruchy, written out of her grief and drawing upon the writing of the mystic Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1416)...

# You Will Not Be Overcome

## The Way to Freedom Week 6: Death

In my deep distress, O Lord,  
I turned to your promises;  
I shouted them to you;  
I flung them back at you:

"The Lord protects you;"  
"The Lord will deliver you,"  
"No evil will befall you,  
for his angels will bear you up  
so that you do not dash your foot  
against a stone."

I clung to these, O Lord,  
but there was no protection;  
no deliverance – no angels  
to lift our son up – only the stones  
dashing his head – the waters covering him,  
death claiming him,  
What about your promises –  
O Lord, where were you?

Then I remembered those other promises;  
promises that Jesus made:  
"The way is hard and narrow."  
"You have a cross to carry daily."  
"The world will hate you."

For he did not say,  
"You will not be tempted,  
You will not be troubled,  
You will not be distressed."  
But he did promise,  
"you will not be overcome."

No easy ride, no special privileges,  
cling only to his promise to love you:  
whether things are going well,  
or everything is falling apart,  
be strong in your faithful trust,  
for you will not be overcome. <sup>6</sup>

What do you think is distinctive about the Christian  
belief in death and eternal life? Do you agree with  
Bonhoeffer's statement quoted above? What is the 'wholly new way'  
of life that the resurrection gives us now?

What difference can the Easter message claim to make to our secular society today?

Secular or non-religious funerals are becoming increasingly frequent today. If you have  
experience of these you may like to share your reactions to them in the group.

What do they illustrate about attitudes to death today?

Turn over  
for the second Palm  
Sunday Bible Input...



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## Bible Input (2)

### Romans 6:1-11: Dying and Rising with Christ

<sup>1</sup>What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?

<sup>2</sup>By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? <sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup>For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup>We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup>For whoever has died is freed from sin. <sup>8</sup>But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup>We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup>The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup>So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In the ancient Church, the season of Lent was the time of preparation of those to be baptised at Easter. It is therefore appropriate also to reflect on the meaning of our baptism, as more than just a formal 'rite of passage'. Paul says that in baptism we are 'baptized into Christ Jesus' and 'baptized into his death'. In our relationship to Jesus Christ we are anticipating both our death and our resurrection into eternal life. It is a 'newness of life' in which we now walk.



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Much has been made in ecumenical discussion in recent years of our 'common baptism' as Christians, and that recognition of one another's baptism is a vital step on the way to visible Christian unity. How might Paul's understanding of baptism as a sharing in Christ's death and resurrection be important in taking us further on this way?

Notice that in Bonhoeffer's verse on death as the 'highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal' his emphasis is that the fullest sight of freedom is God's own self – 'Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face'. He does not try to answer the question 'What will heaven be like?' or 'What will actually happen to me when I die?' beyond saying that it is the point when we shall be utterly open to God, who is in himself the perfect freedom of love, who in Jesus chose death – the laying down of life in complete freedom – as the only adequate way to show who he is eternally. For ourselves in turn to let go and finally surrender to that presence and vision will be the greatest act of freedom conceivable for us. Or, as the First Letter of John puts it: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (3.2) That is a fearfully inspiring thought, which John immediately goes on to bring down to earth: 'And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' (v.3).

*In what way  
would you suggest the  
Churches, as well as individual  
Christians, need to be purified in order  
to bear witness to this hope in him?*

# The Way to Freedom Week 6: Death

## Death ~

## Something to be Made Use Of?

So far we have been looking at death, first, as something to be faced by ourselves either in our own mortality or the pain brought by the death of those we love and whose death means a kind of ending of our own lives as we have known them hitherto; and second, as something transformed by Jesus who freely died to show us what it means to say that 'God is love'.

But what about the taking of another person's life, in whatever circumstances or for whatever reason? This raises the most profound questions about the taking of human life and in what circumstances if any it can ever be justified. The areas we could touch on are of course huge and varied, including war and pacifism, abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, capital punishment . . . and so on. However tempting, there is not time on this course and at this late stage to embark even on just one of these! Except, that if a group did wish to do so the most fruitful way might be for the members to share honestly what their standpoints are on any one of these topics but also to try and understand just how their belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus actually shapes their particular view.

Being confronted with violent death puts to the test all our *'humane'* and *'Christian'* instincts. In the light of the Holy Week and Easter story, however, we shall ask here whether there can be a response to violent death which brings freedom for a new beginning in human community, instead of locking us into an unending cycle of violence and revenge.

## Making Use of Death: Continuing the Violence?

Let us back-track a little in the Gospel story, to John's account of the reaction of the chief priests and Pharisees to the raising of Lazarus:

### John 11:45-53: The Plot to Kill Jesus

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! <sup>50</sup> You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' <sup>51</sup> He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Turn over  
for discussion on  
'expediency'...



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## For Discussion

Is the 'expediency' argument (see v.50 ever justified? Terrorist mass attacks on innocent people, like the 9/11 attacks in the USA or the London bombings of July 2005, will of course be condemned out of hand by the great majority. Yet these acts are rarely 'mindless', to use the instant rhetoric of politicians and newspaper editors. They are the product of a calculation, however perverse it may seem, that for the ultimate defence or justification of the position of a particular group means must be taken to intimidate, to unleash chaos, and thus demoralise the opposition to one's SUPPOSEDLY righteous political or religious cause. This is the ultimate in expediency. That end justifies these means: most of us find this idea repugnant. But what of eliminating the obviously and criminally evil person? Bonhoeffer was involved in a conspiracy which, in order to succeed, had ultimately to involve the assassination of Adolf Hitler. It is known that Bonhoeffer as a Christian had misgivings about this ultimate course but could see no alternative, and regarded his complicity in the guilt of the assassination attempt as part of the price and sacrifice that had to be paid under the judgment of God upon his nation. In our own time, few tears would be shed for Osama Bin Laden, taken and shot by a US unit in Pakistan, or for Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, killed after capture in the final days of the civil war in Libya. Yet by no means everyone is happy about the manner and motivations of their killings, in the context of international law and as regards their longer-term implications for the resolution of conflict.

