

# *paschal mystery & silence*

sermons preached during the  
*Sacred Easter Triduum*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr david moore, vicar*

## *entering the Christ silence*

Holy Thursday

On Tuesday morning Kuncoro and I were standing on the railway platform at Camberwell station – on our way to reaffirm our ordination vows and for the blessing of the oils at the Cathedral. Suddenly, there stood a man directly in front of us. ‘You’re a priest!’ The tone of those otherwise unremarkable words was unmistakable: he may as well have said ‘You’re a paedophile!’ I only managed to say yes, I am a priest, before he launched into a tirade. To be honest, such a lot came out so quickly that I can’t recall it all in detail. But the main points are sufficiently memorable: the Catholic Church is demonic, hiding child molesters and destroying innocent lives; and Jesus is going to punish the Pope, and the priests, and the whole church, by burning the lot. The train arrived and it was all over just as suddenly as it had begun. The incident has also given me cause to reflect on the timing of this week’s church fires in Melbourne.<sup>1</sup>

This nameless man has been my Holy Week companion. Before him I was silenced. I had nothing to say. Oh yes, of course I could have made some rational statements – I could have attempted to justify myself by telling him I’m not a Roman Catholic. Silence, however, is the only response before the enormity of evil. This man’s deep suffering, whatever its basis may be, like the suffering of Job is not ministered to by the babbling of the likes of Job’s self-justifying ‘friends’. There is only silence – the silent, non-justifying, non-grasping Love which *endures with another*, without any attempt to shield itself from wounding. Silence is the way of the self-emptying Love who gathers all things to Love’s-self.<sup>2</sup>

This sacred Easter Triduum is our communal ritual remembering of the human face of self-emptying Love, in the silence of Jesus the Christ: silence at the table and as he feeds his disciples with his own self and washes their feet; silence in the dark garden of tears and sweated blood; silence of betrayal; silence before accusers; silence as he is stripped, mocked, spat upon, and murdered; silence of utter failure and shame; silence of the degradation and torture of the cross; silence of burial in the earth; silence of an empty tomb; even the silence of disciples who on Easter morning still fail to get it.

The whole Paschal Mystery is set within an unfathomable silence – that eternal silence in which all creation came to birth; the silence of the inexpressible Word who was in the beginning with God.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the key to this sacred Easter Triduum is the silence which ‘glues’ the entire three days together. This night ends in dark silence. Friday briefly emerges but returns into silence. Dark silence is our ‘welcomer’ on Easter Day.

And there is even more silence than at first appears. Holy Saturday is entirely set in the silence of the tomb. If this is one liturgy, which takes three days for us to pray together – then the vast majority of the whole experience is in fact silence! Yes, there are words in the liturgical action – of course. Nevertheless, most of the duration between now and about 8am on Easter day is in fact silence! Some basic maths makes the point clear. Between 8pm Thursday night and 8am Sunday morning is 60 hours. The duration of the liturgy is about 5 hours – a significant chunk of which is also silence. So that means more than 90 per cent of the sacred Easter Triduum is silence! At least, it would be if we were to choose not to fill it with idle chatter and meaningless noise.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/third-catholic-church-linked-to-paedophile-priest-burns-in-suspected-arson-attack-20150401-1mcf2o.html>

<sup>2</sup> John 12:32, 14:20, 17:11

<sup>3</sup> John 1:1-12

As an aside, a remarkable comparison catches my attention. This ratio of Triduum words to silence strikingly compares with what physicists are now saying about the structure of the universe – only about 5 per cent of the entire universe consists of visible matter; the remainder being either dark energy or dark matter. Dark silence is the key to existence, to life itself – as silence is the key to the Paschal Mystery.

Thus, the Easter Triduum plunges us into the dark silence of the Christ. Having loved his own, to the end,<sup>4</sup> Jesus embodies self-emptying love by washing their feet. His question to them is poignant and painful: “Do you know what I have done?”<sup>5</sup> The question has to be asked for the very reason that they don’t! He tells them about servanthood<sup>6</sup> and mutuality<sup>7</sup> and love<sup>8</sup> – but they don’t get it.

Thus, Jesus is plunged into a deafening dark silence – even in the company of his friends. This is ‘the hour’<sup>9</sup> – seed falling into the ground and dying.<sup>10</sup> This truly is ‘night’<sup>11</sup> - and ‘glory’!<sup>12</sup> He is going where they are not yet able to go.<sup>13</sup> Here is appalling and unfathomable, and transformative, silence.

As Christ’s followers, his way of silence is ours also – for the disciple is not greater than the master.<sup>14</sup> Allowing Love to wash our feet – allowing Love to feed us with Love’s body and blood<sup>15</sup> – means sharing in Christ’s silence.

