

## Trinity 9: Silence

St. Brandon's

1 Kings 19: 9-18; Matthew 14: 22-33

9 August 2020

I want to pick up on two things from the last two Sundays' sermons by Alison and Anna. But don't worry if you didn't hear them – this should stand alone OK. Alison was focusing on the Kingdom of Heaven and, amongst the various images Jesus gives in Matthew's gospel, one was of yeast which makes the dough rise. Alison described the Kingdom as 'bubbling in us through the Holy Spirit; invisibly working to visibly expand and change us from inside out'. And if so, I guess one question is how might we help that process – how might we help the yeast of the Kingdom within us to take effect?

And that brings me on to what Anna said last week. If you were 'here' you might recall that she included the first two verses of today's gospel reading, so that the passage she preached from began and ended with Jesus taking Himself off to pray, thus setting His followers an example. How do we help the yeast of the Kingdom within us to take effect? Well, one way obviously is by praying. Now there are, of course, many ways of praying, but I think both our readings this morning encourage us to think about the place of silence in our praying. So this morning, somewhat paradoxically, I want to talk about silence.<sup>1</sup>

Elijah, in our OT reading, is in a difficult place, effectively running away from his enemies but also from God – hence God's question to him: 'What are you doing *here*, Elijah?'. And Elijah then experiences the full force of nature – wind, earthquake and fire – only to discover that God is not in any of them; that they are, at most, premonitions of God, but not His actual presence. But then there is, in that wonderful phrase, 'a sound of sheer silence', which, again paradoxically, Elijah hears – he hears the silence. God's actual presence is manifest in a deep and mysterious silence. God is, as it were, present in silence and speaks out of silence to make his will for Elijah known to him. And there is, perhaps, a parallel here with God's creation of the world; God speaks out of silence and into the silence to create the world, the universe as we know it.

What, then, of Jesus in our gospel reading, and elsewhere in Matthew's gospel? Well, it doesn't actually say that Jesus used silence in His praying, either at the beginning of our reading, or at the beginning of last week's reading where it just says that 'he withdrew ... to a deserted place' (14: 13). But it seems reasonable to assume that at least part of his praying consisted in silently waiting on His Father to speak to Him, to reveal His will to Him, as He had done to Elijah. And it is certainly possible to argue that Jesus was very comfortable with silence and in silence, as is revealed particularly in the passion narratives where, you may recall, He stays silent before both the high priest, scribes and elders (Matthew 26: 63), and then before Pilate (Matthew 27: 12) during the two parts of His trial. Jesus chooses silence at the most crucial moment of His life, when there was screaming on all sides, covering Him with all kinds of lies and smears.

So I think we can make the assumption that Jesus was very comfortable with silence and, importantly, that His actions then flowed from His silent communion with His Father. So, back in our gospel reading, Jesus sees or knows that the disciples are in trouble in the boat out on the lake. The

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<sup>1</sup> I am drawing during the rest of this sermon on Angus Ritchie's commentary on these passages in the *Church Times*, 7 August 2020, and on the work of Sara Maitland – see *A book of Silence*, Granta, 2008.

strong wind that led to the boat being 'battered by the waves' presents a scene not unlike that experienced by Elijah, except that here the sea is wild and untameable, a symbol of chaos, darkness and evil. And into that situation Jesus comes with an internal tranquillity stemming from His silent communion with God, and which leads to an external peace as 'the wind ceased', and all was still. He is able to walk across these threatening waves without being diverted or harmed, and then stills them completely.

So if God speaks out of silence as He did with Elijah, and if Jesus' actions flowed out of His silent communion with the Father, what then of us? How might silence 'speak' to us, as it were? Well, if you're like me, you might find this a difficult area in your spiritual life. I'm particularly useless at this, so I'm speaking not out of experience but to myself as much as to anyone else. I know it's important, but I don't find it easy.

But we might, or might not, be helped in this by two modern-day 'prophets'. Many of us are of an age to remember Simon and Garfunkel and their song, 'The Sound of Silence'. (Apologies to those of you who are too young – you can find it easily enough on YouTube!) But it's a dark take on silence – it begins, 'Hello darkness, my old friend I've come to talk with you again'. It continues 'And in the naked light I saw Ten thousand people maybe more People talking without speaking People hearing without listening People writing songs that voices never share And no one dared Disturb the sound of silence'. A later verse has the words 'Silence like a cancer grows', and the last verse, as the volume ramps up, begins, 'And the people bowed and prayed To the neon god they made'.

It's a wonderful song but a complicated set of lyrics. One interpretation is that the neon god is the television, which we have to have on because we are afraid of the silence without it – we live in and have come to need a world of noise. And yet this continual noise separates us from others – people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening – which implies that in a world of noise we find it difficult to communicate with each other. So the song also expresses a desire to get away from all the noise, a continuing deep desire for silence – no one dared disturb the sound of silence.

Ours is an age that is uncomfortable with silence, unused to it, maybe even afraid of it. All of which is simply to acknowledge that, as children of this age, we may find silence, and particularly silence in prayer, difficult. We are perhaps subject to a 'dictatorship of noise' (not my phrase, unfortunately), and this dictatorship of noise undermines our attempts at silence, and perhaps particularly silence before and with God.

And yet I think we also know, as the song expressed, that silence is important. Times of stillness and silence are, perhaps, central to the spiritual life. Without them we can become empty husks driven by the noise of our immediate appetites, desires and fears, our restless egos. And we can be encouraged in this by noting that there are many aspects of the world around us which operate in silence – we already thought of the silence in creation, but what of gravity, organic growth, photosynthesis? Space is silent – there is no atmosphere out there so sound cannot travel through it, though light can; the sun's rays travelling through the silence of space. That might be worth dwelling on some time if we think of it as the light of Christ emerging out of the silence.

So, we inhabit a world that finds and makes silence difficult, and yet also a world that presents us with powerful examples of it. And in facing that contrasting world, and in trying to grapple with silence as part of our faith, part of our praying, we are probably all a bit like Peter. We recognise our

Lord and want to be with Him. We perhaps have a bit of bravado and a bit of faith to step out of the boat onto the stormy waters in response to His word to come to Him. But we have our doubts when we see how rough it is. We can become frightened by what life throws at us. We can be on the verge of sinking and need to cry out, 'Lord, save me'. And we can know through the experience of others like Peter, and perhaps through our own experience, that Jesus will reach out His hand and catch us. And acknowledging that crazy combination of characteristics which is all of us, perhaps we can also trust God with silence.

But what is for sure is that through silence God will search our hearts: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?', and bring to the surface our deepest motivations and desires. But also that, out of our silence, God will direct our paths.

This is scary, difficult but, I think we all know, important. This is one way in which we can play our part in allowing the yeast of the Kingdom within us to work invisibly, to visibly expand and change us from inside out.

Welcome to silence.

Amen