

CRIB 25th July 2021 Feast of S James the Apostle

Sermon: *silence at beginning.....*

Silence is so very uncomfortable! We are people who just love to talk and chat, and sitting in un-filled silence with no one saying anything can make us feel very disconcerted. I was going to say ‘I’m sorry if that silence a few moments ago made you feel uncomfortable’ but actually - I’m not really very sorry at all! I’ve come to believe that silence is one of the most important human attributes that we can possess. I’m calling it an attribute, because most of us find it tricky – it’s like a skill, that needs to be learned, or practised. It doesn’t come naturally to most of us and so we usually have to work at it. If you’re a shy type, you’re likely to find it easier to be silent and listen to others – and I hope that you see that as a positive thing. May be after today us naturally noisier ones might want to think about this area some more.

Our requests to God in our prayers can be very chatty, and very wordy, and can also become a bit like a shopping list – just asking for this or that. Whilst making our requests to God in our intercessory prayer, is clearly something we can and should do, if that becomes a large focus of our prayers then something may be getting a little out of balance. Listening to God, maintaining some silence, is fundamental to our faith because our relationship with God is a two-way thing: we talk and we listen, like all good relationships. But so often we may rush and hurry through the silences in our efforts to be heard. If we make space and silence in our prayers, we may have more chance of hearing what God may want to reveal to us.

In our Gospel reading today, we heard about someone who either didn’t want to be silent, or just couldn’t help herself speak. Or possibly her two sons had badgered her into speaking; we don’t really know the background: ‘The mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons - and she asked him a favour’. She asks if her sons James and John will be able to sit one on each side of Jesus in His Kingdom. Pause...

Now there are several reactions we could have to her behaviour: for me, her speaking in this way seems audacious. You may have your own thoughts: Perhaps she felt they'd be safe close to Jesus – well that proved wildly wrong. Perhaps she simply thought by speaking out in this way that they'd be favoured or more popular; wrong again. Whatever she was thinking in asking for this to happen, Jesus puts all three of them in their place, and when the other 10 disciples got to hear of this they were – unsurprisingly - most displeased.

There are two things which Jesus has said to them which I think we could helpfully note: 1. Jesus says to them that they don't really understand what they've asked for and so there's a warning – do we know what we're letting ourselves in for when we say we want to be close to Jesus? And 2. Jesus says that whoever wishes to occupy a great position such as they've requested must instead learn humility – and to look after others in service rather than being self-serving.

We also might just want to remind ourselves that in Mark's gospel it is James & John themselves who ask to sit at Jesus' side and their mother doesn't appear to be present at all (although of course she may have been the chatty pushy mother behind the scenes: mothers of sons beware! And I speak these words to myself just as much as to anyone else here – our sons are perfectly capable of carving out their own lives without us chatty pushy mothers trying to pigeon hole them into what we think they should be or do! We'd do really well to keep quiet – to remain silent, no matter what we're thinking, and let them get on with it!).

Back to our Gospel: Whichever may be the more accurate account in either Matthew or Mark of the two versions of this event, the point is this: Jesus challenges them about what their request might mean in reality: If they want to be so closely associated with Jesus, then they would need to be prepared to walk with him in all things. The *dangers* of speaking in the way their mother did, out of turn, I think, and by asking this extraordinary question, became all too apparent. If her wish was granted, it would become extremely costly.

The request that was made to be close to Jesus though may be not so very different from what we might ask of Him today. When we say we want to follow Him, to be like Him, to become more Christ like. But have we really thought what those words we speak might actually mean? The global statement ‘I believe in Jesus and I follow Him’ should surely mean just that - we follow, no matter what. May be that makes us think twice about what it means when we say we follow Jesus: following Jesus means sitting at his right or his left or at his feet or at his head, including in his suffering and therefore I think by suffering with him. Can we really say, as St Paul said, ‘I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ Is this really what we mean? Jesus made it clear to the mother of James and John: to be that close to Jesus meant sharing the same cup – the cup of suffering. Is saying that we follow Jesus what we really mean, or do we somehow opt for an easier version of our own chatty design?

Covid times have offered me the opportunity to be less chatty and less talkative, and that’s been a positive lesson to learn. More time to think than speak, more time to reflect than offer my opinion, more time to listen and contemplate. Contemplation during Covid times has given me quiet, space, stillness, silence. I’m worried about losing that silence and becoming too noisy again, being drawn in to the chit chat, the busy-ness of hurrying in our prayers rather than being still and quiet and trying to hear God minister to us. My background as a community psychiatric nurse taught me to walk alongside the person in need, often in silence, however they were feeling, facing their difficulties with them as best I was able, and taking time to listen. Often it felt as though I hadn’t done much at all, but after someone gets better from an acute phase of illness or a relapse, the person realises what you’ve done – you’ve stuck in there and often kept quiet, as the unwell person has worked out for themselves what the best way ahead is.

Pastoral visiting can be very similar – we accompany, and have to be comfortable with silence. Words, speaking and chatting are sometimes just not what's most helpful, and we have to learn to sit, and listen, and discern. Mother Mary Clare SLG - the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God, wrote Prayers on the Simplicity of our relationship with God: it's only when we begin to contemplate the stillness, the awfulness of the stillness and silence of Calvary, that we can begin to imagine the powerfulness of silent contemplative prayer and the transformation of the world. How can we know God's purposes for our lives and the lives of those around us if we don't make the time to stop, to be still, to be silent before God, and to listen?

Are we someone who chit chats our way through our conversations with God, with our desires and requests and designs, or are we prepared to sit quietly listening – and then following wherever he leads us?