

I have watched a lot of Dr Who this week, and there is a theme in Doctor Who which runs for much of the 5th and 6th series in which a prophecy continues to be given – the prophecy is ‘Silence will fall, when the question is asked’.

Silence is a strange thing, it can be something that we crave and long for; and at times it is something we avoid. So often within the silence is a secret, or a gift, or sometimes in a fear which is hard for us to avoid when all other distractions leave us.

Silence, and creating silence, for many of us is a spiritual practice – it is something that we choose, or make space for. There are many groups and individuals each week who come into this building to sit in, or create spaces of silence.

Sometimes silence however is not a choice.

Sometimes silence is something else.

For most of this week I have had no voice. It is not the first time I have had Laryngitis – but it is the first time it has lasted more than 2 days and the first time when I have been unable to communicate using my voice at all. It has been a challenge – and as you can tell it has still not fully recovered.

Initially, when the virus was new, I could sleep to recover. But as the virus left, and my voice did not return, it became a stranger experience.

It turns out that every person in the world has advice on how to recover (most of it conflicting by the way) and people are very protective of me – which too has been a challenge at times. But I know that all of this advice and protectiveness is out of love and so I try to receive it that way (though I suspect I didn’t always receive it as gracefully as I might have – my apologies if this was your experience).

But this new imposed silence I have experienced, or losing my voice, of not being able to share the stories I would like, or ask the advice I need, has been strange. Silence did fall in my house – a new silence – not chosen but imposed.

As I was meditating on the readings for this second Sunday of Advent this theme of voice and silence seemed to resonate with many of the themes of Advent.

This second Sunday of Advent is always given over to consider the voice of the prophets in the telling and proclaiming of not only the birth of Jesus, but of the promise that God will come again.

The prophets we know were often voices in the wilderness, voices that spoke but were not heard. Or voices that were heard but not listened to.

Prophets were often executed because of the phrases they spoke or questions they asked; and even today we do not like to listen to the voice of prophets when they challenge how we might live out who we are.

Isaiah was a great prophet who had a great vision - a vision of a reordered creation which is remarkable: Predators dwell in harmony with their prey, carnivorous instincts are transformed, and the most vulnerable humans in society (children) are

free to play with venomous snakes. Interspecies violence effectively comes to an end and harmony ensues.¹ This is a vision not just for paths of goodness and forgiveness, but a vision for a world that is different – a world that truly is God’s Kingdom.

And then we have John the Baptist, the final prophet to point the way to Christ – Jesus own cousin. The John in Matthew’s Gospel is an end-time prophet whose message is that the time has come to repent because the agent through whom God will affect the transformation from this age to the next is now revealed: Jesus. A principal difference between John and Jesus concerns the timing of the movement towards this new realm – or kingdom. John sees this realm as future. Matthew portrays the realm as already partially manifest through Jesus, though becoming finally and fully manifest in the future. Repentance is the first step towards joining Jesus in the community moving towards the Realm (Matthew 3:1, 8, 11; 4:17)².

Both of these prophets, and the images of the second Sunday of Advent , are voices that do two things – they call us to recognise our need to repent and also to recognise that God is trying to create a new realm, a new kingdom – a place that is different. A place where all creation has a voice.

The prophets did have a voice, but it wasn’t always heard. And there are many who speak around us, whose voices we choose not to hear.

You may remember that last week I spoke of a commentary I have been reading in preparation for Advent which suggested that Advent should be a time for telling stories of Good News. That the stories of longing and waiting, the stories of our lives, the stories of our encounters with God, form part of the Advent story – and our advent practice.

How then do we share these stories of our faith? How then to we allow our voice to be heard? How do we ensure that we hear the voice of others?

When the prophets spoke so long ago, did they think or even imagine that the words of their mouths would be repeated many millennium later. Do we ever really know the impact the words and sounds we make have on others and those who listen to our wisdom?

But voice is more than about being heard – it is also about listening to the stories – listening to the experiences of those around us. Making space and noticing. It is in fact a spiritual discipline and one that our Advent journey calls us to explore.

There was a poem which was read at the Advent Procession at last weekend which I think sums up this need to listen, and at times to echo the voices that we hear:

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3117

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3090

What did you hear?
Said stone to echo:
All that you told me,
Said echo to stone.

Tidings, said echo,
Tidings, said stone,
Tidings of wonder,
Said echo to stone.

Who then shall hear them?
Said stone to echo:
All people on earth,
Said echo to stone.

Turned into one,
Echo and stone,
The word for all coming
Turned into one.³

The prophets of old remind us of the need to come to repentance – and repentance means noticing what is separating us from God, noticing the echoes of God's spirit, and intentionally changing our living so that we do not do the same thing again. What the prophets also remind us is that the thing we most often lose sight of is the voice of God, and our ability to make time and space to sit with God and listen. For in sitting and listening, we will find the voice that God would like us to have as we speak within this world.

Advent is a time for many things, but I think most of all it is a time for making space. Something that is often difficult with all the extra tasks we set ourselves in the lead up to Christmas. But the reality is that the stories, the good news of Christmas is lost if we do not take the time to listen and share.

So I would like to challenge us as we enter the next few weeks of Advent to take time to be like the prophets. To take time to share stories of good news with each other, to use our voice to bring about joy to the world. But maybe more than that, we can also be challenged to create space, maybe even quiet space, when we can be aware of what we need to hear – of what we might listen too – a spiritual discipline of silence.

³ *ADVENT: A CAROL ~ Patric Dickinson (1914-1994), English poet and translator*

Advent 2 – 4th December 2016
Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-13 and Matthew 3: 1-12

John's call of repentance is one that invites us to hear the voice of God, and use our own voice to change the world. It is a very powerful invitation. And one we should not take lightly – or leave in the silence once we have found our voice. Amen.