

God on Mute 4 Sermon – Psalm 13; Luke 23. 50-56

And so we come to Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Day, sometimes called Easter Saturday, in the fourth in our series of sermons addressing the issue of unanswered prayer and why God seems to be silent in the face of so much pain and suffering in his world.

Easter Saturday is really a bit of a non-event. All we're told about it in the today's Gospel reading is that "On the Sabbath (the women) rested according to the commandment." The Jewish Sabbath lasted from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, which is why we're told that it was at *early dawn* on the first day of the week that the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. To have gone at night would have been too dangerous.

But I'm jumping the gun. Our focus today is not Easter Day, but Easter Saturday. On Maundy Thursday, we asked, along with Peter Greig, the author of "God on Mute," How am I going to get through this? On Good Friday the question was "Why aren't my prayers being answered?" and today the question is "Where is God when heaven is silent?"

But before we go there, let me just pick out a couple of things from our reading that are particularly significant. We're told that Joseph, from Arimathea, although a member of the Council which sentenced Jesus to death, did not consent to that death sentence. It must have been a great comfort to Jesus, when he underwent the ordeal of his trial, to know that there was at least one friendly face there, one person at least who was on his side.

God frequently works through other people and having others with us when we're suffering, perhaps the pain of bereavement, say, can bring comfort. Sometimes, when words are inadequate, a hug can mean so much.

A few years ago I was making a pastoral visit to someone, an elderly man living on his own, who was suffering from the depression that comes with bipolar disorder. As I was leaving, he said, with tears in his eyes, "Can you give me a hug?"

The support of others can also help us cope better with pain.

Some psychologists at the Wisconsin University Centre for the Study of Pain discovered that a group of people could keep their feet in buckets of freezing water twice as long as an individual on their own. The experiment focused on physical pain, but the same is true of emotional pain. When we ask the question, "Where is God?" it may be that the answer is that he is there in other people.

The other thing I want to draw your attention to is less relevant to our theme today, but it's the fact that Luke records that the women who accompanied Jesus "saw the tomb and how Jesus body was laid in it." Those who try to debunk the reality of the Resurrection sometimes claim that the women couldn't find the body because they went to the wrong tomb. In these words of Luke, echoed by Matthew and Mark, is their answer.

Looking back over my own life I can think of a number of times when my prayers have been unanswered, but there are two which I'd like to share with you, because I think they show something of the way in which God works. And I do appreciate that the situations described may not be anything like as painful as those which have impacted you.

When at university, there was a girl in my year, also reading English, whom I really fancied. Indeed, I thought I was in love with her, and prayed fervently and frequently that she would feel the same about me. But she didn't. We remained good friends and we still communicate with each other, but she wasn't what God wanted for me. He had something different in mind: my marriage to Anne. And he was clearly right.

The second example of unanswered prayer comes from the seventeen years I spent as a headteacher and stems from the stress involved in running a school. For much of my time as a head, I was waking at 4 o'clock in the morning, running through the tasks for the next day or trying to resolve problems from the day before. I would lie there praying for the gift of sleep, sleep which didn't come.

And not infrequently the alarm clock would find me retching with anxiety at the issues I had to deal with in the day ahead.

As a young person, I'd wondered whether I was being called to ministry, but either I'd been deaf, or the call wasn't loud enough, so I'd ignored it. I now wonder whether my unanswered prayer for sleep was God's way of telling me that that it was time I answered *his* call. At any rate, I took early retirement, trained as a priest, and here I am – now sleeping perfectly.

I ought to add that although God was silent on the matter of sleep, I had plenty of other experiences of my prayers and those of others involved in the school being answered. It was a church school and I used to say that it ran on prayer.

What I'm getting at is that although I thought those two prayers of mine were unanswered, that God was on mute, the truth was rather different. In relation to these prayers, His silence was part of his plan for me. It was a purposeful silence, with the intention of leading me to where he wanted me to be. For me they were difficult times, Holy Saturday experiences, and one considerably longer than the other, but the results were worth the wait.

So if, in your prayer life, you're going through a Holy Saturday experience, don't give up on prayer. It may be that while God appears absent in relation to one prayer request, for whatever reason, it may well be that he is still present in other areas of your prayer life.

And let's try to think about it for a moment from God's point of view. There are currently around 8 billion people in the world, many of whom will be praying. What are the chances do you think of some of those prayers being in conflict with each other?

Let me give you some examples. No doubt there are many people in Ukraine praying for victory over Russia. And no doubt there are equally sincere, but misinformed people in Russia praying for victory over Ukraine. Or how about those wives on both sides praying for the safe return of their husbands, or sons, or brothers? Is it possible for God to answer all those prayers to the satisfaction of all those praying? Almost certainly not.

So when we find ourselves in a Holy Saturday moment in our prayers, it's worth asking whether our prayers might be in conflict with someone else's prayers.

Some of you will know that I'm a supporter of Arsenal football club, but I would never pray for them to win a match, because there's sure to be someone supporting the other team who is an equally committed Christian. Rather I would pray for my team to give a good account of themselves.

In the kind of examples of ways in which sincerely prayed prayers can be in conflict with each other I've given, it is easy to see how the conflict arises, but there may well be occasions in our prayer lives when we're unaware of there being such conflict and the feeling is one of great disappointment or even anger towards God.

In such a circumstance we may well find ourselves in sympathy with the author of the psalm we heard earlier – psalm 13. It's a short psalm, but look how much pain it contains:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I bear pain^[a] in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

And in his or her anguish, the psalmist feels able to rail against God and make demands on God:

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

And this is not the only psalm in which we find such direct questioning of God. As we heard last week, Jesus expresses the agony of his crucifixion in words taken from Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And the psalm goes onto say:

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Words, no doubt that many can echo.

But that Jesus can express his anguish in this way means that it's OK for us to go down to the bottom of the garden and howl at God. He can take it. And

there's comfort in knowing that Jesus has been there too. He too has howled at God.

But look at how psalm 13 ends:

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.

"I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me." Past experience has taught the psalmist that God can be trusted. So when we find ourselves in that Holy Saturday time, the in-between time that separates Good Friday from Easter Sunday, it may be that we can find comfort in the ways in which God has answered our prayers in the past or other ways in which he has blessed us.

And remember, too, some of the other ways in which I've suggested we can find hope when we're feeling hopeless: the support of other people – it may be a cliché, but the saying, "a problem shared is a problem halved" is based on experience; the eventual discovery that the silence on God's part was due to his having something better in his plans for us; that, whilst "absent" in this particular prayer, he's "present" in our other prayers and that our prayers may be in conflict with the prayers of others.

Nevertheless, there may be times when all we can do is howl. That's OK. As the children's hymn puts it, "Our God is great big God." He can take it. But whatever you do, don't give up on prayer, "but in every situation," as St Paul writes, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen.