28 July 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology
‘Making Christian Sense of the Futile Gesture’

A week ago, yesterday, was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the launching of the most famous plot to assassinate Hitler, and to effect regime-change in Nazi Germany. And at evensong the day before, we in this cathedral commemorated all those who had lost their lives resisting Nazism in Germany, as well as their advocates in this country, not least our own Bishop George Bell. After the service we gathered in the Bell Chapel to light a candle in their memory, and to hear a number of readings. One of those readings referred to our first lesson this morning.

The context was this. On the morning of the 20th July 1944 Claus von Stauffenberg arrived at the German army’s headquarters in east Prussia, and at half past twelve he entered the room where Hitler was conferring with his generals. Shortly afterwards Stauffenberg left the room, leaving his briefcase behind under the conference table. At 12.40 the bomb inside the briefcase exploded.

In the early hours of the following day, one of Stauffenberg’s co-conspirators who was stationed on the eastern front, Henning von Tresckow, discovered that the assassination attempt had failed, and that Hitler had survived the bomb-blast. Fearing that he wouldn’t be able to withstand torture at the hands of the Gestapo, and that he would be forced to betray his comrades, he coolly told a friend that he intended to commit suicide. The next morning, armed with two hand-grenades he drove out into no-man’s land and blew himself up. But before he took final leave of his friend, he said this:

The whole world will vilify us now, but I am still totally convinced that we did the right thing. Hitler is the archenemy not only of Germany but of the world. When, in a few hours’ time, I go before God to account for what I have done and left undone, I know that I will be able to justify in good conscience what I did in the struggle against Hitler. God promised Abraham that He would not destroy
In our lesson this morning from the Book of Genesis, Abraham successfully persuaded God to temper his anger with justice, to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty, and to spare Sodom for the sake of just ten righteous men. Nevertheless, it seems that the city lacked even ten, for God, having warned Lot and his kin to flee, proceeded to destroy it utterly. Abraham’s pleading may have tempered God’s anger, but it didn’t save Sodom.

Nor did Henning von Tresckow’s courageous, righteous venture save Germany. For in the following twelve months his country was devastated. Indeed, one British officer, surveying the ruins of occupied Berlin after the war’s end, was convinced that Germany would never again rise above the level of a primitive agricultural society.

This raises for us the question of how to make sense of the futile gesture, the noble attempt that fails, the risky investment in justice and truth that turns tragically, fatally bad. One thought-provoking answer was given by another German who resisted the Nazi regime. Helmuth James von Moltke knew many of those involved in the plot to kill Hitler in July 1944, but he wasn’t among them. Although born an aristocrat, he was also a Christian socialist and believed that Germany’s salvation required much more than a coup d’état by conservative soldiers; it needed unambiguous, catastrophic defeat to clear the way for radical reconstruction. To that end, he hosted a series of religiously and politically ecumenical meetings on his estate at Kreisau—then in Silesia, now in southwest Poland—to plan for the rebuilding of his country after the fall of the regime.

In one sense, von Moltke’s brave efforts, like von Tresckow’s, were in vain. In the vengeful aftermath of the July 1944 plot, he rang a friend to warn him that the Gestapo were onto him. But his phone was tapped. So, von Moltke himself was arrested, and in January 1945 he was tried and hanged at the age of thirty-eight, leaving behind him a wife and two young children. His brave efforts didn’t stop the murderous onward march of the regime. The Nazi juggernaut crushed him, and proceeded on its ruthless way.

But, remarkably, von Moltke had anticipated this. Early on in the war, he had appreciated how unlikely it was that his efforts would succeed, and he’d wrestled with
making sense of what he was doing, with the justification for taking terrible risks in a probably doomed cause. In October 1941 he had written to his wife, Freya:

At four o’clock I woke up and thought about Kreisau, my family, and the war. I became aware of a change that has taken place in me during the war, which I can only ascribe to a deeper insight into Christian principles…. The realization that what I do is senseless does not stop my doing it, because I am much more firmly convinced than before that only what is done in the full recognition of the senselessness of all action makes any sense at all.ii

“Only what is done in the full recognition of the senselessness of all action makes any sense at all”. The remark is cryptic, but the meaning it struggles to express, I think, is this: that the significance of what we do doesn’t lie so much in its effectiveness—in what it effects or brings about or achieves—as in what it says, in what it points to, in what it reveals.

