

Today we return to the Book of Job, our Old Testament reading. Regulars will know that we're in the middle of a series of sermons on this long and quite challenging book. And today, we come to a passage in chapter 19 made famous by the composer Handel, who included a phrase from this reading in his Messiah. I think if we're to understand what's going on in this passage, then we need to talk about silence. It's silence, and the absence of silence, which are the keys to understanding this passage, so that's what I'm going to be talking about this morning.

There can be something wonderful about silence. I had an experience of this this week, when I had the honor of taking the funeral of the famous architect, Irving J. Gill. It was an unusual funeral, given that nobody there had ever met the deceased, given that he died 88 years ago, and his remains had been left on a shelf, and there was a lot of chatter and people shared stories. And then we came to put Gill's ashes in the ground. And a young man from the cemetery came forward, and took the urn in which the ashes were, and then he took a marble box, and he started to put glue on the box, and I stopped speaking. And we all watched intently as this young man put the remains of this famous man into the ground. And everybody was silent. And it was one of those sort of pregnant pauses, or a pause full of meaning, and we all just were together, keeping a most lovely, poignant silence.

Then there are other kinds of silence which are less welcome. Silence can be isolating and oppressive. It might mean that someone's giving us the cold shoulder and not talking to us. The English playwright Harold Pinter was a master of putting silence into his plays. He had three words for three different types of silence that he put in the stage directions, and he was very good at portraying the sort of awkward, embarrassing silence at which the English are particularly good. And he talked too about an echoing silence, kind of an oppressive silence. And then, of course, there's times when it's not right to keep silent, when someone needs to stand up and say something.

And these two aspects of silence lie behind the reading we heard from Job. On the one hand, Job desperately wants silence from his friends. And on the other hand, he's deeply frustrated by the silence of God. And we'll look at these two aspects of silence in turn.

Since we last met, and I was speaking about Job, Job and his three so-called friends have been together, and the friends haven't stopped talking. We've had 16

chapters of chatter, the three friends endlessly pontificating on the cause of Job's suffering. And meanwhile, Job's condition has deteriorated. His bones cling to his skin and to his flesh. He's escaped death, he says. He's not coining a phrase; he's originating a phrase. He's escaped death by the skin of his teeth.

And as his situation has worsened, so his friends have just kept on talking and talking. He says to them, "How long will you torment me with words? Have pity on me," he says. He wants their empathy, not their opinions. And now, before we get down to Job's... We don't want to get too down on Job's friends, because at least they're there. So, I don't want to be heard slagging them off too much, because at least they turned up.

And I read a very sad article in an English newspaper this week about a 27-year-old with terminal cancer. And he'd sent out a post on social media, which I think had attracted the attention of a journalist, and he said he wanted as many people as possible at his funeral. And he felt the need to say that, because he was worried that there'd be nobody there because his friends have deserted him. He was a typical 27-year-old with a wide circle of friends. But his mother told the reporter, they've all abandoned him. They've suddenly found themselves too busy to see him. And there's a word for this, apparently. It's called cancer ghosting. People not being able to show up to their friends in need.

We need to show up for people, and we need, when we do that, to resist the urge to babble. Silence can be a very powerful way of being with someone else, especially when the other person is troubled. Silence communicates. It communicates many things. It communicates acceptance and love. Going back to Harold Pinter again, he said that we often feel uncomfortable with how much silence communicates, which is why we need to cover it up with words, because speaking is a way of evasion. Saying something covers up the fact that we don't know what to say, often, and we lack the confidence to be silent.

Mark Twain famously said, "It's better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than open it and remove all doubt." I think there's a pastoral equivalent of that saying. It's this. It's better to think that you don't have anything helpful to say than open your mouth and prove it. Let's be people who are confident in showing up to those who are suffering, and not feeling the need to say anything of significance, because showing up is enough.

So, Job wanted his friends to be silent, to give him a break. But he was deeply frustrated by God's silence. He can't understand why he's suffering, and he wants God or someone to hear him out. He wants an opportunity to make his case. We would say he wants his day in court, because he wants to show to someone, to tell someone, how unfair his situation is. "Oh, that my words were written down!" He said "Oh, that they were inscribed in a book, or that they were engraved on rock forever." There's a real desperation here in Job's voice. "Please," he's saying. "Somebody listen to me."

And God seems to have withdrawn from him, and he prays a prayer that we often hear elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. "How long?" In fact, it's a Psalm set for today. "O Lord, how long will you tarry?" We sang. Psalm 13 begins, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" What makes, in my opinion, all types of pain and suffering even more unbearable, is not having a timeframe, not knowing how long anything and any situation is going to last. Everything becomes more bearable if we have an end point. Job had no end point.

And something else that I find particularly troubling about suffering, like Job, is the possibility that there's nobody listening, that there's no record of it, and therefore no hope of anything ever being restored or put right. If you heard my sermon the last time I preached, you'll have heard me quote the British scientist and atheist, Richard Dawkins, who said that of course there's nothing. There's no God. So, there's no reason for anything in the world to be as it is. He says the universe is governed by blind, pitiless indifference. And that's the dark thought that's entered Job's mind, that there's nobody taking note of his plight, that nobody cares, that God is indifferent to him. And amazingly, the same thought came to Jesus on the cross when He quoted Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus said.

And if Job and even Jesus had these dark feelings of being forsaken by God, then of course they're going to come our way from time to time. But we must remember that whilst we might feel that God has withdrawn, that's not the same as saying that He has withdrawn. God is with us even when we feel His absence. Whether we feel His presence or not, God is not indifferent to our plight. The Bible reminds us that there will be a kingdom where justice and suffering... Justice is restored and suffering comes to an end, where everything is put right. We don't know how or when, but we do know that God will not abandon His people.

The universe is not full of blind, pitiless indifference. It's governed by a God who is just and loving.

And deep down, Job knew that. Even in the midst of his suffering, even in the midst of his feeling of being abandoned by God, Job knew that there was a God. And by his continued complaining to God, he's giving expression to the fact that he always maintained that there was a God. His complaint was that God had withdrawn, not that there was no God. He continued to complain to a God who he knew was there somewhere. His complaint wasn't that there was no God. His complaint was that God was silent. "For I know," Job said, "that my Redeemer lives." And Job knew nothing of Jesus or how God would act. But deep down in his soul, he knew that one day, somehow, God would act. That there would be a Redeemer. God would act in His own time, he knew.

And I've talked about the need for silence from Job's friends and God's silence. There's one more silence that I'd like to mention as I close, and that's the silence that Job finds in his own soul. The Book of Job is all about Job's journey of faith, and how his own character is shaped by his experience. And he says something quite magnificent in a later chapter. He says this. "How small a whisper do we hear of God!" How small a whisper. The psalmist said, "Be still, and know that I am God." Job found a silence in his soul, in the midst of all his suffering, which allowed him to hear God's whisper. May we be confident to be silent with those who need it, and also find that silence that Job found in his own heart, so that we too can hear the whisper of God. Amen.