



**UNITED STOCKPORT CIRCUIT'S
ADVENT COURSE 2021**

SILENT NIGHT? IN SEARCH OF A SPIRITUALITY OF SILENCE

**On Zoom, Every Thursday at 7pm
25th Nov - 23rd Dec 2021**

www.stockportcircuit.org.uk

Zoom link is available on the calendar of the website

Introduction

Theme: *Silent Night?*
In search of a spirituality of silence

Our world today is dominated by the voices and noises of the powerful, and it often feels as if the loudest voice gets all the attention yet with little action or no action resulting.

As a church we believe in a God who speaks, a God whose speech is always connected with action in love. Yet one of the questions many people are asking as we look back over the Covid 19 outbreak is, has God been silent? How has God's voice been expressed and heard, and does apparent silence necessarily equate with inaction? While the Church is a busy talking community, do we sometimes miss God's voice speaking in different ways? What might 'a theology of silence' look like? Can we grow in our own faith by being open to a different kind of spirituality which leaves words behind and seeks to go straight to the heart of God?

This Advent, in this season of waiting, as we celebrate the arrival of hope in Jesus, we are inviting followers of Jesus Christ to listen to and reflect upon the silent voices of God which are to be heard in a world of competing cacophonies.

One of the most popular traditional Christmas Carols, sung all around the world, is "Silent night, holy night..." and during this season of Advent we are inviting you to think about what is silent or 'un-silent' about the Christmas story? In this period of waiting, how do we understand the speech of God's silence? What do we learn from the mystery of silence? When should we be not silent? How do we communicate the silence of God today?

This course will be offered on Zoom each Thursday at 7pm starting from the 25th of November 2021 and has five sessions. Alternatively, the reflections will be available on the Circuit Website and can be used in house or Bible Study groups looking for a specific Advent theme. They can also be used for personal reflection. Each session will be grounded in the context of our world today and will offer an interpretation of a particular Biblical text in relation to the context, and some suggestions for action and prayer. In addition, the Course will use an Advent Candle Lighting Ceremony, prepared by the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) for 2021.

Come join us in exploring the spirituality of silence this Advent.

Date	Theme	Suggested Text	Facilitator
25 th November 2021	The mystery of silence	Ecclesiastes 3:7	Cathy Bird
2 nd December 2021	God's silent presence	Job 19	Katie Smith
9 th December 2021	The time not to be silent	Esther 4:14	Raj Patta
16 th December 2021	Jesus' momentous silence	Mark 14:61	Lindsay Kemp
23 rd December 2021	The politics of silence	Isaiah 53:7	Annette Sharp

@RajPatta



25th November 2021:
First Thursday in Advent

Leader: We read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’
– the Advent God of creation.

The first candle is lit

Leader: As we light our first candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of this bounteous creation, celebrating its diverse life and wondrous beauty. We know that all created life should be enabled to flourish as God intended, and yet often our actions do not treat it with value. As we face the climate crisis, we lament the ways in which creation has been stifled and altered by our actions. And yet, we also give thanks for the hope we find in the Creator as we wait for God to visit us again.

The JPIT globe symbol is hung on the Christmas tree, lectern, etc.

Sing chorus and verse 1 of ‘Christmas is coming’ by John Bell

Leader: Let us pray.

We pray for all who work to renew the environment, to reverse the years of neglect and abuse and bring hope, love and light to the world. We commit ourselves to play our part in protecting this most precious of gifts and to ‘lift up our voices mightily’ to call on all to do more to care for creation. Amen.

The Mystery of Silence

Ecclesiastes 3:7

Last week I attended a rally and march in St. Peter's Square in the centre of Manchester organised to coincide with the COP 26 Conference happening in Glasgow. The rally and March were to demand climate justice - the reduction of carbon emissions, the halting of global warming and the recognition by the Global North that the Global South bears the brunt of the impact. The march aimed to hold to account all those leaders gathering in Scotland. Many hundreds of thousands of people marched all over the UK, and together we raised our voices loudly.

"What do we want?"

"Climate justice!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

The march I was on was led by a thumping band of drums and it was obvious that folk were watching from windows and passers-by were turning to stare at the noise being created.