For each of us there is a particular transformative silence that must be entered – since, like the entire universe, and like this Easter Triduum, the vast majority of our being is not in fact our excessive words and superficial triviality; but is, rather the unfathomable silence which is in fact the basis of our being.

Moreover, as we will hear read in the darkness a little later this night, the disciple is to accomplish even greater works than Christ.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the unfathomable silence each of us must enter is the way of transcendence that can only be accomplished, uniquely, by each of us: a self-serving justification, perhaps; a need to blame someone else for our own actions; a self-centred demand to have things our way; an inadequate self-image we refuse to relinquish; a shadow aspect of ourselves we refuse to face; an anxiety which we allow to define us; a material object which possess us; and so on.

And this night is the great work – this is the night of decision. Everything that follows is merely the consequence of this night’s decision. It strikes me that if we don’t participate in this night’s momentous decision, we will fail to grasp the true nature of the Paschal Mystery.

And so as my railway platform Holy Week companion silenced me, this night presses all of us with a decision, inviting all of us into sixty hours of silence with Christ – that we may go the way of the Christ; proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes;<sup>17</sup> completing in our flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions;<sup>18</sup> deciding with Christ to go the way of silent self-emptying love.

## *the Christ response to suffering*

### Good Friday

There seem to have been more plane crashes of late. Statistically, it’s probably not so – but the prominence of some recent high profile events gives that impression; MH 370, MH17, QZ8501, and now 4U9525. This last one – freshest to our memory in the middle of this sacred Easter Triduum liturgy – also has certain powerful features which have compelled the world’s attention: a co-pilot determined death descent from 12,000 metres in just 8 minutes; ending with a fatal 700Km/hr impact into the French Alps killing all 150 on board; a captain desperately shouting and attempting to axe open the door, in full view and hearing of everyone in the cabin; and, thus most chillingly, what our imaginations can do with such a

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<sup>4</sup> John 13:1  
<sup>5</sup> John 13:12  
<sup>6</sup> John 13:16  
<sup>7</sup> John 13:8,14-15  
<sup>8</sup> John 13:34  
<sup>9</sup> John 13:1  
<sup>10</sup> John 12:24  
<sup>11</sup> John 13:30  
<sup>12</sup> John 13:31-32  
<sup>13</sup> John 13:33,36  
<sup>14</sup> John 13:16  
<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:16  
<sup>16</sup> John 14:12  
<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:26  
<sup>18</sup> Colossians 1:24

scene inside the cabin during the horrendous final moments of their lives. It's truly shocking – and hardly surprising that this horrific tragedy so catches the world's attention.

But without in any way diminishing the horror of this graphic tragedy, we can hardly fail to notice that tragedy is the daily reality of a frightening number of the world's peoples. It can seem as though every day there are gruesome murders in this and other cities. We are appalled and dismayed at the brutality we now hear about in an instant. A Pacific Island nation is brought to its knees by a cyclone. Islamic State beheadings and other atrocities fascinate and chill us to the bone – fuelling our deepest fears and anxieties.

Yet as horrendous as such happenings are, even they are overshadowed by a predominantly invisible tsunami of human suffering. There are an estimated 45.2 million people displaced by persecution and conflict in the world.<sup>19</sup> The poorest 40 per cent of the world's population accounts for 5 per cent of global income. The richest 20 per cent accounts for three-quarters of world income. At least per cent of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day.<sup>20</sup> For a staggering number, Good Friday is not a mere religious ceremony: but a permanent state of affairs.

I wonder, *what do we feel* as I have recounted this brief summary of the suffering around us? It may well be that for some of us, our own suffering is more than we can bear as it is. What can we say in the face of suffering? This is an eternal spiritual question. All our forebears have wrestled with this perplexing mystery.

This day is called 'good' because of the Christ's response to the horror, the injustice, and the sheer overwhelming power of suffering. And what is Christ's response? Silence!

