



Park Road Baptist Church  
Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021

**Bible reading:** [Luke 1:5 – 25, 57 – 66](#)

## **Sermon** The gift of silence

Let me start by asking you a question – have you ever said something and then regretted what you said?

If you have ever said something and regretted it, put up your hand. How honest of you!

To be able to say the right words or to be able to not say the wrong words requires God's help.

Here's what James wrote some 2000 years ago – and I'm reading from the Message: *'We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.'*

*A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!*

*It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.*

*This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on.'*

That's from James Chapter 3.

Although that was written 2000 years ago – that could be an article in the Sunday Times – nothing has changed.

Let me give you a lovely proverb, **'a word aptly spoken is like an apple of gold in settings of silver.'** Proverbs 25:11

The right word at the right time for the right person, said in the right way is of immense value. On the other hand, the wrong word does untold damage.

Some of you who are of a certain age will remember this character – Zippy from Rainbow, a children's television programme.

Zippy was quite an irritating character but he did have one redeeming feature – a gift that I think many people would benefit from and there are times when I would love to have this gift myself.

By the way, the clue is in the name. Zippy had a zip that could be pulled across his mouth to stop him speaking. Do you ever feel you need a zip for your mouth? Or possibly for someone else? In the very first Christmas we come across the strange but precious gift of silence. You might want to turn to Luke Chapter 1.

An old man by the name of Zechariah who was a priest, was serving in the temple when one day the angel Gabriel shows up and tells Zechariah that he and his equally old wife Elizabeth are going to have a son and he would become John the Baptist. And he would help to prepare the people for what God was about to do through Jesus. One of the things Luke does in his gospel is he takes people, and he contrasts them.

So, we have the same angel appearing to Mary – Mary has no real spiritual credentials, she's young and poor, she's an uneducated and undistinguished teenage girl of no real significance. Her really short response is, **'let it be'**.

Zechariah, who we would expect to be much more spiritually advanced than Mary. He's a priest, he's educated, he's mature, he knows the Torah, he's served in the temple – but Zechariah says, **'no, it's not possible, this would even be beyond God, Lizzie and I are just far too old – you must have the wrong person.'**

And the angel says to Zechariah, *'actually it is possible, I stand in the presence of God, and he has sent me to tell you this good news. Zechariah, why should you be so quick to say what God can or cannot do? Why would you be so quick to say what you do or don't believe – Zechariah, you need a zip for your mouth. Now, you will be silent until the day this happens because you did not believe my words which will come true at the appointed time.'*

God is going to be present to Zechariah in silence. In a way that God could not break through to Zechariah in words. This is the strange gift of silence.

I think there are different aspects to Zechariah's silence.

When he comes out of the temple, he makes signs to the people, but he is unable to speak – imagine trying to tell people you have just seen an angel using only your hands. Then 9 months later we are told that the people made signs to Zechariah – asking him what he would like to name the child v62. That suggests to me that not only can Zechariah not speak but that he can't hear either. This really is complete silence for Zechariah. He is unable to make any sound and he is unable to hear any sound. Imagine your life with no television, no radio, no internet, no smartphone, no newspapers and no books. That was life for most people in the ancient world – they were alone with their mind or with their thoughts much more than we are. For Zechariah, there was also no conversation – no local gossip, no who is doing what, whose getting ahead or whose falling behind or what's for dinner?

I wonder what you think about when you are completely on your own and there is no external stimulation. If we're honest, most of us don't really like to be in that situation. We are usually happy to complain about noise, but silence makes us feel quite uncomfortable. That's why you can't go into a shopping mall without music in the background. Even in conversation round the dinner table we feel every gap in the conversation has to be filled with talk. Why is this? Is it because silence makes us vulnerable to what is actually going on in our hearts?

So often we run from silence and try to avoid it, but Zechariah can't get away from it – he's alone with his thoughts. Actually, that's not quite true. It's in the silence that he discovers that he isn't alone. Remember

that Zechariah was a priest and so in the silence his mind will eventually turn to what he has filled it with – namely the Old Testament. That’s what happens in silence – we are at the mercy of whatever we have been filling our mind with. I wonder if his mind ran to these words; ***Be still and know that I am God. The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silent before him.***

I think it would be in the silence that the reality of God becomes clear to Zechariah. Over the days and weeks and months Zechariah would be playing God’s word over and over and over in his mind hundreds and hundreds of times. I wonder if God’s invitation to us over Christmas is to not do more but to do less. Not so much to be busy but to be still. Perhaps go somewhere where you can be alone with only the sound of the wind or the birds – maybe for half an hour or an hour and just be still. Not only can Zechariah not hear sound, but he can’t speak either. For 9 months he is unable to say all the things he would normally say to control the people around him and their opinions and their irritating habits. Being silent is actually an act of humility. And for 9 months, Zechariah is given space to learn humility. He can’t flatter or intimidate or boast or put down or correct or coerce or whatever. Silence is a strange but precious gift. We know that Jesus often withdrew to a quiet place. What did Jesus do at the start of his ministry? He spent 40 days and 40 nights alone in silence. Early in Mark’s gospel we are told that Jesus got up early, while it was still dark and withdrew to a solitary place. Before choosing his disciples, he withdraws into silence. After feeding the 5000, people want to make him king and he withdraws into silence. After John the Baptist is executed, Jesus withdraws into silence. Our world is much noisier than Jesus’ world – and Jesus was the sinless Son of God and if he needed time in silence alone with God then I’m guessing we do as well. Silence is a gift – I think it was a gift for Zechariah as well and not a punishment as many suggest.

And I believe that is true for us as well. It’s in the silence and stillness that we can more readily hear what God wants to say to us. For 9 months Zechariah lives in silence – I guarantee if you were to spend 9

months in silence, it's going to change you. And during those months God's word becomes very real to Zechariah.

When the baby is finally born, his relatives and neighbours want to name the baby Zechariah after his dad. Zechariah gets a tablet and writes his name is John. In other words, now he believes and now he obeys from the heart. And then we're told immediately his mouth was opened. And his tongue was set free, and he began to speak praising God. How cool would it be if that was true of us – where our mouths could be opened, and our tongues could be free – free from saying what we shouldn't say and free to praise and glorify God.

I mentioned earlier that much of Jesus' ministry is punctuated with times of silence. It also ends with silence. He is silent before the chief priests. He is silent when he's mocked. He's silent when he's before Pilate. He's 'silent when he's before Herod. In Matthew 27:14, it says, 'But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.' Jesus' trial is peppered with these silences. Why? What's the big deal about that? Just before his trial Jesus said to his disciples, 'do you not know that I could just say the word and my Father would put twelve legions of angels at my disposal.'

One word from Jesus and he wouldn't have to suffer. There would be no cross and no death. He just had to say one word and there would be no blood shed – and no lamb would be slain, no sacrifice would be required, and no sin would be atoned for and no curse will be dealt with. Just say the word, Jesus. Just say the word, Jesus and more than twelve legions of angels will come and rescue you and you can walk away from the cross. And every single member of the human race will die unforgiven, uncleansed, unreconciled, unsaved. When one word could save him and crush us – he was silent. When one silence could save us and crush him – he was silent. Jesus chose silence and we are saved by that word that Jesus chose not to say.