

The Revd Canon Jonnie Parkin

A time to speak and a time to be silent.

Sun 8th December 2024

2nd Sunday of Advent

Luke 1. 1-23

“But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” Luke 1 .20

Priests struggle to know when to speak out and when to be silent. As a cathedral clergy team we have been criticised for not making public comment on the Makin report, the Archbishop's resignation and his recent speech in the house of Lords. Priests struggle to know when to speak out and when to be silent. We often get it wrong, sometimes with devastating consequences.

The priest Zechariah spoke of his disbelief at what he was being told about a child, and, his voice was taken away from him, he became silent. It is true that his voice returned, and he used it to give praise to God in words that are repeated every morning in churches across the world two thousand years later, but his story reminds us of a recurring pattern in the church. Priests, and even bishops, don't always know when to speak out, and when to shut up.

Sometimes we are silent when we should be crying out. Sometimes our silence amounts to complicity or collusion in injustice, abuse, and oppression. Abuse often hides behind the veil of confidentiality and misdirected discretion.

Sometimes we speak out when we really do just need to be quiet and undefended. The desire to justify ourselves, to explain our actions, to defend our decisions, can belittle the painful experience of survivors of abuse and oppression. That goes for tv presenters as well as archbishops. Zechariah's nephew was silent and undefended before Pilate. The one who his son identified as the Lamb of God was silent before his accusers.

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I would propose that as a rule of thumb, we should speak out in defence of the powerless, of those who have no voice, to protect the lambs entrusted to our care, and we should be wary of bleating on in our own defence. Our platforms are for courageous advocacy, not self justification.

Let me be clear and unequivocal about this, abuse of any form has no place in the life of Bristol Cathedral. It is contrary to the good news of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom we prepare for in Advent. It is contrary to the way of the way one who Zechariah's son paved a way for in the wilderness. It is contrary to the way of the one who became a refugee in the face of infanticide.

People, and indeed God, will judge us not just on our words or our silence, but also on our actions. Yesterday in this Cathedral the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reminded us that Ezekiel's prophetic ministry began not with speaking but with deep listening, with living in community and in solidarity with those amongst whom he ministered. As a cathedral we are, I believe, called to live and act openly, generously, creatively, and bravely and courageously in solidarity with those who are the victims of violence, oppression and abuse.

Let us pray

Creator of the stars of night

Thy people's ever-lasting light,

Jesu, Redeemer, save us all,

And hear Thy servants when they call. (from the anthem)

Loving God, make your church open, generous,, creative and brave.

Help us to be open to those who have experienced exclusion and abuse, open to learning difficult lessons and listening to painful truths

Help us to be generous in providing space and support to those who need it, and generous in receiving criticism.

Help us to be creative in shaping spaces where people can find their voice and be heard, and creative in finding ways to amplify their voices.

And help us to be brave, brave enough to shout out when needed, and brave enough to keep silence when tempted to justify ourselves.

The grace...