

The Silence of God (Holy Saturday) – Unanswered Prayer 5, April 10<sup>th</sup>  
(Palm Sunday 2022)  
Luke 19:28-44 Gospel of the Passion – Luke 23:1-49

Father, may again these spoken words, be faithful to your written word, and lead us to the living word, Jesus Christ. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **The Silence of God**

Holy Week begins with praises and palm branches, ends with the yells and mocking of crowds, and the silence of a young Jewish man hanging, dead, on a cross. That silence extends into Holy Saturday. A day which the Bible – and therefore the Spirit – says nothing about.

As we preach on unanswered prayer, we focus upon the silence of God and engaging with that silence.

### **Holy Saturday**

Holy Saturday is a day of silence.

Holy Saturday must have been a day of confusion. The women had seen the crucifixion. As they walked home, we can imagine each was silent in their thoughts of this unforgettable day. The day their Lord suffered brutal punishment and was killed on that Roman cross. their dreams and hopes were in tatters. How could they go on? The male disciples were scattered, some in the city, others in Bethany. These disciples who had followed Jesus for years. Yet there was no voice, no angel to comfort them – at this stage. In the bible, the phrase 'do not be afraid' appears 366 times – and yet not once is this said on Holy Saturday. Silence.

On that day, God allowed his creation to live without answers to what had happened.

The Bible is full of these silent moments. Moments between the longing and the fulfilment. Difficult moments that required God's people to dig deep into their spiritual resources to hold on to the promises of God's faithfulness. Abraham and Sarah waiting for the promise of a child. Israel waiting for God to deliver them from Egypt. The exiles waiting to return to their land.

## **Silence**

When we consider unanswered prayer, we can be in a time or season of silence. Holy Saturday represents the time between questions and answers – prayers for finance, health, relationships, but miracles are still to come. We wait.

There are times, when God does not say yes, no, or not yet. He is not saying anything at all. We pray, continue to pray and God remains silent. We pray for help and he seems to ignore us. We try to make sense of what is going on, and we find no explanation, no revelation or any indication that God cares.

CS Lewis, writing after his wife Joy had died of cancer, described this silence, like standing before a house you knew well. “The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seems so once.” CS Lewis quoted in Greig, p.210.

We can endure pain, suffering, years of unanswered prayer, if we know that God is present in the suffering. We can say – Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.’ The suffering we may not understand, it may be very hard, but we know God’s presence in it– ‘for you are with me.’ But sometimes, we feel we stand in front of God’s house, but the doors locked and the lights out...

Exodus 2: The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

They cried out. How many years did they cry out? During Moses lifetime? At least 40 years in the chronology of the story. The people of Israel, chosen, loved, yet for decades, they experienced the silence of God. God

heard, he remembered, he saw, he was concerned, but only when Moses is 80, God acts.

### **Being Honest**

Some of us, can understand those feelings. We have cried out to God for years. We feel like CS Lewis, the house has no one at home. That is such a hard place to be in. To keep praying, it is a sheer act of faith and will. But when it is something personally affecting us, it can be so hard. It is okay to acknowledge that, such feelings we see expressed in the psalms. My God My God why have you...

If we cannot see God, or feel God in our situation, if we cannot feel his hands on our life , we may feel angry, scared, helpless, or even want to give up on the whole praying thing. In our mind we may feel that God has abandoned us.

### **Silent yes. Absent NO!**

But God had not abandoned his people. God has not left us when we cannot feel his presence anymore.

Scripture reassures us.

God in Hebrews 13 – ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.’ Jesus, entered that city and hung on that cross, was completely forsaken, so we would not be.

The cross declares we are loved, secure – no one can snatch us out of God the Father’s hand – that we are accepted – accept one another as Christ has accepted you – and we are significant - part of his purposes in his world.

Jesus sent his disciples out in mission, he said, ‘surely I am with you to the end of the age’ – until his return. God the Holy Spirit has come to live in each us. God in us. He is closer to us, than we are to ourselves.

Paul tells the Romans that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ – not even unanswered prayer.

And he reassures them, in Romans 8, that even if they see their prayers are not being answered, when we do not know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit himself intercedes for us, for us, in accordance with God's will. Spot on prayers are being prayed for us, from within.

And Jesus 'at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us.'

Greig describes it beautifully: "The Bible leaves us in no doubt at all that when God is silent, He is not absent from His people – even if that's the way it *feels*. He is with us now as much as He ever was. He's no less involved in our lives than He was when we could hear His voice so clearly and could sense the joy of His smile." (Greig, p.213).

### **Why the silence?**

So why does He go silent? Martin Luther, the reformer, suggested, one reason is to draw us further into a deeper relationship with him, a deeper walk which is only possible as we move beyond faith + We have faith plus something else. So I pray because I see answers, I read the bible because God speaks to me, I take communion because I sense his presence. These are all important blessings. Yet God withdraws, fall silent, it is suggested, so our faith can grow further as faith, and not faith + .

