

A time to be silent and a time to speak

(Main passage - Mark 14:53-65)

I want to start of this evening by playing you a piece of music from 1952 called 4'33" (four, thirty-three). Listen carefully.

[play 30 seconds of silence]

What did you hear?

- Perhaps silence? – perhaps a squeak from a chair, a cough, traffic outside?

That piece of music is a real piece of music. It was composed by an American composer called John Cage and it is actually more complicated than you might think. Many mistakenly refer to this piece as "4 minutes 33 seconds silence" but they are wrong! – the piece actually has three separate movements in it, the first is 30 seconds long, the second 2 minutes 23 seconds and the third is 1 minute 40 seconds. There is actually a score for this piece of music that instructs the performer not to play their instrument during the entire duration of the piece throughout the three movements.

The music is not actually the silence itself but the idea is that in the silence you hear the environment around you. Perhaps you hear a clock ticking, maybe the rain on the roof or the faint hiss of the central heating. You might think that John Cage is a nut case but actually the composer highlights something quite striking. These sounds are around us all the time and yet we are rarely quiet enough to hear them. How often are you silent? – our lives now are so noisy, silence is very rare now.

Of course there is still one time when we are silent. 11:00 on 11/11 (remembrance day) is a time to be silent for a couple of minutes as we remember those who have died in conflict. But even that seems to be too long for some to stay silent – as people in offices continue to tap away at their keyboards, some ignore it totally and even people who hold a silence reduce it to one minute.

The book of proverbs tells us sometimes it is good to be silent.

Proverbs 17:28 – "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."

We've looked at the use of the tongue quite a lot in the mornings as we have studied the book of James. Throughout the book James talks about the use of the tongue. In the first chapter he says:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...

(James 1:19)

I don't want to go into James again tonight. What I would like us to do tonight is to look at the life of Jesus and to see what light that sheds on 'a time to be silent and a time to speak'.

1. When was Jesus silent?
2. When did he speak?
3. When does he tell us to be silent?
4. And when does he tell us to speak?

So that's the plan for tonight.

1. Jesus was silent before his accusers

In the passage we read earlier this evening it says, (v55) “the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.”

This was a very difficult time for Jesus. A man who was so popular with people. The man who even as a young man had astonished the religious teachers with his insight. He often taught in the temple, he taught people about the kingdom of God. He was a good Godly man, everyone knew that. Even those who were a bit jealous of him or felt threatened by him, even they could find no fault with him. This man was a prime example of how to live a Godly life. And yet they searched for evidence against him, to give them a valid reason for putting him to death. Anything would do, the slightest shred of evidence that could be used to blacken his name would do. Anything to get this man out of the way.

Many people came forward telling stories about Jesus that would give a reason for him to be put to death. But as another story was told it became clear that these things were complete fabrications, a pack of lies.

⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

What Jesus actually said was:

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (John 2:19)

So this was twisting Jesus’ words, he wasn’t talking about Herod’s temple, he was talking about himself. And he didn’t say he was going to destroy it, he said if *they* destroyed it he would raise it up again.

How do you react when people say things about you that aren’t true? Imagine if you were in Jesus’ shoes, if you were on trial and someone claimed that you had said something that you didn’t actually say, they had twisted your words. How would you react?

I guess for most of us we don’t like it when people say things about us that aren’t true. Our instant knee-jerk reaction is to correct them. That may well be a justifiable thing to do but Jesus’ reaction was a little different:

⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

When people accuse us falsely we want to correct them just to save face but Jesus here has a bit more at stake than his reputation. They are plotting to kill him, this false testimony claiming that he said he would pull down Herod’s temple could be interpreted as treason and could get him killed. Yet Jesus says nothing. Why just roll over and take it? Why didn’t Jesus stand up for himself?

To us who have the benefit of the gospels and the New Testament, we can understand what Jesus meant when he said that if the temple was destroyed he would raise it up again in three days. We can understand now that this refers to Jesus’ death on the cross and him being raised from the dead in three days. But to those people in that room it was not something they could understand. If Jesus had tried to clarify this it could have given his accusers the ability to dismiss him as a mad man and questions would have been raised about all that Jesus had said and done. It was therefore wiser for Jesus to remain silent.

Isaiah prophesied this centuries before:

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

(Isaiah 53:7)

But Jesus did speak when the High Priest asked him if he was the Christ, the son of the Blessed One. In his answer Jesus states the authority he has in Heaven:

⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

(v62 NIV)

The New Living Translation is much closer to the Greek on this occasion:

Jesus said, "I Am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven."

(v62 NLT)

The Greek says: '... at the right hand of the Power.' So this is a role reversal. For now, the Chief Priests and the Sanhedrin have the position of power but things were very different in the Kingdom of Heaven.

2. Jesus spoke out when the temple was being misused (Matt 21:12-17)

At times Jesus did speak out. One notable time was when Jesus went into the temple courts and observed people buying and selling and changing money. The problem was that people came from far and wide to worship at the temple and to offer sacrifices to God. Many travelled a long way and the traders in the temple took advantage of this. They sold animals for sacrifice, probably at inflated prices and money changers would change common currency for temple coins (which was the only money that merchants would accept). People from a long way out may not know the exchange rates so again this could be exploited.

