

# Gospel Silence

a sermon preached on the

## Last Sunday before Lent

3 February 2008

at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Lectons: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-13

On the mountaintop with Jesus transfigured and shining-faced, flanked by Moses and Elijah, Peter is intoxicated by the glory of super-time and super-space. As with other revelatory experiences recorded in the Scriptures – Moses and Elijah themselves on their respective mountains, Isaiah and Ezekiel seeing the heavenly court, John the Divine seeing the New Jerusalem <sup>1</sup> – Peter, James and John have been given the privilege of seeing beyond the normal three dimensions. For an instant, past, present and future are as one. For but a moment, this particular place is every place. The here and now meets the Beyond. But Peter's response is (in)famous: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish I will make three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>2</sup> Peter is intoxicated with a spiritual vision. However, though ecstatic and excited, Peter is not enlightened.

Today's gospel story, so apt on this Sunday which turns our attention towards Lent, is a very tough religious lesson. We should not be under any illusions about this, and ought to be open-eyed about its true cost. Christian discipleship is tough, indeed, but not for the reason which many might assume. It is not tough because it's hard living morally-pure lives – no one is capable of that! It's not tough because it's hard to believe a hundred impossible propositions before breakfast – only those who have had a lobotomy can do that! No! It's tough because to see anything at all which is a glimpse of the Beyond shining through the here and now, to experience even a moment of super-time and super-space, propels us into a state of excitement and intoxication. I think every single person catches at least one glimpse of the Beyond which transcends time and space. But though ecstatic and excited, like Peter we are not enlightened. That is an accurate description of all mass-hysteria, whether it be sporting events, rock concerts, Presidential campaigns, fireworks displays, religious rituals or 'gospel' music. As the ancient Romans and the Nazis knew only too well, it's relatively easy whipping up crowds into a state of excitement and ecstasy. Film and music celebrities, politicians, sport heroes, canny franchise marketers and entrepreneurs, and religious salesmen and women stand in the same long tradition of crowd-massaging and mass-hysteria. And as both history and the contemporary scene amply demonstrate, there's never any shortage of excitement and ecstasy fodder ready to betray its brain, open its wallet and bleed its credit card.

So though Peter, James and John may be excited and ecstatic having been privy to the Divine voice declaring Jesus' Son-ship, <sup>3</sup> they remain un-enlightened: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Humanity has been raised from the dead.'" <sup>4</sup> This is a very hard instruction. When we catch a glimpse of super-time and super-space we become quickly intoxicated and want to concretise and absolutise our awesome experience. Our instinct is to make booths, to turn the vision into a commodity, to talk endlessly about it, impressing followers with our marvellous visions. The ecstasy and excitement in themselves are God's gifts, of course, but they are given for the service of the well-being of the whole creation, they are not religious commodities in the service of the insecure ego. The disciples are ecstatic and excited, but not enlightened.

There is only one way through this impasse in the soul. It is the ancient, 'old fashioned', way. Silence. "Tell no one about the vision..." This is without doubt a hard religious command. The Mystery of Jesus the Christ has to be kept secret. In the episode immediately preceding today's story Peter makes the startling declaration: 'You are the Christ'. <sup>5</sup> Moments later, after Jesus has likened Peter to Satan, "He sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." <sup>6</sup> When two blind men were healed they were silenced. <sup>7</sup> When

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:20; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Revelation 1ff

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 17:4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 17:5

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 17:9

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:16

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:20

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 9:30

the demons recognised Jesus he silenced them.<sup>8</sup> When the leprous man was healed he was sent to the priest with the instruction to say nothing about what had happened to him.<sup>9</sup> When Jesus himself was baptised and heard the voice of God announce him as the Son, he was immediately silenced with 40 days in the wilderness.<sup>10</sup> Jesus tried before religious and civil authorities remains mostly silent.<sup>11</sup> He could have said all sorts of things. He could have demonstrated his tremendous powers. Instead, because he knows he will be misunderstood, he applies to himself the same instruction given to the disciples: “Tell no one about the vision, until after the Son of Humanity has been raised from the dead.”