At one point during the march, I remembered another act of protest I had been involved in, many years previously, when a group of us sat in vigil, in absolute silence, outside the hall in which the annual Methodist Conference was meeting and making decisions for the first time about the place of lesbians and gay men within the life of the church. Every day during the conference a group of us sat on a blanket on the steps of the hall, with a banner explaining who we were, with a lighted candle in the middle. We were there to seek justice for the LGBT community in the Methodist Church, but we were also there to pray for a respectful, peaceful and non-confrontational debate. At various points members of the Conference came and went, sitting with us for a short time in an act of solidarity.

A time for noise and a time for silence.

The beautiful poem from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, touches on the mystery and sense of the unknown that we live with - why things happen when they do and in the way they do. It takes our natural human instinct to want certainty, knowledge and understanding and encourages us to live with the unknown and to accept that as life takes its course God weaves a presence around us - not ordering and planning events and stripping human kind of any degree of control - but rather inhabiting events. God is with us in the noise and God is with us in the silence. As Christians we are called to be both activists and contemplatives, although it is not always easy to discern when we should be one or the other. Some of us are more inclined to speech, some of us to quietness and sometimes the pull to raise our voice, or to be silent, can go against our natural inclination.

The season of Advent calls us to reflect upon the incarnation, God becoming human and entering the world to announce the arrival of God's reign. We might imagine the birth of Jesus to be an event full of noise! Indeed, the cacophony of angels announcing the birth of the Saviour imply anything *BUT* a Silent Night! And of course, the ongoing story of incarnation involved Jesus preaching and teaching, sometimes raising his voice in anger and frustration in order to make a point and to bring about change. Advent might well be a season, like Lent,

when we feel called to action. Yet Advent is also the season in which we **wait for** that incarnation, it is not yet fulfilled, and a waiting time which respects the mystery of these days and which upholds stillness and silence as a means of preparation is a legitimate Christian response.

Silence has a deep and established tradition within Christianity. Contemplative prayer (sometimes called Christian meditation) is a form of prayer which can bring us into the full realisation of our humanity because it leads us into relationship with God; it leads us into Love. It has been described as 'pure prayer' because it leads us away from the self and into a complete and utter focus on the Divine as we sit peacefully and quietly in contemplation waiting for God to speak into the space which the silence creates.

Christian meditation usually involves the use of a word, or mantra, the repetition of which is an act of concentration that focuses our attention, silencing thought and imagination for the whole prayer period. This isn't intended to deny all of the gifts that make us human, but rather as we become more aware of the presence of God we become less ego-focussed and are lead into a ministry of love and service. Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable, and in the practice of Christian meditation we in some sense seek to align our consciousness with the consciousness of Christ.

The American Jesuit priest, activist, and writer Daniel Berrigan once described prayer as being 'a subversive activity.' Never is this more true than with silent prayer. Think about what silent prayer does; it sits and listens in silence in a world that loves to voice its opinion, it gives us permission to be still when we are told we must be busy. Meditation (the word has the same root as the word medicine – it is to do with healing) and the utter silence of prayer, as has been attested to by Christians since the earliest times can be the most profoundly moving and inspirational of encounters with the Divine.

Prayer Activity

The method of Contemplative Prayer is as simple as it is challenging. Try this every day, or as often as you are able in the coming week. If you can continue the practice throughout Advent and beyond even better!

Choose a place where you can be as sure of silence as possible and before you start set a timer with a gentle alarm tone to bring you back from your prayer time. Try 10 minutes to start with and then build up to half an hour. Sit upright and still on a chair or on the floor, close your eyes lightly, sit relaxed but alert and then silently, in your mind begin to say a single word. Many use the prayer phrase MARANATHA which means 'Come Lord Jesus.' Concentrate on saying the word continuously. Do not try to think or imagine anything, yet when distractions come – as inevitably they do – make a conscious decision to turn back to the mantra, which is in itself always a decision to turn back to God. Remember, you are not speaking to God in this time of prayer. You are opening up a space into which God can enter and speak to you, although perhaps the greatest mystery of all is that God rarely uses words when speaking to us! Try not to analyse things too much, don't expect miracles, and remember, this is about mystery!

@CathyBird



2nd December 2021
Second Thursday in Advent

Leader: We read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’
– the Advent God of peace.

The second candle is lit

Leader: As we light our second candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of peace. We remember the Prophets, throughout the ages, who have spoken out for peace against the clamour of violence, bloodshed and war. Jesus reminds us that ‘blessed are the peacemakers’, yet in our own lives, in our churches, communities and between nations we see conflict and witness those who prepare for war. May we not be content with uneasy peace but find strength as we wait in hope for the reign of the Prince of Peace to build real and lasting peace.