We recalled last night the silence at the table as he washes their feet and feeds them with his own life; silence in the dark garden of tears; silence in betrayal and before brutal accusers. This day Jesus remains silent: silent before his torturers,<sup>21</sup> silent before the power-hungry yet terrified Pilate,<sup>22</sup> silent before the previously-adoring and now-murderous crowd,<sup>23</sup> silent before his executioners,<sup>24</sup> silent before 'the apathetic people he came to love, the fearful and murderous system he tried to stretch to its human limits, to its fullest potential, to its deepest vision of God.'<sup>25</sup>

Silence is the Christ response in the face of the worst suffering and evil that can be imagined: including all the instantly graphic and the perniciously invisible suffering which bathes our world on a daily basis, as well as the suffering with which we may be personally acquainted. For silence is the eternal song of the Divine Love who "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things".<sup>26</sup> Silence, eternally dark silence, is the womb of the Love who empties Love's-self, even to a silent death on a silent cross.<sup>27</sup>

As I noted last night, more than 90 per cent of the total duration of this sacred Easter Triduum – between 8pm Thursday night and about 8am Easter Day – is in fact silence. If we will allow the sacramental symbol minister to us – and resist the near-overwhelming temptation to stuff this time with the usual distractions and noise. And if we can allow it to be so, tomorrow we may be totally surprised by the depth and the spiritual liberation of Holy Saturday's silent tomb.

Of course, to a world deluged with noise – and with no shortage of sure-fire 'solutions' and quick-fix remedies for sale in the marketplace of smooth words and snappy images – silence is utterly laughable. And because suffering so feels as though it will overwhelm us, we unthinkingly and unconsciously respond to the suffering of the world with a torrent of useless words, like Job's pathetic 'friends'. In a mechanistic-materialistic world – which vainly imagines it can fix everything – silence is sheer foolishness. Silence? Surely a joke! Yet "the message about the [silence of the] cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God".<sup>28</sup>

And so it is that the many silences of this gospel story today end in the deafening silence of the grave. Yes, the dying Christ does speak, declaring: "It is accomplished!" But these two words (in Greek<sup>29</sup>) are

<sup>19</sup> Consisting of 15.4 million refugees, 28.8 million internally displaced persons, and 937,000 asylum seekers. <http://www.refugeeweek.org.au/resources/stats.php>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

<sup>21</sup> John 19:2-4

<sup>22</sup> John 19:9

<sup>23</sup> John 19:14-16

<sup>24</sup> John 19:18,23

<sup>25</sup> Joan Chittister, 'Why Jesus Came', from *In Search of Belief*.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7

<sup>27</sup> Philippians 2:7-8

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18

<sup>29</sup> John 19:30 "It is accomplished" is the NRSV translation of the Greek words **panta tetelestai** *panta tetelestai*, 'everything has been completed'.

immediately swallowed up in an eternal silence. “He bowed his head and gave up his spirit”.<sup>30</sup> What is ‘accomplished’ on the Cross is the silence which is Love. “Unless a grain of wheat falls [silently] into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain”.<sup>31</sup> “One must become dead in order to see into the [silent] heart of things”.<sup>32</sup> Blood and water silently pour from the dead Christ’s side.<sup>33</sup> Silence is taken down from the Cross and wrapped in an astonishing quantity of costly spices, and laid in a silent tomb<sup>34</sup> – a nobody’s and a nothing’s silence.

The silence of Christ crucified is the Divine Lover’s emphatic response to suffering and evil. To be able face the enormity of the world’s suffering – neither offering cheap solutions to make ourselves feel better, nor ‘being taken out of the world’<sup>35</sup> by anaesthetising ourselves against the world’s suffering with soul-less entertainment and mind-less distraction – it is necessary to first enter into one’s own inner silence.

This is the way of the Christ: the Cross which is his and which he invites every person uniquely to bear; in order that his sufferings might be brought to completion in us; that creation might continue in us.

And this is the gift of the sacred Easter Triduum. As we see in the One whose Cross is lifted high – and which we are all invited to venerate today – only the fully human person who faces their own eternal silence can enter into the silent suffering of the world; and draw all that silent suffering into the Divine heart of transformative Love,<sup>36</sup> where all is brought to completion.

## *Christ & the mother of all silences*

### Easter Day

In this sacred Easter Triduum I have been meditating on the silence at the heart of the Paschal Mystery – silence which is mirrored in this 60 hour liturgical celebration. And now, on this day – when this communal initiation into the Paschal Mystery moves to its conclusion – that silence is even more dramatically apparent. The silence of betrayal, arrest, condemnation, passion, death and burial gives way to the most puzzling silence of all: the silence of Resurrection.

Most of us have some idea of silence through acts of betrayal and condemnation. Some of us may even know personally the silence of arrest. Millions know only too well the silence of being nobodies: asylum seekers turned back to sea by a wealthy G20 nation; so many unwanted dregs in a culture that has convinced itself that only those who deserve things have them. Many of us know the silence of personal suffering.

However, the silence in the aftermath of Golgotha has perplexed Christianity for 2000 years. Yes, we have churned out a deluge of words *about* Resurrection: but none of those words actually describes Resurrection itself. Scandalously, some have even turned words about Resurrection into bludgeons with which to assault others – insisting on narrow-minded dogma.

