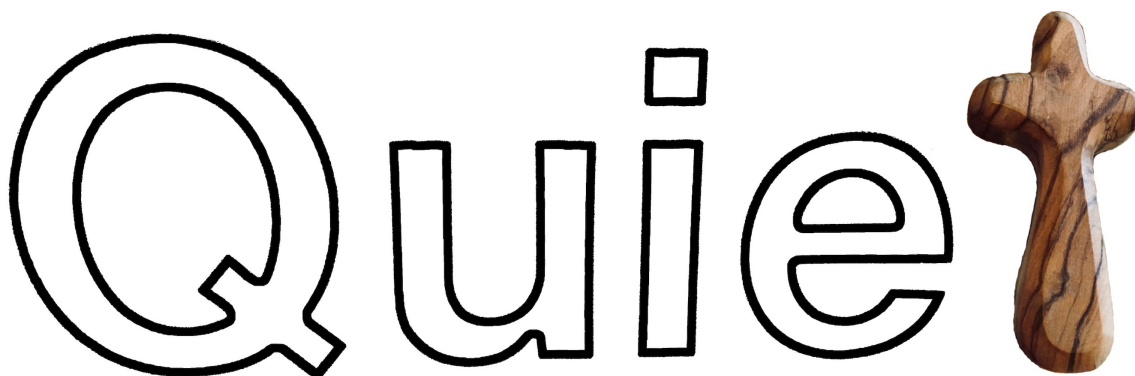


A Quiet Life

February 2020 (2-29 February)



Last month we thought about our senses and read the Bible looking for the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and other details we often miss. This February, as we approach the day of contemplation 'Ash Wednesday', we are going to try a contrasting approach. Instead of looking to fill in the picture, looking for what is *present* — we want to change our focus to consider what is *absent*. What's going on in the pauses, the gaps, the information conspicuous by its absence, in what's left *unsaid*? What happens when we read the Bible alive to the quietness it contains, the mysteries. We also want to think about quietness more widely. Christians for thousands of years have used contemplative silence as part of their spiritual practice. The Bible often encourages living 'a quiet life'. What does that look like? Being withdrawn? Solitary? Dull? Not necessarily...

Perhaps a quiet life is one that is sensitive and open to God and to one another. A life that doesn't rush to fill all the silences; which takes time to notice others. A life that can pause and reflect — sometimes before taking action, sometimes after — with humility, grace and invention. A quiet life doesn't have to be a boring one. Many of the most heroic lives in history have been quietly determined. Living quietly can involve the shouts of frustration, the shrieks of joy, and the cries of courage but it also makes space for the whispers of reconciliation, the comfortable silences of love and the searching quiet of a restless soul looking for home.

So from last month to this we move from the major key of our alert senses to the minor key of contemplation — the inner as opposed to the outer journey of our discipleship. As we read the Bible we will look for the silences, the shadows, the spaces where we can breathe and notice things we haven't noticed before — about scripture, about ourselves, and about our God.

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.

Living quietly (2 February)

This week we are thinking about this idea of living 'quietly' or 'simply'. We will consider humbleness, respect, humility, lifestyle, generosity, getting the balance right and trusting God to provide. As we read the Bible this month we do so mindful of the quiet moments: the questions left unanswered, the voices who don't speak, the details unmentioned, the implications we are left to wrestle with.

1. Micah 6:1-8
 2. Psalm 111
 3. 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
 4. 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-12
 5. Luke 12: 13-21
 6. Proverbs 30: 7-9
 7. 1 Timothy 6: 6-19
1. **A mandate to live humbly.** A call to live simply and to short-circuit the escalating reasoning of loudly bargaining with God — where the stakes would get ever higher and more harmful, to the point of destroying what is dearest to us (see verse 7).
 2. **Fearing the Lord.** Acknowledging God's unimaginable scale and power.
 3. **A quiet response.** We often want to rely on our own insights, interventions, and interjections. We want to make a whole a lot of noise. But what if God can sometimes do more with our quietness, our foolishness, even our weaknesses? God can use us even when we can't find the right word, can't get a word in, or when words escape us all together...
 4. **Living a quiet life.** A lot to unpack here. What does it mean to 'mind your affairs'? Should we be overly concerned with being self sufficient?
 5. **Owning possessions... and possessions owning us.** The irony of ownership.
 6. **Goldilocks...** Not all who are rich disown God and not all who are poor steal — but the speaker recognises that both want and excess challenge us. What we need is 'enough', not too little or too much. But what is *enough*? What is our Daily Bread?
 7. **God richly provides.** Getting your priorities right and trusting God.

