

Hymns: 499 Great God your love has called us here  
338 There is a redeemer  
Halle, halle, halle!  
563 O Jesus I have promised  
661 Give me the faith which can remove

---

Readings: Proverbs 1.20-33  
Psalm 19 (803)  
James 3.1-12  
Mark 8.27-38

---

## 'Shutting up, Speaking out'

Holy God, break your word among us for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you sight o Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Yesterday afternoon I was on my way home from District Synod in Westminster, and I had missed my lunch – so it was mid afternoon and I found myself on the Jubilee line towards London Bridge with a cheese and coleslaw sandwich. (It is a glamorous life we lead)

And I joined the carriage and there were all these seats – bliss – so I sat down next to a row of three Nigerian men all wearing suits with similar badges – I think old boys of a school or something.

And then a ruckus started. Here was the reason all the seats were free: across from me, a large white man with wild and wonderfully curly hair – and a tattoo across his right knuckles for Leeds United – and he was addressing the carriage in loud Yorkshire tones: are none of you happy? Is no one down here happy? Why is no one smiling – you – and other words – and I realised he was one of a large group of men, spread all through the carriage – on their way to the Leeds match at Millwall. And if you don't follow football, don't worry – that speaks well of you – just use your imagination.

Are none of you happy – someone smile for me – the man stood and become more aggressive, and racially charged – to the African men next to me, in their suits – 'you people are usually happy, always smiling and laughing – what's wrong with you?'

From the letter of James – How great a fire is set ablaze by a small fire – and the tongue is a small fire. And... like the tiny rudder that turns a great ship, so also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

We know this. How saying the right thing at the right time can be such a blessing and change everything –

and conversely how saying the wrong one can tip something over the edge.

When should we speak out, when should we shut up? I'm not just talking about underground carriages. I'm talking about dealing with bad practice, injustice in our workplaces, our churches, our kitchen tables – I'm talking about the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Trades Union Congress this past week, attracting much criticism.

So should we just shut up, stay quiet to avoid causing harm? If only it were that easy – because sometimes things are said that seem to cause a bit of trouble, but need to be said. Or more properly, sometimes things are said which reveal tension in a situation. And even if the one who speaks gets tagged with having rocked the boat, anyone can see that they were not the cause of the trouble.

Other times, speaking out can exacerbate a situation that is on the brink of peace. Sometimes silence, restraint, is golden.

I am thinking about office situations, or schools – or Anyone who has ever had the question before them about whether to make a grievance about a colleague's behaviour, for instance, will identify with the question

in the scripture today – when to speak, when to be quiet.

And sometimes it is the most innocent questions - I remember my parents visiting a church out in the suburbs – more than 40 years ago now – brother – mommy, where are all the black people – how quickly my parents silenced him.

Also remember my grandfather – better to keep quiet and be thought a fool, than to open mouth and leave no one in doubt.

He was right, but friends, we come from a long line of divine fools – people who look foolish, simple in the eyes of the world and yet are wise –

Come with me to Proverbs – wisdom stands at the streetcorner and cries out! She stands in the market place and says how long will you all be foolish! And friends, people look away and try to hurry past.

Jesus, who is identified with the voice of lady wisdom in Hebrew scripture – almost always causes trouble by what he says, or rather, reveals trouble by what he says. And Jesus is also thought foolish – sometimes even, especially by his own disciples.

So at risk of being foolish, Today as we stand and look at the world around us I want us to each think about as Christian people – when to shut up, when to speak out, and how to tell when to do which.

We have heard it the passage from James, blessing and curse come from same mouth – it should not be so.

But here's the point – the question for us, as we confront evil in a conflicted, hurt place is not 'should I say something or not,' but 'how can I bless in a situation instead of cursing.'

Blessing is not the same as smoothing things over – indeed it may look like it causes more trouble!! Sometimes blessing may involve costly speaking, sometimes even more costly silence. And when I say costly, I mean not just discomfort, but the kind of pick up your cross suffering that is real, and hard, and brings peace by our willingness to undertake it just as Jesus' cross brought blessing to our world.

Here is the heart of our Gospel today – picking up our cross means taking responsibility for being a blessing in the way we engage with the world – when we speak out, when shut up. AND it is hard. Sometimes because it brings abuse or difficulty on ourselves, sometimes because it exposes conflict or existing difficulty in a

community where this then rebounds on other people, especially in the short run. It is uncomfortably like wisdom standing at the street corner – the mad woman with the wild hair everyone tries to avoid on the underground?

Because there is always the possibility that our intervention brings more than a little curse into a situation that was on its way to being resolved – that is to say, making it worse – playing into the hands of evil and tipping it away from peace.

Remember earlier in Mark, Jesus said not what goes in, but what comes out that defiles – speaking from anger, fear, bitterness. This defiles us.

SO how can we judge when to speak up? When this will be a blessing not a curse? How to engage, and what to do?