All of this really angered Jesus because it was hindering people's worship. The temple had been built as a holy place where people could come to worship God and yet commercialism had got in the way. Jesus would not stand for it and he spoke out saying:

¹³ "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,'^[e] but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'^[f]" (Matthew 21:13)

Jesus was rarely silent when people were putting obstacles between people and God. The people who angered him most were those who were supposed to help people get closer to God but instead Jesus observed that they actually stood in people's way.

¹³ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. ^[14] ^[b]

¹⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

(Matthew 23:13-15)

3. Jesus told people not to say anything about him

So what about us? When should we be silent and when should we speak? Well of course the first principle is that if we are disciples of Jesus, we should seek to model ourselves on Him. So let's get passionate about the things that Jesus was passionate about. Let's get worked up about worship, especially if things are getting in the way of people being able to worship God. Let's do what we can to make it easier for people to engage with God – that is what we are here for.

And the things that Jesus let go, well if we are his disciples then perhaps we should learn to let them go too. I'm not saying we should be doormats but sometimes it might be wiser to let things go as Jesus did.

There were times of course when Jesus told people to stay silent about him. There are many more times in scripture when Jesus told people not to speak about him than there are times when he told them to evangelise.

It's all a matter of timing. Jesus told people not to tell others who he was because the timing wasn't right. People were looking for a political leader who would overthrow the Romans and this was many people's understanding of what the Messiah would be. So Jesus did not want that kind of attention because that wasn't what he had come to do. People who came to know him saw beyond that and saw the real Jesus – they had come to realise this over time.

Sometimes even in our evangelism we need to hold back on what we say and wait for the right time.

Sadly there are people who enthusiastically tell people about Jesus and I really wish they wouldn't. The people who stand on busy streets (like Oxford Street) shouting at people through a megaphone. I admire their courage, in many ways I admire their faith but I do sometimes wish they would shut up. Because as I pass these people I can't help thinking 'you're not making our job any easier – you're not really helping to grow the kingdom, you're probably hindering it'.

Someone I used to work with was very enthusiastic about telling people about Jesus, everyone knew he was a Christian. But people found him boring because he went on all the time and he had nothing to talk about except church. The image that created was that he was boring, the church was boring and God was boring. They were put off the church and put off the Christian faith because he wouldn't shut up.

Jesus is certainly not boring – let's not be responsible for making people think that he is.

4. Jesus told his disciples to tell the world about him

However, at the right time and in the right way, we certainly should talk about Jesus. It was the commission that Jesus gave his disciples.

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:18-20)

Jesus said go and tell people about me. Go and tell the world about me. Make disciples of them, baptise them and teach them the things that I have taught you. So yes we need to get the timing right, yes we need to do it in the right way but we should still do it. Let's not wait forever, our aim should always be to share the good news of Jesus. How else are people going to be saved if we don't tell them? But let's do it in a way that is appropriate and effective. Let's not make Jesus seem boring, not go on at people so much that we put them off, but to use a phrase from Nigel Wright, let's be "attractive ministers" of the gospel of Jesus Christ (attraction others to Him).

There is a time to be silent and there is a time to speak.

[stay silent for 30 seconds] – isn't it annoying when you're waiting for someone to speak and they don't?

- That was just 30 seconds – what if it's days, weeks, months, years?
- (BT Advert – it's good to talk)

How often are you silent? – our lives now are so noisy, silence is very rare now.

Proverbs 17:28 – "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."

11:00 on 11/11 is a time to be silent (remembrance)

Sometimes we really should shut up!

We've looked at speaking quite a bit as we've looked through James:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...

(James 1:19)

Jesus was silent before his accusers – (Matt 26:63) (Mark 14:61) (Acts 8:32 (Isa 53:7)) but his actions spoke loudly (Centurion who saw the way he died said "surely this man was the son of God")

- When Jesus died the sky went black (or 'the sun stopped shining') – was this a solar eclipse? – I remember when there was a solar eclipse a few years ago and one comment people made was how quiet it went – birds stopped singing, animals went quiet, somehow it was as though the earth stood still. I wonder if there was the same silence as Jesus hung on the cross. – then of course there was a mighty crack of thunder – Jesus cried out "it is finished".

Jesus spoke out when the temple was being misused – the place of prayer had been lost

At times Jesus told people not to speak about him – the time wasn't right

At the right time Jesus told his disciples to tell the world about him (Matt 28)

Jesus may have been silent before his accusers but his actions spoke loudly. (Centurion who saw the way he died said "surely this man was the son of God")

- When Jesus died the sky went black (or 'the sun stopped shining') – was this a solar eclipse?
– I remember when there was a solar eclipse a few years ago and one comment people made was how quiet it went – birds stopped singing, animals went quiet, somehow it was as though the earth stood still. I wonder if there was the same silence as Jesus hung on the cross. – then of course there was a mighty earthquake – Jesus cried out "it is finished".