

Sermon for Lent 2C

First Reading: Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Second Reading: Philippians 3: 17– 4: 1

Gospel: Luke 13: 31-end (NT page 71)

In his piece, *Four Minutes, Thirty Three Seconds*, composer John Cage pushed boundaries...

For those who don't know it, this three-movement composition, for any instrument and any number of instruments, consists, entirely, of, well, nothing... None of the instruments play for the whole duration. But whilst some have dubbed this as a piece of silence, the composer disagreed. He said;

"They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out." (John Cage speaking about the premier of 4'33)

But knowing how to listen is not as easy as it sounds, and in the second week of our lent course, we're particularly thinking about *the call to listen*. And the call to listen is a theme that resonates in all our readings today.

In our first reading, we hear part of the story of Abram. Abram (or Abraham as he is renamed), is a person who walks by faith. His whole story is one of listening to God. Abram has listened, as God called him out of his country, setting off into the land of the Canaanites. And he continues to listen. Of course, sometimes he doesn't hear things so well; there's the whole incident of passing his wife off as his sister to the Pharaoh in Egypt; that probably wasn't part of God's plan... But, on the whole, he listens. And we should do likewise...

But, of course, there are challenges to listening to God. Sometimes we listen to God and we don't immediately see the fruition of the things we think we've heard God say. This is the case with Abram. Though he's done pretty well at following God's call, there's one thing that still worries him; that he's left without an heir... And even though God has said 'I will make you into a great nation'; Abram is filled with dread and pain about their childlessness and continues to ask 'how am I to know'? Which is where today's whole elaborate ritual of cutting up dead animals and God (in the form of a smoking brazier and flaming torch) passing between them; comes in. In the Ancient Near East, it was ultimate symbol of sealing this covenant, this promise, with Abram. It was spitting and shaking and signing on the dotted line.

Of course, when we listen for God (and Lent is an ideal time to try to concentrate on how we do that), we rarely get anything quite so obvious, as *our* sign that what we're hearing is really God. And so, as we start trying to listen to God more, we might immediately think about some of the challenges? How do I know it's God I'm hearing? What if I don't hear God at all?

Because it's true... at times God's voice is so quiet, that we're not quite sure if it really is the voice of our Lord and maker. We strain our ears in the silences, hearing just the faintest whisper on the wind, and when we stop and try to grasp the sound... it dissipates into the past, leaving us with just a vague memory of meaning. We sometimes wonder if God would only speak a little clearer and a bit louder, well, wouldn't that make it all a lot easier! But, if God's voice became the booming words of a coercive director... .. much as we might occasionally wish for it, it would change our very understanding of who God is. Listening to God in prayer means finding that deep inner stillness, in which the still small voice of calm is present.

But listening to God is also more than just holding out for words; we can also listen to God in other places. As often as not, God speaks to us in action, or symbol; through a surprise smile, the last fading bar of music or a single solitary flower in a field of barren mud. So perhaps, when I say listening, it is more like attentiveness; being able to touch, taste, smell, see *and* hear the presence of God in all the everyday glory of our lives. It means having our eyes open to the little things that point us to God's deeper purpose...

I remember a day, a few years back, when I really wanted to see some friends. And I was texting friends in turn, and everyone was busy... And because I'm a bit slow sometimes, I spent quite a lot of time trying to arrange things, and nothing was coming off... So eventually I gave up, and I went out for a walk. And I had a really strong sense of which way I needed to go... Now I could have ignored that, I almost did, but thankfully, for once, I was listening to my gut, and I went that way. And less than 10 minutes into the walk, I met a friend's husband. And he said 'thank goodness I've seen you. Please can you come round?'. And this other friends was really struggling and just needed someone to be there with her. Which I was able to do, because nothing else had worked out. And this example comes to mind, because a very similar thing, on a bigger scale, has happened to me this week.

So sometimes, it's only with a bit of hindsight, we can see the voice of God gently nudging us. And the quiet, the peace, the times of silence, they help us to recognise those moments more clearly...

I know that there have been many times I've ignored those God-nudges... and I've wondered 'what if'. What if I'd been brave enough to ask that person I barely knew round for a cuppa? What if I'd walked up to that stranger who looked like they were having a bad day? What if I'd walked that way and not the other?

Many of our Lenten disciplines are made to help us to develop that call to listen for the God-nudges. Decluttering, Sabbath, Silence and Prayer; each give ourselves the space we need to listen to God. I had a conversation with one of our very wise young people at youth group the other week. She looked at the little booklet of Lent suggestions (bake a cake for your neighbour, paint a picture, plant a flower, read the bible etc) and said 'but I just can't do any more'. And she's right, for those of us with over busy lives, putting more in, is just as likely to push God out. Perhaps, as we continue our journey through lent, what we each really need is to give ourselves space to listen, to pay attention.

Because our other readings this morning remind us of the cost of not listening.....

In our Gospel reading we hear that, in the case of Jerusalem, the consequences of not listening to God are high. Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets. They've not just ignored some gentle God-nudges. They've had some full on obvious-prophet intervention. Prophets who have made it very clear what needs to change...

Prophets who've said; pay attention to how we treat the poor

Prophets who've said; pay attention to how we interact with foreign powers

Prophets who've said; pay attention to how we rely on ourselves and not on God.

All these prophets who tried to help Jerusalem hear the word of God, and Jerusalem has not responded well. Uriah was struck through with a sword¹ and they attempted to murder Jeremiah by lowering him into a cistern.²

And now, the ultimate prophet is working in their very midst, and they are still choosing not to see or hear.

No wonder Jesus despairs. No wonder he is heartbroken for his own people and cries;

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Both here and later in Luke, Jesus' message is clear – if only Jerusalem could recognise the voice of God calling out, the course of history might be different. For God is always longing to gather God's children closer in a wide embrace; if only they would listen...

Paul too, in his letter to the Philippians writes about those who would not listen; those who have set their mind on earthly things, those whose destiny is destruction and whose God is their stomach.

And that gets me wondering..., are we really listening?

Because as we listen this Lent, I believe we're being called, not just to listen deeper in our lives and in our prayers to God's individual call to each us.. but to also listen deeper to the prophetic voices that are crying out God's preferred future to the whole of society.

Prophets like the 100s of young people in Cambridge who joined the Youth Climate Strike.

Prophets like the solitary man who stood outside a mosque in Manchester yesterday, with a sign which read “you are my friends. I will watch whilst you pray”.

None of us are every particularly comfortable at being called upon to change; I know I'm not!

But just as it is sometimes peaceful and calming, at other times listening to God's call is challenging and disquieting. At times, as Abram found out, it is frightening and like a dreadful darkness.

But listen we must.

¹ Jer. 26.23

² Jer 38.4-6

So this Lent, let us listen deeply and attentively,

To God in the quietness of our prayer

To God in our everyday lives

And to God's prophetic call...

Because we are God's sheep and we know God's voice.