*Do such deaths really remove the source of the conflict or do they leave violence embedded in the system or possibly even more entrenched?*

*Is there such a thing as a 'just assassination'?*

## Making Use of Death: Taking Out the Violence

### Standing Against Violence: Example 1

On 25 September 2005 17-year-old Lloyd Fouracre was leaving a friend's 18th birthday party in Taunton, Somerset, when he and his friends were attacked by a group of youths. He was hit over the head with a wooden parking sign, rendering him unconscious. His attackers then continued to beat Lloyd until they were interrupted by a passing car. Lloyd was taken to hospital where he was pronounced dead 30 minutes later. A post-mortem examination revealed he had suffered fractures to the skull, cheekbone, jaw, eye socket, nasal bone and suffered multiple brain haemorrhages. He would have had his own 18th birthday on September 26, the day after he died. After a four-week trial at Exeter Crown Court two of the accused youths were found guilty of murder and received long prison sentences for what was described in court as '*unprovoked and extreme violence*'. The Fouracre family were of course devastated by the murder: '*Lloyd's death means a big part of our family is missing. He's never going to be forgotten*', says his brother Adam, a nurse at Musgrove Park Hospital. Adam, however, decided early on that Lloyd should be remembered in a way that would somehow bring good to the community. He began a '*Campaign for Lloyd*' designed to increase police presence and public awareness about violence in the area, and he collected 26,000 signatures from people condemning violence. This however was presently re-launched as the '*Stand Against Violence*' programme, its main aim being to bring home to secondary school students and other organisations working with young people the effects of violence and how it needs to be dealt with. It includes film, resources and talks not only for schools but also pubs, night clubs and youth clubs.

Adam's own particular contribution has been to produce a video about Lloyd and his death, which was launched in September 2011, the sixth anniversary of the murder. He says: '*The video builds up a picture of Lloyd and our family as very normal, and then goes into a re-enactment of what happened. It shows how quickly things can get out of hand. I'm hoping it will make people think about the consequences of their actions.*' The video can be viewed on the website of Stand Against Violence: [www.sav-ed.co.uk](http://www.sav-ed.co.uk).

*Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*

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## Standing Against Violence:

### Example 2

During the riots that took place in August 2011 in British cities, three young Asian Muslim men were killed on Dudley Road in Birmingham. They had been standing peacefully on the pavement trying to protect local businesses when a car mowed them down. The father of one of those who were killed, Tariq Jahan, spoke out at the time and the following day with great dignity and courage, to an angry crowd some of whom were calling for revenge.

He said: *'Remain calm. Our family has received messages of support and sympathy from all sections of the community and all faiths. We all live in the same community. Why do we have to kill one another? Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise calm down and go home.'*

This turned a tragedy with potentially dangerous consequences into an inspiring example. It was followed by a large gathering of local people, black, white and Asian, in a nearby park, pledging to work together for peace and the support of all faiths at the funeral of the three murdered men a few days later.

We can take such real-life stories as parables of what can happen, of the redemptive 'use' that can be made even of violent death as a prompting to reconciliation and healing instead of a legacy of revenge and continued violence.

*Can you think of other such stories, especially any from your own community?*

## Anticipations of the Kingdom?

Or we might say that such good or redemptive happenings are the anticipations of the kingdom and the glory of God which can't completely hold itself in for 'eternity' but is even now running down from the gates of heaven to meet us and give us a taste of that freedom which will be ours in fullness, and can begin to transform our life and world here and now? But the way in which it meets us is in a life of dying to self and rising to newness of life in love.

*In what ways might the churches themselves be such parables today, and so become more truly free?*

## A Last Word from Bonhoeffer...

To recall Bonhoeffer again:

*'To be free is to be in love, is to be in the truth of God.*

*The one who loves because made free by the truth of God, is the most revolutionary person on earth'.*

### References

<sup>1</sup>4th verse, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom'. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Fortress Press 2009), p514

<sup>2</sup> 'A Report from Flossenbürg' in Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (eds), I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Collins 1973), p232.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Krauss, Great House (Penguin 2010), p174.

<sup>4</sup> Isobel de Gruchy, In Well and in Woe. Poems. Published privately, Volmoed, Hermanus, South Africa 2010. <sup>5</sup> Letters and Papers from Prison, p447f. <sup>6</sup> In Well and in Woe.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, The Enlarged Edition, SCM Press 1971 © SCM Press. Used by permission of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, SCM Press 1955. Used by permission of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd.



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# *The Way to Freedom* *Concluding Questions*

## *Your Experience*

*Think back to the first week of this course. What do you think you have learnt about freedom since then, or in what ways have your views developed?*

*Is there any particular point on this 'Way to Freedom' that has struck you as especially important –*

- + for yourself personally?*
- + for your church?*
- + for your community?*

*If so, what do you hope and plan to do about it?*

*As an individual or group you were invited at the beginning to compose a prayer for your use throughout Lent. As you have gone on praying it, has it opened up meanings for you that you had not been aware of at first?*

*As a result of sharing in this course, is there some aspect of Christian life and thought that you would now like to go on and explore more fully?*

*Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*

Designed and edited by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

39 Eccleston Square

London SW1V 1BX

info@ctbi.org.uk

Tel: 08456 806 851

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