

Choral Communion – 9th August 2020 – 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Trinity 9).

1 Kings 19: 9, 11-13; Romans 9: 1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33.

Title: Silence ('The peace of God which passes all understanding').

How are you with silence? Silence seems to be one of those things that makes many people feel uncomfortable. I guess it does this because we can perceive silence as an **absence** of something and so rush to fill it with something, anything, rather than endure this awful nothingness. And we can see this not just in our encounters with one another but also in our worship. Some church services seem to have no time for silence at all. Even when no words are spoken, a kind of musical 'Polyfiller' can be relied upon to fill in the cracks! Silence will only be present if those leading worship have made special provision for it to be present. I would imagine that silence is one of those things that has challenged people during this recent period of lockdown. For those who are used to defining their existence in terms of the amount of activity in which they are involved, staying at home for extended periods of time, especially if that means doing so with other family members who find themselves equally disorientated, has presented somewhat of a problem. But there is always ZOOM! I can't help but feel that those of us who are retired have something of a head start in all this, although we can be as prone as anyone to seek to justify our existence in the amount of voluntary activities in which we are engaged, much of which has also come to a stop during this period of lockdown. For if we cannot 'do' we are forced to focus on our 'beingness'. We are forced to turn our attention from the **quantity** of our activities to the **quality** of our lives. How *are* our relationships, with one another, particularly our closest relationships? How *is* our relationship with God? How *is* my relationship with me? How *has* my life been so far? Where *is* my life going? What *is* the point of life anyway? All of which I think you will agree can be pretty heady stuff.

But what about if silence, rather than representing the **absence** of something, provides us a wonderful and much needed opportunity to detect someone's **presence**? It is only when we are still, that we have any chance of knowing. As the psalmist says in Psalm 46 verse 10, "Be still and know that I am God", a sentiment which leads us rather nicely into our Old Testament Lesson this morning. Let me remind you of its context.

Immediately before this passage begins, Elijah has had a hard time of it. He has taken on the prophets of Baal *and* forewarned the end of a drought, and *won*. He flees from Jezebel for fear of losing his life, and hits rock bottom both mentally and spiritually. He longs for some peace and quiet and the assurance of God's presence with him, and that is just what he experiences, not in the wind, fire and earthquake but, as the version we heard put it, '*in the gentle breeze*'. Elijah's experience of God in this passage is very similar to Moses' experience of God in a period of private prayer recorded in Exodus chapter 33 verses 19-23. Both witness the presence God at a critical time in their respective ministries. Although both take shelter from God in a cleft or opening in the rock, there is an important difference between the two. Whereas God appears to Moses as a result of a period of robust dialogue, God appears to Elijah when he is in the depths of despair. And that should give us hope too. Whether we are so frustrated with God that we find ourselves letting God have it with both metaphorical barrels, or whether our spiritual energy has deserted us completely, God is just as capable of making himself known to us as he did to Moses and Elijah. Whether through a moment of glorious beauty or an undramatic act of kindness, we too can sense God's presence providing we are still enough to notice.

For the disciples in our gospel reading, stillness initially seems to be something in very short supply. This passage follows on from the Feeding of the 5,000. Whereas that miracle occurs in all four gospels, Jesus walking on the water, only occurs in three, Luke preferring to follow the Feeding of the 5,000 with Jesus' Transfiguration, and it's only Matthew's account that includes the passage about Peter. In our gospel passage today, the disciples are back in a boat, and things are not going well. One of the things I love, particular in the fourth gospel, is how St. John *uses outward events to mirror the inner workings of people's hearts*. If he was alive today, I think he would have been an incredibly effective screen writer. Well some of his particular talents are clearly at work in the passage we heard read from Matthew this morning. It is night time; a storm has blown up suddenly, as it so often did on the Sea of Galilee, the surrounding hills acting as a funnel for the wind. In this instance the wind is coming at the experienced disciples' boat head on. They are not only fearful but superstitious too. And then they realise that the person that they thought was a ghost was none other than Jesus himself which should not really have surprised them. Because Jesus has needed some time to be alone in prayer with his heavenly Father (not only because of the exhausting day they have just had, but also because of hearing the shocking news of the death of John the Baptist), the disciples are taking their boat to the other side of the lake whilst Jesus will join them by walking around the lake's northern edge. Whilst not for a moment denying that this storm happened, *how well all of these outward events mirror the inner workings of the disciples' hearts*. Not just their courage, but their faith is deserting them too, which is underlined with the episode of Peter, wanting to meet his Lord who appears to be walking on the water, by (if I may borrow words from Star Trek) 'going boldly where no man has gone before', until he realises what he is doing and starts to sink.

Having initially said to all the disciples *“Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid!”* the dialogue that takes place between Peter and Jesus is central to what this passage is all about. Let me just remind you what is said. Peter cries out to Jesus, *“Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.”* Jesus responds by saying *“Come.”* When Peter falters he cries out, *“Lord! Save me!”* at which point Jesus reaches out his hand which Peter firmly grasps. Jesus gently chides Peter by observing, *“Man of little faith, why do you doubt?”* Peter, can only reply, *“Truly, you are the Son of God.”*

Jesus addresses his remarks not just to Peter, not even just to the disciples, but to men and women down through the ages who seek to look to him for help, including of course, you and me. When things are tough, and we have taken the positive step to stop rushing around like headless chickens getting nowhere fast, Jesus says to us **“Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid!”** When we are wondering whether Jesus is listening to us and whether there is any point coming to the Lord in prayer, Jesus says to us, **“Come.”** When we are in danger of drowning in all our worries and concerns and wondering if Jesus is even there, Jesus reaches out his hand to us and helps us find a way through all that burdens us. At that point we hear Jesus saying to us, **“Men and women of little faith, why do you doubt?”**

How well the metaphor of Jesus being in the midst of, and quelling, an actual storm speaks to our Lord being present in the midst of, and quelling, the inner storms of our hearts. But we need to practise being silent in both our private and public prayer if we are to have any chance of hearing the sound of God’s gentle breeze blowing through our lives. Then we can also say of Jesus, **“Truly, you are the Son of God.”**