But the Biblical witness to the silence of Resurrection could not be clearer. Resurrection is not televised – not available on YouTube. There are no eyewitness reports. No Instagrams, tweets or hashtags.

Yes, there are a few Resurrection *appearances* – though even they are fragmentary, and not consistent with each other. And those few appearances suggest that Jesus’ followers did not understand Resurrection. In John’s account Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved go to the tomb – but they don’t get it. Mary Magdalene understands considerably more than the men – yet even she attempts to grasp what is not graspable.<sup>37</sup>

No, the Resurrection itself remains a matter of total silence. Though as early as the second century CE it was already being said that “the entire life of Christ [is] wrapped by God in silence”,<sup>38</sup> it could be said that Resurrection is *the* silence at the centre of Silence. For Christians, Resurrection holds together the ancient

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<sup>30</sup> John 19:30

<sup>31</sup> John 12:24

<sup>32</sup> Ilija Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011, p134.

<sup>33</sup> John 19:34

<sup>34</sup> John 19:39,41

<sup>35</sup> John 17:15

<sup>36</sup> John 12:32

<sup>37</sup> John 20:17

<sup>38</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, London: Allen Lane, 2013, p50.

Genesis meditation on the primeval silence of the unformed world – and St John the Divine’s image of the final silence of the eschaton. Resurrection is the ‘mother of all silences’!

Now perhaps this may seem an odd thing to say, since we are perhaps accustomed to thinking of Easter Day as the triumphal outburst that deals with Good Friday’s sombre silence. Or, in this vein, the tidy ‘answer’ to the unpleasant crucifixion problem, the happy conclusion to an otherwise-tragic story. Thank goodness Holy Week is over: now we can get back to business as usual! Or, to say it another way: the suffering silence of crucifixion is a message impossible to sell in the feel-good, pleasure-seeking marketplace; but Easter triumph coheres very neatly with prosperity doctrines of every kind. Or, to say it again: this materialist-consumer culture will not be convinced that ‘falling in the ground and dying’ is the way to abundant life; ‘Easter’ triumphalism, on the other hand, is good for business – and well-suited to a ‘KPI’ culture.

It is significant that the consumer world says ‘Happy Easter’, whereas the church has always said: ‘Christ is risen!’ For there’s a world of difference between these two statements.

To say ‘Christ is risen’ does not guarantee us anything: apart from the eternal silence of the Love who “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”.<sup>39</sup> Resurrection faith does not make the world’s vast and appalling suffering disappear. Resurrection faith is not a magic pill or a sure-fire medical procedure. Resurrection faith, as a friend of mine is fond of saying, is not ‘a fairy sword’. Rather, it’s being baptised into Christ’s dying.<sup>40</sup> We are invited this morning to reaffirm this absurd and astonishing hope.

Resurrection defeats evil and suffering and death, yes of course – but the scale of Resurrection time and space is analogous to the time and space we now know to be the extent of this expanding-evolving universe. The code language for that scale is most succinctly expressed by John the Divine’s memorable self-description of the Godhead: “I am the Alpha and the Omega”.<sup>41</sup> Resurrection faith, then, is the already-but-not-yet experience of the world’s suffering contained and transformed within that eternal time and space: the result of which is the discovery that suffering is incrementally incapable of holding us in its death-grip of meaninglessness and self-pitying. This is what ‘defeat of death’ means. Eucharistically, as Christ’s body, we fall into the silent ground of suffering and die: and in this loving silence discover that life is given to us!

Easter’s ‘Alleluias!’, then, are the Easter people’s response not to claims of certainty, prosperity and triumph doctrine: rather, they are the disciple’s willing and joyful consent to this silent self-emptying liberating Love. With Easter Alleluias we are given nothing we can ‘prove’ – which could be used as a bolster for our tribal-territorial-expansionist aspirations and self-centred interests. Rather, like the risen Christ, we have only silent wounded hands and pierced side with which to bless. With Mary Magdalene, the risen One tells us also to stop clinging on, that what we are seeking is found in the returning of silence to Silence: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”.<sup>42</sup>

At the start of Holy Week I drew our attention to the Easter Triduum as the church’s communal rite of initiation into the Paschal Mystery. I’ll conclude today with the spiritual insight of 7<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine, St Maximus the Confessor:

“He who knows the mystery of the Cross and the Sepulchre  
knows the reason (logos) of all things.  
He who is initiated into the hidden [silent] meaning of the resurrection,  
knows the end for which,  
from the beginning,  
God created all things.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7

<sup>40</sup> Romans 6:3

<sup>41</sup> Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13

<sup>42</sup> John 20:17

<sup>43</sup> St Maximus the Confessor, cited in Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p40.