The JPIT dove symbol is hung on the Christmas tree, lectern, etc.

Sing chorus and verse 2 of ‘Christmas is coming’ by John Bell

Leader: Let us pray.

We pray for all peacemakers, for the mediators and negotiators, for those who challenge aggression and refuse to meet violence with violence. We commit ourselves to the way of peace and to ‘lift up our voices mightily’ to call on all to live in God’s peace. Amen.

God's silent presence

Job 19

We live in a world of noise and bustle. A world where information is at our fingertips – with just a few taps of the keyboard I can find a list of all the presidents of the United States or a recipe for carrot cake, all delivered almost instantly.

Our communication with one another has also become much quicker. Recently, as I planned a funeral, the deceased's daughter remembered the days when her mum would book their family holiday in Cornwall. This would involve a letter written by hand and posted to the tourist information board, a reply arriving several days later with a list of possible guest houses and then more letters to inquire about availability and then to confirm and pay deposits. The process took several weeks to finish.

In many ways, we are glad of how much easier and more convenient things seem, but perhaps this comes at a cost.

We can come to expect almost instant replies and become impatient when we are forced to wait. Technology makes this even worse: we can see that our message has been read, and even that the person is typing a reply, so why is it taking so very long? Even 5 minutes can seem an unacceptable delay, and not receiving a reply at all can make some people feel that they are being ignored and question the relationship they have.

In this study we consider whether there might be value in waiting in the silence when we don't receive a reply and particularly when we wait for a reply from God. We ask how we can invite others to understand God's silence.

Questions to talk about:

- Can we remember times of waiting for a significant answer? (e.g., exam results, medical results, the outcome of a job interview)
- Are there any positive aspects of having to wait for answers?
- How do we sustain ourselves in those times?

The book of Job in the Old Testament explores one of the biggest questions that humans have asked throughout history, "Where is God when suffering occurs?" It is thought to be an extended parable and sits as a challenge to the comforting idea that if bad things happen it must be because we have deserved them, and therefore we can ward off these things by making the right choices in life.

At the start of the book Job is seen to be a righteous and religious man. He has a good life, a wife and children and property, and not only did he follow religious laws, he made atonement for his children just in case they had sinned. But then, everything is stripped away from Job. His family die, his property is taken away and finally even his health deteriorates. Finally, Job cries out in pain and frustration.

Job is joined by three friends who offer "helpful" counsel. They suggest that what he needs to do is to work out what it is that he has done so wrong to deserve such punishment. When

he has done that, he can make atonement and life will get back on the right course. After all, if they can believe that Job deserves this, despite the fact that he has always seemed so good, then perhaps they can reassure themselves that they will not suffer a similar fate.

Eventually, in chapter 19, Job answers them. Read chapter 19 slowly, paying particular attention to verses 7-12 and reflect on one or more of these questions:

- What are Job's emotions at this point?
- What response do you think Job expects?
- Might there be a purpose to God's silence?

Our journey with God today

What is our expectation of hearing God's voice today? Share some initial thoughts.
Read together the hymn:

1 Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders
unmistakable and clear;
mighty signs to prove your presence,
overcoming doubt and fear

2 Lord, you sometimes speak in whispers,
still and small and scarcely heard;
only those who want to listen
catch the all-important word.

3 Lord, you sometimes speak in silence,
through our loud and noisy day:
we can know and trust you better
when we quietly wait and pray.

4 Lord, you love to speak in Scripture:
words that summon from the page,
shown and taught us by your Spirit
with fresh light for every age.

5 Lord, you always speak in Jesus,
always new yet still the same;
teach us now more of our Saviour;
make our lives display his Name.

Christopher Idle

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Reflect on one or more of the following questions:

- In which of these ways have you experienced God talking to you?
- Are there ways that aren't expressed here?
- Might God sometimes be at work in the space while we wait to hear his voice?

- Critics of faith often point to God seeming to be silent and inactive, allowing evil and harm to come to people. If our mission is to point people to God, how do we help people to experience his presence even in the silence?

Prayer

Light a candle if you are in a shared space. If you are doing this study online then maybe light a candle each.

Once the leader has opened the prayer time, invite people to join in if they wish by praying: "Lord, help me to know your presence in the silence of waiting for..."

They may also wish to say the prayer on behalf of another person.

Leader:

Silent God,

We sit with you now, in this space where you are, as you are everywhere.