Quietness in context (9 February)

A so called 'quiet life', which we are exploring this month, is not a 'silent life' — although it might feature times of silence. This quiet is perhaps not so much about 'noise' as it is about living openly and graciously and with an attitude of humility, attuned to God and others. A life sensitive to the rise and fall of conversation and rest; protest, celebration, and reflection. As it says in Ecclesiastes: 'there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak'; but how do we tell what time it is?

1. Isaiah 58:1-12

2. Psalm 112

3. 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

4. Matthew 5:13-20

5. Exodus 14: 10-14

6. Ecclesiastes 3: 7

7. 1 Peter 2: 15

1. **Living 'quietly' doesn't mean never raising your voice.** We should not idolise pious spiritual disciplines like fasting while ignoring the social issues we should be speaking up about.
2. **Steady hearts.** Living mindful of justice, mercy and grace.
3. **Resting on God's power, not human wisdom.** We humans are capable of great feats; we have much to be proud of and yet also much to be ashamed of. Fortunately we don't have to rely on our wisdom, we can quietly rest on God's power.
4. **What's said? And what's left unsaid?** Jesus, a phenomenally engaging speaker, says a lot in a short space of time.
5. **Standing still.** Sometimes we need to stand firm while the Lord fights for us. It's difficult to work out when to act and when to wait.
6. **Telling what time it is...** How do we work out when it's a time to speak and when it's a time to remain silent?
7. **Silencing the foolish.** Sometimes our quiet good acts can silence the foolish (verses 13-14 are thought provoking too...).

Walking quietly (16 February)

So: a quiet life is not simply one of retreat and isolation. We have to walk the walk, carrying our quietness with us — affirming life, seeking God with our whole heart, tending the seeds God plants, and reconciling ourselves to others. In public parks you sometimes see signs that say something along the lines of: “Take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints.” As we walk quietly through the world what are the pictures we are taking and the footprints we are leaving?

- 1. Deuteronomy 30:15-20**
 - 1. Choosing to affirm life.** Walking in God’s ways — what footprints are we leaving?
 - 2. Walking the walk.** Seeking God with our whole heart. What do you notice when you walk quietly around your neighbourhood?
- 3. 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**
 - 3. We are the gardeners... not the sunshine...** Our role is to walk the garden and tend the plants — we are not the rain, or the sunshine, or the soil. Our life — our growing — comes from God.
- 4. Matthew 5:21-24**
 - 4. Making the quiet walk of reconciliation...** We are told to **go** and reconcile ourselves.
- 5. 1 John 1: 5-7**
 - 5. Walking in the light...** means we are in fellowship with God and with one another. What are the ‘pictures’ we are taking on our walk? The moments we want to keep and treasure.
- 6. Psalm 23: 4**
 - 6. Not all walks are easy.** Walking quietly with the Lord through difficulty and hardship.
- 7. Ephesians 5: 1-2**
 - 7. Walking in God’s footsteps.** When we imitate God where does it lead? What does it mean to ‘live in love’?

The transforming quiet (23 February)

As the theme draws to a close, and in anticipation of Lent (the period of reflection in the Christian calendar ahead of Easter) we consider those moments when we step into the quiet heart of things. A place, set apart, where we open ourselves up to the power of the Spirit working in the quiet to change us.

1. Exodus
24:12-18

2. 2 Peter
1:16-21

3. Joel 2:1-2,
12-17

4. Matthew
4:1-11

5. 2 Corinthians
5:20b-6:10

6. Matthew 6:
1-6

7. Isaiah 11: 1-9

1. **Heading up the mountain.** Going into a sustained time of quietness with God.

2. **Being attentive and open.** Giving ourselves space to notice the Holy Spirit.

3. **Fasting, weeping and mourning — together.** Grief is often experienced as a lonely, solitary thing; but the quiet centre of grief — the true acknowledgement of loss and letting go — can also be shared with others.

4. **True strength this Ash Wednesday.** Quietness can be a source of strength. Jesus (the stronger of the characters in this encounter) is quiet and still; while the Devil (the weaker) is turning up the volume and bluster giving it full bombast and CGI and failing utterly.

5. **When quietness isn't a choice.** Sometimes quietness, and simplicity are not a choice but are forced on us against our will. We find ourselves: trapped, caught, mute. But even in the horrible quiet of injustice and oppression God is there — waiting with the deeper quiet of the universe, a quiet that can hold our tears and that says the bound can be freed, the beaten can be lifted up, and the silenced can sing.

6. **It's tempting to practice piety as a 'humble-brag' for others to see** and even more tempting to stop being 'pious' if there's no one there to see it! We are right in seeing our piety as part of a relationship — but it is a relationship that involves God's grace and is not meant as a means of feeling smug about others.

7. **A peaceable kingdom.** A vision of mutually incompatible needs somehow being met — of the predator and prey relationship being transformed — of all getting along quietly together.