

Sound of Silence. 3rd April, 2022.

Once upon a time I was in the Royal Navy, posted to a 'Stone Frigate' for 11 years - the Royal Naval Hospital, Haslar, which is on one side of Portsmouth harbour in the south of England and opposite the Isle of Wight.

For some reason I wasn't quite sure of, a local home for mentally disturbed folks asked me if I would be a patron to this small but important institution.

Since I knew nothing about it at all - to my shame - I asked if I could see around the facility and meet some of the folk who lived and worked there.

Duly, one day I went and was shown around. All of the residents were mentally challenged in one way or another, some with congenital issues, and some the result of a bad trip on drugs that had left them permanently brain-damaged.

One young man with Down's syndrome followed me around the whole time - not in an aggressive or irritating way, but just was always there when I turned around. He didn't speak when I tried to make conversation with him, and became instantly very shy, and went off to sit on a sofa. I asked my guide who he was, and was told, 'That's Sam - he's our peacemaker.'

I was intrigued, and asked how that worked, and was told the following story: 'It is not unusual for our residents to get into arguments; they find it hard to process and deal with disagreement, and it is easy for things to flare up into shouting matches and occasional fisticuffs.

Sam cannot bear the sound of raised voices, especially in anger, so he has taken the role of pacifier, which he has invented for himself.

What he does is to go where the two protagonists are having a verbal fight (or worse) and first go up to one and hug him very tightly. As soon as this intervention has interrupted the flow of anger, then he will go

to the other person and hug them tightly too. When he feels the time is right, he will then let go and hug them both at the same time until all noise and argument ceases. Then he will kiss them both on the head and walk away. The argument is over. Sam never says a word.

There is a beautiful song that has been covered by a large number of country singers, called, 'When you say nothing at all'. It was written by a couple of American country songwriters, Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz in 1988, and was a hit for Keith Whitley, Alison Krauss, and later, Ronan Keating. The refrain goes, 'You say it best when you say nothing at all.'

How often have you looked into the eyes of a person you loved and not needed any words to say what you know is there?

Sometimes it is not a look, but a touch; I have sat at many a bedside and just held the hand of the person there - holding them through the pain of realization that my surgical skills have nothing more to offer them - and realizing myself that I have nothing more to offer them but a hand to hold and silence in the love of God.

I mention these two things because of the implicit volumes that are said without a single word in our gospel for today.

The story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet is found in all four gospels, although in Matthew and Mark it is Jesus' head that is anointed, and in Luke and John it is his feet.

In Luke we are told that the woman is a sinful woman, and is weeping and drying Jesus' feet with her hair; in John's gospel we are told the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; she also dries Jesus' feet with her hair.

Matthew and Mark have Jesus at the house of Simon the Leper, but Luke has him at Simon the Pharisee's house; John places Jesus at Mary and Martha's house in Bethany.

These small discrepancies can give you cause to fret - if you let them - or you can choose to say they are immaterial to the essence of the message.

For me, this story is one of high drama, which, of course, is lost on those with Jesus - particularly Judas Iscariot, who is only thinking about the pecuniary worth of the perfume, although it was quite likely that he would have pocketed any money he got for the sale of the perfume, and not given it to the poor at all.

That aside, let's concentrate on what is happening here.

This is a supper given in Jesus' honour, and it was likely that Mary and Martha would have been serving and not sitting at table with the men. In three of the four gospels, we get the impression that this woman who enters is a stranger to the house.

Nevertheless, her actions cause a major disruption to the business of eating the meal.

Imagine yourself, sitting at a meal, and an unknown woman enters the room. Conversation stops - she comes towards you, kneels down, and starts to cry. Her tears start to drop onto your feet, and she cracks open a flask of expensive perfume whose aroma begins to fill the room. Not a word is said - food is put back

onto plates as the guests look in amazement at this spectacle, while Jesus does nothing to stop the woman, letting her touch him. Whether or not the woman's hair was bound, she releases it to wipe Jesus' feet, and then starts to kiss them.

Still not a word is said; the atmosphere is electric - is Jesus not going to stop this embarrassing charade? Who does this woman think she is? Can't Jesus see that she must be either unhinged or else of dubious character - possibly both?

But the moment is prolonged even further, until the richness of the perfume fills the house, and then Judas can no longer hold back,

and bursts out in his objection to the waste of money being poured out onto Jesus' feet and the floor.

His strident complaint is ignored as Jesus softly looks at the lady at his feet, mute as a prayer, quietly loving him in the only way she knows how.

Sometimes our prayers to God are just like that - mute, desperate, and tear-stained - and that is OK too; we have been told that Holy Spirit is doing the work for us. To be silent and comforted in the presence of God is a precious gift that Jesus demonstrated. Some of us should try it more often.

Gently, Jesus says to Judas, 'Leave her alone...'
and indicates that the lady anointing his feet
has a prescience of his future death, and
wants to honour him in her own way.

The sound of silence fills the room, and
eternity etches this tableau into our gospels
for all time.

She said it best when she said nothing at all.