We bring before you our impatience and our yearning for quick and easy answers, and the frustration we feel when they do not come.

As we sit in your presence, help us to listen as well as speak, to quiet our inner voices and the clamour of other things for our attention.

Time for people to add their own prayer in the format above

Leave plenty of space – don't be afraid of silence

God, help us to know your work in the quiet and in the waiting.

Help us to know that we are held in your love.

Amen

@KatieSmith



9th December 2021
Third Thursday in Advent

Leader: We read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’
– the Advent God of flourishing life for all.

The third candle is lit

Leader: As we light our third Candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of life in all its fullness. We see the gap between rich and poor increase and debt becoming a way of life for too many people. We are mindful of John the Baptist, who prepared the way of God by challenging people not to be selfish, so that all may flourish. In a season of excess, may we seek only what we need so that others may flourish too.

The JPIT piggy-bank symbol is hung on the Christmas tree, lectern, etc.

Sing chorus and verse 3 of ‘Christmas is coming’ by John Bell

Leader: Let us pray.

We pray for a just economy with equality at its heart, an economy where all may flourish. We pray for those in power to work tirelessly for such a vision. We commit ourselves to ‘lift up our voices mightily’ as we strive for economic justice for all. Amen.

A time not to be silent

Esther 4:14

The book of Esther, is one of the few books in the Protestant canon with a shero, with women in lead characters in it. In the entire three-year lectionary cycle, only once the book of Esther is prescribed and one can realise, hardly there are any sermons preached from the book of Esther. When I recently asked the congregation members what could be the reasons for less sermons heard from the book of Esther, one of the members replied, “pulpits have always been overpowered by men, and since majority of the preachers are men, they have conveniently not preached from the book of a woman and silenced the voices of women to silence the voice of women in the church.” That was a stark response which calls for a confession from men, for having been driven by the forces of patriarchy, they did not allow the flourishing of the voices of women in the Church.

Another interesting note about the book of Esther is that there is no mention of God in the entire book, not even once mentioned in prayers or conversations. So many have commented on this book as ‘the secular text in the sacred book,’ and have queried, is God absent or silent in the book of Esther? However, thankfully the Spirit prevailed among those that were compiling the canon, and the book of Esther was elevated to be a sacred text for the Jews and eventually to the Christians, for though the name or the word God was not mentioned, it was a story about of a brave woman who prevented a national genocide, and the God of the Bible wouldn’t have been disassociated with such an act, nor was absent in that story.

The book of Esther begins with the story of Queen Vashti, who was dethroned by the king for resisting to parade her body in front of his guests in the royal palace. Then Esther with the help of her uncle Mordecai becomes the Queen for the Persian empire. The whole book of Esther runs through the theme of ‘resistance,’ specially against the rise of ethnic nationalism. Mordecai protests, bowing down to Haman, and when the second in command in the empire Haman plans to cleanse the minority Jews in their Kingdom, Esther navigates the situation and works with determination in not only saving her people but also to addresses the root cause of the ethnic hatred, Haman.

In chapter 4, in the context of the decree of ethnic genocide, Mordecai’s conversation with Esther was about inspiring her to not keep silent at a time like this. If she remains silent, deliverance might come from someone else. He was challenging Esther, that she can’t remain silent, and perhaps that was the reason for her to be the Queen of the empire in that given time and context. Esther picks that provocation and challenge, and works out her way of defending her people from a genocide. This text is an invitation for the hearers of this word to rise up to the occasion of not keeping silent but to act.

The quote often ascribed to Bonhoeffer comes very handy for our reflection here.

*“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless.
Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”*

There are many occasions today which calls us to speak up and not to remain silent. Esther did not remain silent on the face of an ethnic genocide, she worked out a plan, and executed

it with determination and commitment. On the face of any systemic oppression that we encounter these days, we are called to raise an alarm and speak up for the cause of justice. In situations of racial injustice, we as faith communities are called not to remain silent, and are called to raise our voice and speak for justice and equality of all people. In situations of climate injustice, we are called to raise our voice and change our lifestyles and strive for climate justice. In situations of gender injustice, our faith demands us to ensure we celebrate the equality of all genders, and discrimination on people's sexuality or gender shouldn't be tolerated. In times when refugees and migrants face hatred and unwelcome, we are called to raise our voice and welcome them into our communities. It was also said that, "silent spectators of injustice are direct supporters of injustice," and so the role and call for faith communities is not to remain silent, but to choose to be on the side of justice.

