

St Mary and St Francis – 19th February 2023
God on Mute – Sermon 1 in Lent Series – Brian Griffiths

This is the first sermon in our Lent series 'God on Mute' which explores how we cope with those difficult situations when God seems far away – when our prayers seem to go unanswered. Since being diagnosed with a serious illness and undergoing major surgery just over a year ago, I have really struggled and wrestled with my faith. It didn't get any better when my wife, Rowena, had a heart attack in September and spent 17 days on the Cardiac Care Unit in Croydon Hospital. It's the age-old question – 'Why do bad things happen to people who try to be good?' There are no easy answers and when I have looked at the Bible it just seems to say 'Don't worry about anything.'

Jesus said it when he talked about the birds of the air and the lilies in the fields. Paul reiterates this in his letter to the Philippians that we heard this morning. He writes:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Anyone reading or hearing this scripture for the first time might well be excused for thinking that Paul is describing some utopian paradise in a parallel universe that's part of a galaxy far, far away that not even the Starship Enterprise could reach on warp speed.

If you are concerned that you'll still have a job in the next few weeks – then you are bound to worry. If you are awaiting test results for a health issue or your tests or treatment has been delayed – then you are bound to worry. If you are caring for someone you love who is gradually losing their memory –

then you are bound to worry. If you are running out of the food you got for your family from the food bank last week and you're still waiting for your Universal Credit to come through – then you are bound to worry. If you are having to make choices between paying for food or heating your home – then you are bound to worry. Paul says – just give it all to God in prayer. What happens when you pray really hard and all you get in return is silence? How do we engage with that silence?

This is the dilemma I have faced and I still face. Where is God in all this chaos? Why is he silent? In trying to search for an answer to this big question I browsed the internet and found 'The Unanswered Prayer Course' set up by Pete Greig who wrote the book 'God on Mute'. I looked at the course sessions and Hazel loaned me a copy of the book. At last I found a resource that seemed to have some answers to these hard questions. So now you know that the 'God on Mute' sermon series and course we are going to study in Lent was my idea.

I know that there are several people in St Francis and St Mary's who are going through some really hard times at the moment and they have the same question – where is God in all of this? Interestingly, during one of the last conversations Rowena had with Barbara Plummer when Barbara found out that her daughter in law had cancer, Barbara said 'It makes you question your faith. How much more can one family take? It makes you wonder what it's all about.'

I have mentioned the film 'Bruce Almighty' in a previous sermon. God gives Bruce his powers – including receiving and answeri-ng prayer. Bruce's computer gets overwhelmed

with incoming prayers and so in his frustration he 'selects all' and answers 'yes'. The consequence is that there's a riot in the city streets because thousands were praying to win the lottery and they all did – but because they all won, the prize was virtually nothing. Would that God answered 'yes' to all our prayers. Of course, he doesn't – even in the midst of the storms of life, a lot of the time he's just silent.

Some of you in St Francis will know Jane Smith. Jane has many health problems and, in her difficulties, she has questioned where on earth is God. Here is part of a lament that she wrote earlier this year – I reproduced this in the parish magazines a few months ago:

***You promise to heal the broken-hearted and save
the crushed in spirit,
So why have You departed and left me feeling wretched?***

***You promise to protect us from all harm so none of our
bones are broken,
So where were Your loving arms when I needed them?***

***You promise to listen when we cry to You in agony,
So why have You not replied to my questioning?***

***You promise to rescue and deliver us from our fears,
So why aren't You coming quicker to wipe away my
tears?***

***You promise that those who trust in You will lack no good
thing,
So why are You oblivious to my suffering?***

We can see from her writing how Jane has wrestled with the silence – which seems to be an abandonment. It's a real cry from the heart. Jane sees no answers in the promises she reads in scripture and I see few answers too.

You may wonder what I am doing here preaching when I am constantly questioning my faith – searching for answers which seem to be quite elusive. Maybe you expect those on the Ministry Team to have a solid faith – a faith that just accepts scripture and never doubts, never questions. However, I strongly believe that it is healthy and absolutely right to question – it's OK to doubt – especially when life throws a load of rubbish at us. Here's a quote I came across when preparing this sermon:

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.

Our Gospel reading from Luke this morning is essentially about someone who is really confident about their faith and someone else who is struggling and wrestling. The confident character says 'Look at me. Look how good I am. I do all the fasting and the rituals and I give a tithe of my money. I'm not like these other people. I am so, so good.' The other character says simply 'Have mercy on me a sinner.' It's the second person – the one who acknowledges that his life is messed up and struggles and wrestles with his faith that Jesus commends.

So how do we 'engage with the silence?' How do we cope with the mess, all the emptiness and the discomfort when God seems silent?

In his book, Pete Greig writes that it is important for us to talk about unanswered prayer for three reasons:

Emotionally – most of us have pain we need to process

Intellectually – we may also have questions we need answered

Culturally – sadly the church can be less honest than the Bible

Sometimes it can be a real challenge to be vulnerable with our fellow Christians here in church. It's doubly so for those of us who preach, for the pulpit or the lectern can be an extremely vulnerable place – a place where we often bare our souls – it seems like I am doing this now. It's often challenging to talk about doubts and struggles with our faith in church. Maybe it's because we don't know what to say – because we don't have the answers either, but are afraid to admit it. Hopefully, when we tackle these issues in the study groups we can be open and honest with each other – not judging those who question their faith – and more importantly listening to each other so that we can learn from people's lived experiences.

So, when we encounter silence from God, do we just give up. Is the silence God abandoning us – as Jane wrote in her lament. Or should we just do ask Paul urges us:

'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

You will know Hilary Fife who has taken services and preached here – she used to be the Lead Chaplain at Croydon Hospital and she is my Spiritual Director. Before I had my surgery just over a year ago, she said something that has had a profound effect on me. She said:

'When you are lying on the hospital bed just shuffle over a little so that Jesus can lie alongside you.'

In handing the messiness and chaos over to Jesus in prayer we know that he lies or stands alongside us. That one sentence has been a lifeline for me. I imagined Jesus lying alongside me in the CT scanner two weeks ago when I was undergoing a biopsy. I did feel a sense of peace – even though God seems to be on mute the vast majority of the time.

This is the peace that Paul promises when we hand over the mess and chaos to God in prayer in those well-loved words:

'And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

So maybe that's one way to deal with the silence – to let Jesus stand or lie alongside us. Jesus knows about messiness, emptiness and discomfort.

I would like to finish by using a prayer entitled *Silent God* by Edwina Gateley as this expresses how God doesn't abandon us, but is always near even though we may not be aware of his presence:

*This is my prayer—
That, though I may not see,
I be aware
Of the Silent God
Who stands by me.
That, though I may not feel,
I be aware
Of the Mighty Love
Which doggedly follows me.
That, though I may not respond,
I be aware
That God—my Silent, Mighty God, Waits each day.
Quietly, hopefully, persistently.
Waits each day and through each night for me.
For me—alone.*