This abstract point takes on flesh in the final letter that von Moltke wrote to Freya just after the trial in which he had been condemned to death and a few days before his execution. Here he speaks of how he now sees, with wonderment, the whole of his life as a journey of preparation, bringing him to a place where he can affirm, clearly and unequivocally, not just with words but in his very person, what is true and just and of enduring value:

Just think how wonderfully God prepared this, his unworthy vessel. At the very moment when there was danger that I might be drawn into the plot to kill Hitler, I was taken away, so that I should be and remain free from all connection with the use of violence. Then he planted in me my socialist leanings, which freed me, as a big landowner, from all suspicion of representing interests…. And then your husband is chosen, as a Protestant, to be above all attacked and condemned for his friendship with Catholics, and therefore he stands before Freisler [the rabidly Nazi judge] not as a Protestant, not as a big landowner, not as a nobleman, not as a Prussian, not as a German but as a Christian and nothing else. “The fig leaf is off”, says Herr Freisler. Yes, every other category was removed.

He continued:

In one of his tirades Freisler said to me: “Only in one respect are we and Christianity alike: we demand the whole man!” I don’t know if the others sitting there took it all in, for it was a sort of dialogue—a spiritual one between F. and
myself …—in which we two got to know each other through and through. Of
the whole gang Freisler was the only one who recognized me, and of the whole
gang he is the only one who knows why he has to kill me. We talked, as it were,
in a vacuum. He made not a single joke at my expense, as he had done with the
others. No this was grim earnest: “From whom do you take your orders?”, he
asked, “From the Beyond or from Adolf Hitler? Who commands your loyalty?”.

Von Moltke’s trial was a revelation to him, for in it he discovered the meaning of his life,
which lay not so much in what it had produced or built, as in what it enabled him to say,
in what it enabled him to show. In that moment his life was disclosed as a subtle process
of preparing him to be in a position to give an utterly unambiguous answer to Freisler’s
questions, and to expose the Nazi regime for the Anti-Christ it was.

Von Moltke’s understanding of the significance of the apparently futile gesture in terms
of the truth it tells or the reality it shows or exposes, echoes a passage in our second lesson
from the Epistle to the Colossians. For there the author understands the saving
significance of the crucifixion of the innocent Jesus in terms of its public exposure of the
ruthless injustice of the powers that had perpetrated it. It tells us that, on the cross, God
in Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them,
triumphing over them in it” (2.13b-15).

So one important answer to our question—How to make sense of the noble attempt that
fails, how to understand the futile gesture?—is that it isn’t quite so futile. It succeeds in
speaking really important truths, in showing important realities. And the testimony can
survive the witness, echoing down the decades and the centuries to warn and inspire
future generations.

At the very beginning of the Second World War, W. H. Auden, who used to worship in
this cathedral, captured this point in his poem, “September 1, 1939”. Its final stanza is
this:

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

It’s good to be a point of light; it’s good to be an affirming flame; it’s good to be a shining example for future generations to follow.

And yet that seems to me not quite enough. For it leaves witnesses like von Tresckow and von Moltke with but a moment’s final satisfaction in their own integrity before the grenade explodes, or the noose tightens, and darkness falls—for them—forever. In the end, it makes their sacrifice total. In the end, they lose everything.

To this Stoic story of noble tragedy, the Christian Gospel adds a comic epilogue. For while God’s witness, Jesus, did cry out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, it turned out that God had not forsaken him. It turned out that death could not contain him. For on the Third Day he burst the bounds of his tomb, and rose again.

We, too, are beleaguered by Eros, by desire, by the will to live, by ambitions for the future. We, too, are beleaguered by anxiety that from dust we have come and to dust we shall shortly return. Nevertheless, may we take courage to show an affirming flame, trusting that, though we die, yet shall we live; for God-in-Christ will not desert us.

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3 Ibid., pp. 410-11, 408-9.