William Faulkner's advice, *"Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world...would do this, it would change the world"* is the need of the hour. This week's reflection is an invitation for us not to keep quiet and silent in times and situations of injustice around us.

For further reflection, the quote of Desmond Tutu is helpful for our meditations:

*"If you are neutral in times of injustice, you are on the side of the oppressor.
If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral,
The mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."*

Which is to say, "silent spectators of injustice are direct supporters of injustice."

Questions for Discussion:

1. Can you remember times that you remained silent, even though you were able to speak up?
2. How do you understand Christian discipleship in situations of injustice around us?
3. What are the ways we as churches can raise our voice on the face of injustice today?
4. Discuss practical ways of engaging in advocacy for the cause of peace and justice in our local communities?

Prayer:

God, who in Jesus came down to offer us grace and peace,
And who rose up to the occasion of speaking and acting against injustice,
Empower each of us not to remain silent on the face of injustice,
Help us to speak out boldly, help us to act for the cause of justice,
Lead us to reflect Jesus Christ in our life practice. Amen.

@RajPatta



16th December 2021
Fourth Thursday in Advent

Leader: We read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’
– the Advent God of joy.

The fourth candle is lit

Leader: As we light our fourth candle, we recall the words of Mary as she sang praises to God who ‘looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’. Mary’s joy is not only that she has been chosen, but that in God’s grace there is no marginalisation! Too often in our world, individuals and groups are pushed to the margins and not heard. May we work towards a society where those marginalised and their voices are drawn into the centre.

The JPIT ‘marginalised brought into the centre’ symbol is hung on the Christmas tree, lectern, etc.

Sing chorus and verse 4 of ‘Christmas is coming’ by John Bell

Leader: Let us pray.

We pray for a joyful world where the lowly are lifted high and the hungry are fed. We pray for our churches and communities that we may look towards the margins and not always to the centre. We commit ourselves to ‘lift up our voices mightily’ to challenge a worldview that pushes people to the margins. Amen.

Jesus' Momentous Silence

Mark 14: 61

"But he was silent and did not answer. Again, the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'"

The theme of this year's Advent Study is around Silence. Something we're not very good at, or even used to. Wherever we go there is noise of some sort or another, some lovely, some not so lovely.

And somehow, we have lost the art of being still, and with it, the wisdom of silence. Cathy started this study with a verse from Ecclesiastes 3 – there is a time speak and a time to keep silence. And today's study is around the time when Jesus chose to keep silence.

The context is that Jesus was standing in front of the High Priest following his arrest, and he was being questioned. We are told that the Chief Priest and the whole Council were looking for some evidence that would convict Jesus, but they couldn't find it. Some people gave false witness – told lies against Jesus but their stories didn't agree.

For a lot of people, the immediate reaction would be to defend themselves, to rush in with the truth, and sometimes, even as the words are being uttered – even if they are true – they can sound, well, somehow not enough. They can sound petty, nit-picking, retaliatory even, so that the words, though the truth can lose their impact, and can sound as though they are a cover up.

But Jesus is not like the rest of us. His agenda was never to get himself out of the ghastly situation he was in. He knew that he had to go through with it, otherwise he would not fulfil his purpose. I'm not saying he *wanted* to go through with it, but he knew he *had* to.

Silence can be a very powerful thing. In not answering the Chief Priest, Jesus, far from appearing weak, put the Chief Priest on the back foot, forcing him to push further. We could learn from Jesus in this.

Firstly, we can learn to think before we speak. This can have the effect of unsettling people. But when I have met people who think before they speak, I have found that when they do answer, it is usually a well thought-out, considered, measured response rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

Secondly, it might be worth considering whether the question, statement or whatever, even deserves a response. Not all do!

Thirdly, we might be listening to a debate where people are falling over themselves to give answers before they've even got answers! We could think of current affairs programmes where something happens and the press are immediately asking questions, pressing for information, pushing for reasons, excuses and those they are asking would do better to pause, to hold silence, to make people wait for an answer and give the right one before charging on, making their voice heard, getting their sound-bite in.

Jesus had to answer in the end and the Chief Priest was furious, tore his garments and called for Jesus to be condemned.

In our world we are operating at pace, facing demands on all sides sometimes and all too often give the wrong response simply because we haven't the time to think things through. We are pressurised into giving an answer because the other person is under time constraints. And sometimes a sloppy job is the result.