Martin Luther King Jr. and others he worked with taught a process to prepare to engage in non-violent direct action – a process, if you will, to discern when to speak up and when to be silent, to try to maximise the potential of blessing a situation by direct action. I think it is a good pattern and I commend it to us as we try to follow the Gospel teaching today, and each of us pick up our cross.

First, research: that is, makes sure you know what is happening. That you understand the context, the culture, the facts – and if there is an injustice, then what exactly that injustice is.

SO for instance picking something that has been in the news this week in relation to the words of Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby – Are a particular group of people disadvantaged by something called a ‘gig economy,’ where individuals are paid by the task or session rather than being employed? Who and what group? What is the reality of people’s experience, whatever anyone claims? You don’t just go straight to action, you make sure you know what is true.

The next step in the process is negotiation – is there a way to avoid the need for direct action or explicit conflict – can someone be reasoned with, or an employment practice be modified so as to lessen the bad effects. This involves understanding where power lies in a situation, and not just who is doing something which may have a bad effect, but who has power to change that.

Negotiation involves finding partners, and enlisting the help and advice of people who may themselves be part of something we want to change.

Going and shouting at workers in a council housing office is unlikely to produce more affordable housing.

Working with groups of housing worker representatives, who know first hand the effects of a particular policy, may be essential. And this is the easiest step to skip, because it requires of me that I actually deal with the people who may be causing me most anxiety and difficulty – and risk being further hurt. It requires we speak with each other, not about each other. Think about our households, our extended families, our workplaces – our politics, and think how hard this can be. And how simple.

Third step in Dr King's process to deciding whether to engage in direct action was one not taken up much in our world, and here we hit the Gospel straight up: this step is self-purification.

That is, the searching of my own motives to make sure I am serving righteousness and nothing else. The what I am picking up, if I am picking something up, is actually the cross of Jesus Christ and not my own ego. Or my own shame.

Am I angry, stay home. Am I ready and prepared not to return insult with insult, but to return insult with



love and respect? Have I girded my heart and reminded myself how much God loves me, so that I know I can afford compassion for someone who abuses or hurts me?

Then, and only then, is it right to go forward and break silence, and then and always then we have a responsibility to go forward and to break silence.

TO bless, and not to curse a situation.

If that describes a process by which we might judge when to speak out, then when should we keep silent?

Sometimes this teaching in Mark – pick up your cross – has been misinterpreted to mean be a doormat, or simply to accept an injustice – NO – it means that we accept the cost of changing injustice.

Be willing to suffer to change things, which is costly. Again, anyone who has ever brought a grievance against someone, you know this. Or stood up with someone of a different gender, or sexuality, or for goodness sake, political opinion and said by all means disagree, but do not abuse this person.

In our personal relationships this means choosing generosity, also on occasion it means drawing conflict.

It does not mean I exercise every right I have, without that I exercise every power for compassion that I have. And in compassion is power.

We do as much, if not more damage by our silence as by our speech.

Again, the question when faced with a problem is not 'should I say something or not,' but 'how can I bless, not curse.' How can I be wise?

And never moreso than when we seek to share the mystery of our faith with another person, to ask the question or give the testimony that turns someone toward a recognition that God loves them, and them uniquely.

Friends, lest we get ourselves all tied up in knots over this, let's remember that justice does roll like waters, and love like an everflowing stream – no one said Christian life would be easy, just that it would be full of love!

SO we will each of us choose when to speak, and when to be silent, and try to be a blessing.

And sometimes the world will call us foolish, and sometimes we will fail, and always need to be strong

and warm and repent of the anger in our own hearts so we can not simply win, but transform. But not, never to step away from presence, from action to be part of God's work against evil.

Because remember the scandal of the Gospel, the grace of God is not just for those who are right, or who are worthy, but for all.

SO in that underground carriage, with my cheese and coleslaw sandwich, I thought 'Oh golly,' and decided to stay silent – I was tired and a little frightened. No such luck – I was wearing a collar and had forgotten – and the man with the wonderful curly hair spotted me and began to ask about my marital status and other things – he was a Roman catholic it turned out – and not nasty at all, just alive and aggressive up for the match and perhaps limited in his experience dealing with other people, feeling out of place in London – by the time we got to London Bridge I'd had the story of his mother's death and his estrangement from his sisters, his hopes for Leeds that afternoon but an assurance that even if 'we get beat, it's the friendship, the loyalty that matters.'

And the African men joined in – they knew more about football than I did.

When to speak out, when to shut up – how to decide - Jesus did not call us to be doormats, and did also recognise the cost and danger of asking us to speak his word of love, and mercy which is justice – God’s mercy is that the unjust in our world will be changed. Across out kitchen tables, in church, at the streetcorners, and in our offices and schools and anywhere that people are.

SO go then - you wise, you generous, you forgiven and beloved – go and bless this world with your lives: speak and withhold - have no fear, and know that your God holds your name on the very sigh of his lips: you are beloved.