

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH GRAFHAM

'THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK'

25th November 2020

What does 'silence' mean to you? Some of us may think that silence is the absence of all noise. But is that actually possible? I know that people who have spent time alone in a desert say that contrary to popular expectation it is a noisy place - there may be wind or the sound of the sand shifting; some people refer to a gentle undefined noise like the earth breathing. Perhaps silence is the absence of noise generated by humans. Is it easier to absorb natural noises? What though is 'noise'? Does it have to be audible? What about emails and other electronic communications which seem to demand immediate answers? Is silent reading silence? Perhaps silence is the absence of language. Trying to define silence raises as many questions as answers. Possibly it is up to each one of us to work out what silence means for us.

Our experiences of silence will differ widely. They may be positive or negative; reassuring and comforting; or uncomfortable and threatening. Sara Maitland, the author of 'The Book of Silence', says that she thinks that being sent to your room should be a reward not a punishment! Many people may feel that lockdown means that they have had enough of silence. Yet being alone and being lonely are not the same thing, we can be lonely in a crowd of people.

I think that we all need some silence in our lives but we have to work out for ourselves how much and what form it takes. In schools silence is now seen as a positive learning tool. It offers time to rest and to recharge our batteries but it also offers us time to process things. In the Bible there are many examples of Jesus going away to a quiet place by himself but there are also several examples of him using silence in his meetings with people. For example, when he just silently writes in the sand in front of those accusing the woman of adultery or when he remains silent before his own accusers.

In the Bible it is often in silence that people encounter God. In the first book of Kings, Elijah meets God not in earthquake, wind or fire but 'sheer silence' (1 Kings 19:11-12). Elijah has been going through a bad patch but as a result of that encounter in the silence, he's re-energised and goes off to get Elisha to work with him. Before Jesus makes major decisions such as choosing his disciples, he goes to a quiet space and spends time with his Father.

Silence has always been an important part of our Christian tradition and remains so today. The Desert Fathers and Mothers in the early centuries advocated silence in the inner spiritual journey. In the fourteenth century, the German mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart wrote, 'There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence'. Fast forwarding to the twentieth century, Thomas Keating, a monk and a contemplative, wrote, 'Silence is the language of God, all the rest is bad translation'. If this all feels a bit too philosophical, Brendan Callaghan who is a priest and a psychologist has written, 'Silence enables us to recognise what it is that we care about most deeply'.

We can experience this focused contemplative silence in which we allow ourselves to be open and attentive to God in many different ways. Some of us may already do so as part of our daily practice. But we can also do so on a retreat or a Quiet Day with or without someone to

accompany and help us. Next Wednesday, I am offering a Quiet Afternoon to help us engage with Advent and prepare for Christmas. Whether you are an 'old hand' at Quiet Days or have never done anything like this before, you might like to consider joining me (details below). I'll be giving two talks each followed by a period of silence for your own prayer and reflection. I'll also be suggesting some ways in which you might engage with that silence

With my love and prayers

Camilla

Advent Quiet Afternoon: 'From Darkness into Light'.

Wednesday 2nd December 2.00pm until 4.30pm on Zoom. If you would like to come please book by contacting me (camillawhite@waitrose.com) by 30th November and I will send you the Zoom link and a handout before the day.

Please share these mailings with anyone who you think might find them helpful. If they would like to receive them direct they are welcome to email office@standrewsgrafham.org.uk and we will add them to the mailing list.