

**Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity 2020 (6.09.20)**

**Ezekiel 33: 7 – 11; Matthew 18: 15 – 20**

Today we've had two Bible readings about the divine command to speak up and speak out in order to redress wrongs. They come from widely different contexts. Ezekiel is all about speaking out against society at large to challenge widespread injustice and iniquity. It's a recurring theme in the Bible. The Gospel from Matthew is something more of a niche reading.

We mentioned a couple of weeks ago how a concern for the institution of the church is exclusive to Matthew's Gospel. We think it was first addressed to a community of Jewish converts who were struggling to forge their distinctive identity as a new worshipping community within the broader context of Jewish culture. So Matthew gives granular detail for a model grievance procedure within the emerging institution.

I don't want to get too bogged down in the minutiae of incremental procedural escalation to which Matthew treats us, or subjects us, depending on your point of view; but rather to take this passage, together with Ezekiel, as examples of a divine command not to allow things to be left unsaid so that grievances fester; because in fact silence is a form of complicity with the perpetuation of the grievance or injustice. There is a divine command for interrupting silence<sup>1</sup>.

Before we do that, though, we need first to acknowledge that, in other ways, silence is a very good and underrated thing. When Elijah had been promised by God that, if he went and stood on the mountain, then God would pass by, it wasn't in the earthquake or the wind or the fire that Elijah perceived God. It was in what the hymn calls "the still, small voice of calm", but what our translation of the Bible

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<sup>1</sup> The second part of the sermon is deeply influenced by Walter Brueggemann "Interrupting Silence" [2019] Hodder & Stoughton

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describes as the “sound of sheer silence.” That’s where God is to be found: in the sound of sheer silence.

In her reflection, broadcast across Facebook and YouTube last Sunday evening, the Priory’s Associate Minister, Christine Strand, drew our attention to Mark chapter six as just one example of Jesus withdrawing from both the crowds and his disciples in order to pray in silence with his Father. We could do well to cultivate silence as part of our devotional life.

It’s been very heartening to see the Priory’s weekly Christian Meditation group going from strength to strength in recent years: a group of people using the techniques and disciplines of the World Community of Christian Meditation to create a positive silence in order to attend and attune and align themselves with God. Whenever the group is finally able to meet again together, you might want to consider joining; or when we’re firing on all cylinders, attending a service where there is more space for silence than there is at 10.30 –

Evensong, or the 8 o’clock Communion, or the mid-week Communion; or, as Christine was recommending last Sunday evening, you might want to carve a time of silence out of your daily routine. The point is that silence is an important and necessary part of a healthy, balanced, spiritual life.

But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about a completely different sort of silence. I’m talking about the sort of silence which is coercive; the sort of situation where voices are silenced in the interests of control by the dominant voices<sup>2</sup>. This takes many different forms.

There is of course the direct positive imposition of silence; the situations where people are required to be seen but not heard, quite literally. In many of our lifetimes we’ve see this for ourselves, if not in U.S. segregation, then in Apartheid South Africa: black people denied voting rights, denied property rights,

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<sup>2</sup> Per Brueggemann

denied educational rights, denied even the right to have access to public transport. The iniquity of that is self-evident and unambiguous.

But what is more insidious, more underhand and treacherous is when people are effectively silenced because the legitimacy of their voices is denied. So, for instance, when after 400 years of white Americans disregarding the value of black people's lives, by enslaving them, or lynching them or allowing their police officers to kneel on their necks whilst they arrest them; when black people protest that black lives actually matter, nobody argues that black lives don't matter – it's all too subtle and insidious for that – but they deny the legitimacy of stating that black lives matter by parroting that *all* lives matter. And if black people protest, the dominant voices prescribe what the proper, legitimate, respectable, acceptable way to protest is. And if the protest crosses any of those lines, if it is accompanied by any looting for example, that's

it: they've discredited themselves, they've undermined their cause, they've cooked their goose.

And this pattern is replicated again and again, whether it's white privilege stifling multicultural possibilities, western privilege insisting that the lives of slave traders cannot be commemorated in any way other than the way late Victorians commemorated them, male privilege silencing women's voices, heterosexual voices delegitimising LGBT voices or entitled Christianity suppressing the emergence of generous ecumenism<sup>3</sup>.

But God called Ezekiel to be a sentinel to the house of Israel, to speak up and to point out their evil ways. Jesus called his followers in Matthew's Gospel to ensure that disputes are not lefty unresolved. So, what is God calling us to speak up about? What silence is he calling us to interrupt? Have we got the courage to recognise our privilege and to renounce our privilege

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<sup>3</sup> Per Brueggemann (see p.57)

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so that we are not complicit in preventing the silence  
from being interrupted?

Amen.