

# Silence and Relationships

*A sermon on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 & Ephesians 2:11-22 by Jeff Wild, 18 July 2021*

Jesus invites us: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” May this reflection be refreshment and nourishment for our journey with him. Amen.”

What mother does not give a sigh of relief at the silence that follows the crying of her baby or when her teenager finally switches off that loud music? When we are overwhelmed at the beauty of the crystal-clear night sky in the wide-open spaces of the outback, are we not reduced to silence? What lover has not found the occasion when a silent embrace expresses far more than words ever could?

There is the hush of an audience, expectant, as the conductor raises the baton. We know the focussed, expectant hush of the searcher for the first sighting of a beautiful bird. Many of us have watched the absorbed silence of a child creating a tower from wooden blocks. Silence is golden, so the poets tell us.

In the Gospels, we hear of many occasions when Jesus went away by himself to pray, or took the disciples away to a quiet place. Probably the prime example of this is Jesus’ time in the wilderness. So today, I will focus on our experience of silence and its contribution to our relationship with God. The start of the passage from Mark’s Gospel is the inspiration, with the fulfilment being the wonderful passage from Ephesians 2.

I am delighted and fascinated that this sermon is following directly from Craig Bartlett’s of last week. Craig clearly drew upon the aphorism that we have two ears and just one mouth, so should listen twice as much as we speak. He boldly presented the challenge facing the people of Canada, a similar challenge that we are facing. He then showed how processes he had observed here at South Yarra Baptist can provide a way forward.

Just to clarify - of course there are times when silence is not the best response. Indeed, as Craig pointed out, it often leaves very hurtful things unsaid. Here, I am referring to a deliberately chosen, positive kind of silence that is respectful of the other.

What happens within us when we are silent in the healthy, positive way we are reflecting on here? What may cause this silence and what may result from it? Very often we are silent when words can no longer express what we feel; when words may in fact, detract from the experience. Strong feelings of grief, joy, wonder, shock cannot be adequately conveyed by language.

At such times our attention is focussed with unusual clarity, much as a magnifying glass may focus the rays of the sun. We are intensely aware of minute details which in ordinary circumstances would escape us.

Silence may be a very effective form of communication with another. As an alternative to preaching or offering unwelcome advice in another’s troubles, it may actually be very affirming. Consider the effect of silence in de-escalating a conflict situation. Such a deliberate choice to respond in silence, rather than with angrier, louder shouts flows from an ability to put aside our own feelings in the effort to be more in touch with the other.

This inner silence is respectful of the other and allows us to hear their needs and their quest for meaning. In other words, we can only be truly hospitable to someone else and their feeling or situation, if we are at peace within ourselves, if our own needs are not noisily distracting us. Our loving action is then able to flow out of the peace and silence at the centre of our beings.

In order to become truly aware of who we are within ourselves, we need times of silence. We need to be free of the distractions and noises at the surface of our lives to be in touch with our deeper selves. Other faiths refer to such an attitude as “mindfulness”.

In the silence we will be more aware of what is happening, of what is most important, deep within us. In the silence we will feel the deep longings of our hearts, and be aware of the challenges, or the call of others in our lives, for us to reach out.

Years ago I heard a definition of God, which has stayed with me and makes sense in new and different ways. Apparently our word “God” is derived from a Sanskrit word which has the basic meaning of “call”. We can understand God then as the “one who is called upon and is calling”. God is that Being to whom we reach out with our innermost yearning and the one whom we sense is calling us to be more than who we are. How will we hear this call from within ourselves, or from the “Other”, unless we have an attitude of silence?

So the apostles come together and report to Jesus on their work of healing and teaching. In response Jesus invites them to come away and rest. In this time together with him, they can refocus on who they are as individuals and as a community and on their relationship with him. From that renewed sense of purpose and mission, they are ready to go forward.

I see this as one way of appreciating our reading from Ephesians 2. It is significant that in verse 13, Paul asks us to “remember”. In the Greek, this has the fuller meaning of “to recollect and to be mindful of”.

What is it that we are to be mindful of? It is not just the first verse or two, but the entire passage. We find the complete explanation of what we are to be constantly mindful of in the final verse of the passage: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are ... members of the household of God”.

I love the reference in verse 13 to you have “come near” through the blood of Christ. The fuller meaning of the expression is “to come to a fuller realisation of oneself”. In this case, a fuller realisation that we belong together in Christ. I see silence as a valuable part of this fuller realisation. It is in silence that we can go to our deepest selves, beyond the disparate, sometimes warring parts, to the oneness at the source of our being. In other words, we discover who we truly are.

We are also to be mindful of how that new state came about. It was through the blood and death of Christ on the cross. Christ took into himself the alienation between two peoples and the alienation between all of them and God, and killed it by his death on the cross. He extracted all of the poisoned relationships, the hurt, the anger, the lack of forgiveness and put it to death.

So, as we have seen, silence is not a state that is dead or inactive. Rather it is often the precursor of creative action, or the condition of awe and wonder after something stupendous. Even the silence of death is not an end but a new beginning in the Resurrected Life.

We have already seen that an attitude of silence is one necessary precondition for the relationship with God. What is it that issues forth from our respectful silence before God?

One result is the wholeheartedness of our worship. A wonderful part of every service with this community is the silence following the readings. In the silence we set aside our own noisy distractions by handing them over to God. We set our relationship with the Persons of the Trinity at rights and realise our deepest selves.

Further, we are not just silent as individuals but as a community. A community that has shared in listening to the readings. Deepening our sense of who we are as a community, we are better able to reach out to each other in prayer and in peace. We are able to praise and thank God, to celebrate our communion with God, and to seek out the mission.

As I noted earlier, there are times when we should not be silent. There are times when external silence may be a mask for feelings of hate, shame, fear. At these times we are internally noisy, so the very possibility of responding in love to another is blocked by our own frustrations, anxieties, inadequacies. We have not reached the deeper, interior silence which may allow us to speak or act in creative ways.

Another time when we should not be silent is in the face of oppression and injustice toward those who are unable to speak for themselves. This community has rightly taken very seriously the responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless. However, such action can be reduced to an activism, existing for its own sake, unless it is rooted in an attitude of humble silence before God and neighbour.

We can participate in that loving relationship only if we cultivate an attitude of silence. Just as we have been told that the foolishness of God is greater than human wisdom and the weakness of God is greater than human strength, so the silence of God is greater than human words.

Jesus desperately desires a greater relationship with us, desperate to the point of death. Let us now celebrate that relationship with our expression of faith, with our reaching out to others in prayer and with our partaking in the thanksgiving that is the Eucharist.