This is indeed a hard religious lesson. It has always been a hard lesson, particularly acute in our time perhaps, so chatty and extroverted, ‘market’-driven and success-obsessed is our culture. Everything is for sale and for promotion and for accumulating and for measuring. The church is readily lured by the same logic that pervades business, political and celebrity culture. However, we are people who swear allegiance not to the ‘invisible hand of the market’ nor to opinion polls but to Christ. We are people not of ‘market’ but of **εὐαγγέλιον** *euangellion*, gospel. Gospel, as we know, means good news, but gospel doesn’t necessarily *appear* as good news at first spec. Silence, saying nothing about the vision, the glimpse of the Beyond, does not seem like good news to us. We want to tell everyone, we want it to be popular, we want the solidarity of a crowd, we want demonstrated success. As Bishop John Talyor observed: “Success is the only credential we know, and unless a belief is widely accepted we soon start to doubt the truth of it. This makes us latter-day Christians nervously anxious about the effectiveness of our proclamation of the gospel. The prophets and apostles were obsessed by divine revelation or the lack of it; we are obsessed by human response or the lack of it.”<sup>12</sup> To be blunt, what we really want is to establish yet another cult. Jesus, however, says: ‘Tell no one.’

Now there’s a critical distinction to be made here, between silence and repression. As I read the gospel, when Jesus commands disciples, “Tell no one”, this is an instruction for silence, not repression. Someone was talking with me during the week about their doubts about certain articles of christian belief, and how they no longer seem to have any relevance. And together we observed that it’s generally not possible to talk about such things, even in the parish context. I admitted that I suspect there are a great many church-goers, in all parts of the church, who have similar doubts about the validity or usefulness of many christian beliefs, but who never speak about this. And my hunch is that a critical factor for the widening gulf between religious ideas and what individuals can actually swallow is that we have experiences of one kind or another which seem to contradict or undermine those ideas. And perhaps we are ashamed that we are thinking and feeling such things, and afraid that if we told others we would be exposed and possibly rejected? And the consequence of all this is what I am calling repression. I suspect repression is widespread.

Repression is denial of the conflict between the received religious idea and my actual experience. Repression is a form of inactivity, a pretence, a kind of split-personality, a living in two separate worlds. Repression is attending church and making all the outward signs, not believing whatever one is supposed to believe, and *ignoring the inner conflict which results*. Repression is a passive going through the motions. For some repression results in a felt need to defend the liturgy, for others this means defending the bible or the church or some doctrine. Gospel silence, on the other hand, is actively facing the conflict head on. Gospel silence does not mean inactivity, it is in fact highly active. Gospel silence is conscious and open-eyed about the painful gulf between whatever received truths we might hold to, and the data of whatever ecstatic experience we have been given, whether joyous or painful. Jesus’ gospel silence is active, fully engaged in reality. This kind of silence is a crucible, a furnace, a creative and courageous holding together of two seemingly-contradictory realities, *until the meaning of the ecstatic experience is understood* – that’s the critical difference between repressive inactivity and active gospel silence. Silence is being driven into the desert by the Spirit of God. Silence is consciously accepting temptation, hunger, isolation, unknowing - and ultimately crucifixion. Gospel silence is clearly the opposite of repression. This kind of silence is, in short, the path to enlightenment – which is what all the great mentors of the faith have always known and taught.

So when Jesus commands the disciples to silence he is telling them about the necessary path from ecstasy to enlightenment. What Jesus *does* after this transfiguration encounter on the mountain is the enfleshing in his own body of what he has told them about. Gospel silence is not simply one more piece of clever religious wisdom, which would be yet another marketable religious commodity. Lent, to which we now turn, and towards which today’s fire of palm crosses gestures, is the church’s symbol for gospel silence. Not merely a piece of religious teaching to be swallowed, motions to be gone through, but an active reality to be enfleshed – a crucible, a furnace, a creative and courageous holding of opposites in gospel silence, until the meaning of the ecstatic experience is understood. Gospel silence can only be safely broken when the Sons and Daughters of Humanity have been raised from the dead.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:25

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 8:4 and parallels

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 4:1

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 26:63; 27:11,14

<sup>12</sup> Taylor J V, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, London: SCM Press, 1972, p69.