And what of God? We come to God, often with our "shopping list" of what we want God to do, and we, too, are often in a hurry, eager for answers or results. How many times have we thought to ourselves, privately, that God hasn't answered our prayer or our request, or maybe our demand? When in truth, God's answer is to wait; to think it through more before taking the next step, to pause and hold before God that person or situation or problem for a while before charging on to get things done.

And what happens when the answer from God is 'Yes, but *you* do it? Do we then wait in that time and think what is it that God is *really* asking of us?

When I take services, I usually call people to a moment of silence before the we begin. People may have been busily preparing for the worship, or may have been enjoying a catch-up with their friends, or trying to organise something before the service so that there will be less to do after the service. Some will have been sitting quietly observing and preparing themselves.

After I have called people to a time of silence, there is usually a few moments of rustling as people organise themselves – their bags and sticks and coats etc., followed by a few quieter moments of jiffing about as they settle down and get comfortable, followed by a time when there is quiet, followed by a very precious time as the silence 'thickens', becomes almost tangible, and people relax into it, and it can feel as though people are really enjoying the luxury of not being allowed to do anything but relax in God's presence, with their fellow worshippers. It can feel as though they don't want to be drawn out of that silence into action, or even have their thoughts directed by me as the preacher. It may last only a minute or two, but maybe, just maybe we should create times, together, when we are together in God's presence and, following Jesus' example, listen for what God wants to say to us, rather than telling God what we want to say to him. Or maybe just enjoy the silence with God, as old friends sitting comfortable together often do.

Song: Let all mortal flesh keep silence <https://youtu.be/e2MwVZyHJdo>

Questions to consider:

- Are there times when it is possible to rush in with a response too quickly? Times when it might be better to consider first? Can you think of any examples?
- What about people who may be silenced by others and not allowed a voice?
- There are many, many species on this planet. How are the voices of other species heard? Are they heard?

Pray for:

People whose voice is silenced by others
Our planet whose voice is struggling to be heard
Our fellow species who we don't listen to enough

@LindsayKemp



23rd December 2021
Fifth Thursday in Advent

Leader: We read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’
– the Advent God of love.

The fifth candle is lit

Leader: As we light our fifth candle, we celebrate the birth of Jesus! At a time when our country is debating immigration policy, we remember Jesus, a refugee child, fleeing to safety. We celebrate Christ who, with God’s love, welcomed strangers and those had been marginalised. May we live as disciples of the incarnate God, who through our welcome and our love, will build communities of grace for all.

The JPIT shaking hands symbol is hung on the Christmas tree, lectern, etc.

Sing chorus and verse 5 of ‘Christmas is coming’ by John Bell

Leader: Let us pray.

We pray for welcoming, caring and loving communities. May our churches welcome all as Jesus has welcomed us. Help us to work with others in our local community to promote an openness to the stranger. We commit ourselves to ‘lift up our voices mightily’ to challenge those in our society who are not welcoming of others, and instead to be joyously welcoming to everyone. Amen.

The Politics of Silence

Isaiah 53:7

The fourth servant song (Isaiah 52: 13-53:12) in the second-Isaiah (40-55 chapters) has been one of the most debated scripture for both Christians and Jews. Who is this 'suffering servant'? And scholars from both faiths argued on different interpretations. Particularly, from the Christian point of view, it was argued that the 'suffering servant' is a prophecy fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and in some liturgies Isaiah 53 is read and reflected on Good Friday services about the suffering of Jesus Christ. Several Christian theologians have argued their case for 'penal substitutionary atonement' theory of Jesus Christ, which means Jesus is dying as a substitution for all people in order to appease God, based on this very text. Others have interpreted 'suffering servant' as the one who was the remnant of Israel from the Babylonian exile, and others have argued that it is not one individual person, rather 'suffering servant' is about a collective suffering people in the exile. It will be beyond our scope and theology to argue for one single interpretation of this text, for that matter any text in the scripture, for interpretations are diverse and so are dynamic. However, in the context of searching for a spirituality of silence, what does Isaiah 53:7 offer to us, where the 'suffering servant' is silent, though oppressed and afflicted not opening his mouth like a sheep before its shearers is silent.

