



Palm Sunday, 2014

St. James Church, Vancouver, BC

“Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.”

I'm sitting in the office of the vicar of a small African-American parish in a town outside Cincinnati, Ohio. The Bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio has placed me in that parish as an intern to sort out whether he will indeed admit me to the ordination process in the Diocese.

The Vicar is an older African-American man, very well educated, beautiful to look at and to listen to. He possesses a strong, proud, ageless face and a voice so deep and resonant that at times I find myself ignoring the content of what he's saying just so that I can listen to the sound of his voice.

But at this moment I'm listening carefully to the content of what he's saying. For I've just asked him to tell me about what it was like for him to grow up African-American in the US.

He tells me two stories.

“When I was a teenager,” he starts, “I had to take the bus to my job after school. I remember waiting at the bus stop, terrified that a white woman would walk up. I was terrified because I could get in big trouble if a white man saw me near her and took it in his head to jump to some conclusion about what I was up to. And so if a white woman walked up, I would, right away, put ten, twelve feet between the two of us. I would never look at her. And I would never open my mouth. I would never, ever say a word to her.”

“And then there was the time when I was about twelve years old when two white boys ambushed me and beat me up because I was black. One held me down while the other let

me have it. And the one who was hitting me kept saying, 'Boy, I want you to beg me to stop hitting you.' But I refused to do that, and because I wouldn't say anything, he beat me up even more."

The passion story from the Gospel of Matthew depicts a Jesus who is indeed the long-awaited Messiah and, at the same time, is a person who says very little when standing before the authorities who will condemn him to death. This has led one commentator to describe Matthew's Jesus as the messiah who is the "silent sufferer."

"Suffering in silence" is not something we usually think of as a positive—for it conjures up people we have known who suffer silently mostly because they don't know how or don't want to take greater responsibility for themselves or for what happens to them.

This, of course, is *not* the Jesus we know in the Gospel of Matthew, for he is a Jesus who comes to fulfill all Scripture, to speak of the kingdom and create a fellowship of insiders who understand that kingdom through his teachings in what commentators call his five "discourses." Silent he is not.

But in the passion account, a time when we might expect to hear more teaching, more overt declaration of his identity as the Messiah, we instead see quietness and silence. Is this because Matthew has for the most part borrowed from the Gospel of Mark whose Jesus is trying to keep his Messianic identity a secret? Or is it that Jesus is the Messiah in Matthew *because* of the specific way he chooses to bear his suffering: because he responds with terse, non-committal answers rather than through argumentation or declaration, with silence rather than any verbal response at all?

"Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed."

The two stories that the African-American vicar told me express what at least one commentator says about the silences of Matthew's Jesus: that there are two ways of looking at what they say about this Messiah.

First, Jesus' silence before the authorities means that this Messiah participates in the silence of the oppressed. As poor rather than rich, as one with no political power standing before those with ultimate political power, Jesus falls silent and in his silence, we hear the silence of all who have been in such a place: the silence of the poor who do not have a voice; the silence of the abused who are fearful to say what has happened to them; the silence of refugees, prisoners, the elderly, the sick and the dying who cannot speak

In this kind of silence, the silence of the oppressed, the Messiah reveals himself as the one who stands with all of us, but especially with those most silenced among us.

But there's another silence that this Messiah also participates in. In ancient society, when someone of greater power asked someone of lesser power a question, the person of lesser power was expected to answer out of respect for the person with greater power. And so when Jesus does not answer the question put to him by the governor, the reason the governor is said to be "greatly amazed," is likely because he cannot believe a poor man would be so cheeky as to *refuse* to answer him.

And so while our Jesus identifies with the silence of the oppressed, he also resists and protests against the powers that would rob a human being of his or her dignity. He does this not by blasting authority but by a silent resistance that shocks and amazes.

In this silence we hear the silent and powerful protests of so many for their dignity and worth: In the early 1900's women silently protesting that they did not have the right to vote; African Americans on silent marches in the South to protest their lack of civil right; silent protests in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe against unjust governments

In this kind of silence, then, the silence of protest, we know that Messiah stands against those who would rob any human being of his or her dignity.

Where have you seen this Messiah in your life, a Messiah who has inhabited the silence of your or another's oppression? Where have you seen the Messiah of quiet but powerful protest against all who would rob you or another of their dignity?

That small African-American church and its vicar (the one I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon) was not the only African-American church I served in before I was ordained. By the grace of God and the grace of dumb luck I served in another African-American parish in a city in South Carolina. On the first day I visited that church, a church that was built to be the church of the descendants of slaves, I learned more about Jesus' silence of oppression and silence of protest and the cross that both would lead him to than any theology class would ever teach me.

For behind the altar in that fragile, rickety, little wood frame church hung a crucifix such as I had never seen before. The body on the cross was muscular, struggling and powerful. The body hanging on that cross was also black: unmistakably, rock-my-world black.

To see this crucified one, this silenced, strong black Messiah on the cross, was, in an instant, to understand that the cross both comprehends all who are oppressed in the world and cries out as a silent and deafening protest against the powers of oppression. But even more than this, even more than this, for me, to see this crucified one with his strong, dark beautiful body was to believe and to know that the Messiah of God not only comes to stand with us and to strive for us, but comes to us *mightily* to save.

Works cited or consulted

Frank J. Matera, Expository Articles: Matthew 27: 11-54 in *Interpretation*, 1984