John 11. Jesus is about to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus has told his disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep - they think Jesus means he is actually sleeping. Then he says: " 'Lazarus is dead and for your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe.' V14. Faith – as Hebrews says – is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not *see*.

As a writer put it: 'faith is believing something with all your heart but not having any tangible evidence to prove it to another person.'

"You could say 'Trust me' Jesus was virtually saying to them. 'I know you do not understand why I did not go and heal my friend Lazarus. Yes I did let him die. He is dead. I am glad for your sakes that I did not go and heal him, so that you may trust me and believe now that I know what I am doing. You will see this clearly later; trust this to be absolutely true now.'" RT Kendall, Does Jesus Care?,p.55

Nicky Gumbel shares: "This is a sign of Christian maturity, when we continue to believe in God's love when we don't see it or feel it. As we believe in God's love even when we don't see it or feel it. As we believe in the sun even when it is not shining, we continue to believe in God's love in times of darkness when we don't feel his love." Quoted in Greig, p.214.

**Engaging the Silence – what to do with it?**

In 1960 Martin Luther King Jr was interviewed: "As my [personal sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course." King quoted in Greig, p.226. To put it another way, some lyrics from a song by Jimmie Allen. '

When this is over  
I hope I take a little less for granted  
Hope I'm a little more understandin'  
When some things don't make sense

'cause right now all I got is time  
To think about the bottom line

What I have, where I stand  
How I live, who I am  
I hope these hard times make me better and not just older  
When this is over

Life's trials either make us bitter or make us better; or that these hard times make us better and not just older... So when our prayers are not answered, and especially when God is silent, we have a choice to make that will affect our lives. Three ways to engage with the silence.

### **Remembering God's Word**

Jesus was on the cross. My God my God why have you forsaken me?

Even though Jesus felt abandoned by God, he still used the word of God. When God is silent, the revelations we may have had in the past from the bible, or the times when God spoke, seem a distant memory, BUT this does not make them any less true.

When God seems absent, his word may seem devoid of the flavours it has had. Others may be feasting on the bible with delight – but for us there is no flavour. “And yet – as Greig says – significantly it remains as nourishing as it ever was and is vital to the well being of our soul.” Greig. P228-229.

To help us further engage with the silence of God, we see how Jesus used scripture. It was relevant. It gave voice to his lament. Like Job, Jeremiah, and in the psalms of lament, our circumstances have been articulated in scripture, we are not the first to experience this; and it will help to reuse those words to God.

### **Sabbath**

The disciples would have eaten. Did that act of eating bread, remind them of the last supper with Jesus? This is my Body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me? As they ate, on that Saturday, did they remember the meal, the bread?

This is theoretical. Could the meals they have had, helped stir hope?. As Jesus had talked a lot about his coming death, could it be that there was plan in all the events that had took place.

“When God is silent and our prayers are unanswered, when the word of God seems flavourless in our mouths – there can sometimes still be faint flickers of hope and meaning expressed to us and for us in Scripture, in fellowship, and in the bread and wine. By reading the Bible, spending time with Christians and participating in the Eucharist, even when these activities feel like merely ‘going through the motions,’ there may well still

be moments when hope and faith seem to break through the clouds of doubt.” Greig, p.230.

### **Bethany**

Most of the disciples were in Bethany. The previous week, the day before Palm Sunday, in the same place they had a meal which Lazarus attended, Mary had anointed Jesus feet. It was in Bethany, on Palm Sunday, the crowds began praising ‘hosanna’. As the disciples gathered there, they remembered the praises, they perhaps saw Lazarus – proof of God’s power – and perhaps even the smell from the nard lingered, reminding them of Jesus.

We need a place like Bethany where we can go when we answer with unanswered prayer. It can be a physical place. It can be a book or piece of music that reminds us of the good things God has done in the past. It can be a person whose very being makes the presence and power of God real to you even when life is at its worst.

Bethany – a connection point – it reminds you of something you knew for sure – that God can do more than all you ask or imagine – that the kingdom still has power even when there is little evidence in your current situation. Bethany – a place, a community, where you still sometimes smell the perfume of god’s presence.

### **Conclusion**

Holy Saturday we know is not the end. Yet we often find ourselves in this space.

The first Holy Saturday was the space between two worlds, a new beginning was coming.

We endure our Holy Saturdays with at least a certain amount of optimism, because we have the hindsight of Easter. The first disciples did not have that. God may be silent but we know he is not absent and he will speak soon. Many of our prayers will go unanswered but not for long. Revelation 5 shares how each of the 24 elders held a golden bowl, full of incense which are the prayers of the saints... unanswered prayers in our eyes, but those prayers are in the throne of heaven...

Like the first disciples, we can look back on all Jesus had done for us in the past with grateful hearts, even if we don't know where he is at the moment. But unlike them, we know we can look to the future with realistic hope that Saturday is here, but Sunday is coming. We have hope because Jesus, is raised from the dead.

Shall we pray...

**God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.**