In order to understand the silence of the 'suffering servant,' the writer of this text provides us that silence is like that of a sheep who is silent before its shearers. Now let us start reflecting on the sheep and its shearer, who is all set to cut the fleece. Is the sheep willingly going to the shearer to rip off its fleece? Or does the shearer catch the sheep by force and power, and cuts the fleece? The shearer overpowers the sheep, puts the weight of his body on the sheep, turns and overturns the sheep in all directions according to his convenience and to the convenience of his cutting machine and shears all the fleece. The sheep wiggles, and even bleats, however, from the perspective of the shearer, the sheep is always silent or to say it in other words the shearer does not listen to the bleat of the sheep, or doesn't understand the language of the sheep and so calls it silence or has only known language in the form of human language. Therefore, out of that colonial knowledge of the shearer, it is said, 'the sheep is silent before the shearer.' The sheep might be communicating her displeasure, yet because it is the knowledge of the powerful shearer that thrives, the voice of the sheep is made to be silent. To put it other way, though the sheep tries to bleat and speak, the powerful shearer doesn't give a damn to the voice of the sheep, and therefore all he listens is the silence of the sheep. Can the sheep speak? Yes, of course, but not the language that the shearer is willing to listen or understand to.

This text therefore is an invitation to all the readers and listeners of this text to make every effort in listening to the voice of the 'silence' of the powerless in the creation. For the powerless, the excluded, the oppressed, the afflicted, the marginalised are speaking their language, but it is understood as silence or 'lack of voice' to the ears of the powerful. 'Hearing to speech' the voice of the powerless is a call for us as Christian disciples, understanding their worldview and striving with them towards liberation is a commitment that calls from us.

The other thing when we reflect on this text is that, the verses from Isaiah 53: 7-8 are again quoted in the New Testament, in the book of Acts 8:32-33. It was the Ethiopian chancellor,

who was a trans-gendered person, who was travelling on a chariot from Jerusalem after his worship was reading the scripture from Isaiah 53, and invites Philip to sit with him to explain what he was reading from Isaiah 53. It is interesting to note that when the chancellor asked Philip quoting Isaiah 53:7-8, asking him about whom is the prophet saying this about, is it about himself or someone else? it is recorded, “then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:35).” Rather than implying that the ‘suffering servant’ is the suffering Jesus, Philip started to share the good news of Jesus from the scripture from Isaiah 53: 7-8. It is a huge hermeneutical leap to the early Christians in the book of Acts in terms of their understanding of the Hebrew Bible. It is not just about the fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible in the life of Jesus, rather the texts from the Hebrew Bible offered that starting point to share the good news of Jesus. The Greek word used for ‘starting’ in Acts 8:35 is ‘archemenos’ which means ‘having begun’ or in other words ‘beginning’ from the verses of Isaiah 53:7-8, Philip proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. Starting with the silence of the ‘suffering servant,’ Philip proclaimed to the chancellor the good news about Jesus. Did we ever think that a text of ‘silence’ can be the starting point to the good news of Jesus Christ? For the chancellor from Ethiopia, ‘silence’ of the suffering servant, worked that way and that led him to be baptised on that road to Ethiopia.

In other words, how is this text Isaiah 53:7 a starting point for us to share the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant for our times today? From a scriptural text that happened during the Babylonian exile, when the ‘suffering servant’ community was oppressed and afflicted by the empire of their times, ‘suffering servant’ used their silence as an act of subversion, for not to speak is to speak, for their speech for justice was unheard and so the powerful understood it as silence. In our times today, starting with the scripture of Isaiah 53:7, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to allow spaces for the unheard voices, the silenced voices, the forgotten voices, and the speechless voices to be heard and addressed. The voices of the refugees, the voices of the hungry, the voices of the women, the voices of the LGBTQUI+, the voices of the homeless, the voices of the poor, the voices of Dalits are speaking and crying out for justice, the call for us is to respond to their ‘silenced’ voices and work with them for justice and transformation.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are your thoughts on the politics of silence? Have you recognised issues of power in conversations? Whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced?
2. How do we understand Scripture? How can it be a starting point for the gospel of Jesus Christ today?
3. Have you ever spoken to a refugee or a hungry person in our locality? What are they speaking that you are able to hear? What is the challenge of their voice to our faith?

Prayer:

Open our hearts and our ears to the voices of the powerless O Lord,
Help us to recognise that in the voices of the powerless is your voice,
Forgive us when we are dominant in our voices and in silencing the voices of others,
Open our eyes and our hearts to acknowledge that the God of the Bible is the God of justice,
Embrace each of us in your love and send us all to share your good news of love with one another. Amen.

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