

# Listen carefully

Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-13; Philippians 2.1-4; Matthew 21:23-32

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What if Martin Luther kept silent?<sup>1</sup>

Talanoa in Pasifika (that is pacific languages like Tongan, Samoan, Māori) means “conversation”. So the Tongan Church in Canberra is named Toe Talatalanoa which means “talk Again”. You see, in indigenous cultures the tradition is to talk things out – no matter how long that takes. In American First Nations communities, the elders might go into a meeting and not come out for days<sup>2</sup>. Western cultures, white cultures avoid conversation. That’s how we deal with things.

God orders us to listen and to listen carefully. Take poor Moses, for example. God’s a little cheesed that the people are quarrelsome and taking it out on Moses. They are questioning God’s power and His commitment so he tells Moses to go, use the staff in which he struck the sea and hit the rock. Water WILL come out...

But you can’t read this passage without considering another passage in Numbers 20. Exactly the same thing happens: the people are angry and questioning the whole adventure. They don’t want to die in the desert –and they start to take it out on Moses. So, Moses asks God again<sup>3</sup>, “what shall I do?” and God tells him get Aaron and your rod/staff and gather the people. Go to the rock AND TALK TO IT! ... and water will come out. Moses gets, a, b & c right but when he gets to the rock, he hits it. Big mistake. God wanted him to try the soft approach first –perhaps to demonstrate God’s power. Look! I can do this even with words. (remembering that first came the word) or maybe, it was to test Moses’ restraint. He was angry after all.

Moses paid a hard price for not listening carefully.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and pastor who was executed by the Nazis for his involvement in the resistance movement. He spoke out about totalitarianism and the rights of minorities. Some of his famous quotes include:

"The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children."

"A god who let us prove his existence would be an idol."

"We must learn to regard people less in light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer."

"Your life as a Christian should make non believers question their disbelief in God."

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<sup>1</sup> What if Rev Dr, Martin Luther King Jr had kept silent?

<sup>2</sup> You can imagine how that drives bureaucrats nuts!

<sup>3</sup> I’ve never been exactly confident this is a different event or the same story told in a different way.

The only ones who accused Bonhoeffer of mixing religion with politics were the Nazis who executed him.

Most importantly he said, “It is the characteristic excellence of the strong man that he can bring momentous issues to the fore and make a decision about them. The weak are always forced to decide between alternatives they have not chosen themselves.”

He also said “Politics are not the task of a Christian” but he never stopped speaking out for justice...at least, not until they killed him. Today, theologians from all denominations study him in almost every seminary.

Meanwhile, back to Moses. God is cheesed off because all this moaning and groaning comes after God as brought them out of Egypt; freed them; parted the waters and fed them manna. And all they do is whine and ask for more. They dare to question God’s faithfulness and power. Did they really think he brought them out to die in the desert?

Poor Moses. Trust me. You don’t want to be a mediator in the church – any church. Moses was caught between the needs, expectations and his companion’s contempt. At the same time, he was lost in the wilderness away from anyone or everything he had ever known <sup>4</sup>. He was called to invoke the word of the Lord which, to be honest, I don’t think they particularly wanted to hear. Remember I’ve said before, they had nothing particular in common when they left Egypt. Just a bunch of different clans and faiths. Moses’ job was to meld them into a people – God’s people.

Did they want the 10 Commandments? No!... and here I quote one of my textbooks, “how many visionary individuals who undertake leadership roles in the church and in society find themselves buffeted by the unrealistic demands of those of whom they seek to lead and find themselves trapped between those demands and reality of a given situation.”<sup>5</sup> How many times did they want to shoot the messenger? It is much easier to be a follower; to operate on mob rumours and to take pot shots at the messenger. Us and against – one.

Paul tries to give us some guidance in Philippians on how to be community. He says to make joy, to show tenderness and encouragement valuing other people above yourselves. He prayed for a common sharing of spirit and being of one spirit and one mind in a different way.

I strongly encourage you to read the first part of Matthew 21 where the Chief priests challenge Jesus. They ask “Who gave you this authority?”. And Jesus tests them. Who

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<sup>4</sup> Remember he lived a comfortable lifestyle and was brought up in an important family.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, Cousar et al, (1995) Texts for Preaching Year A. P.498

Baptised John the Baptist? Was it by human authority or heavenly? They were baffled so as was his teaching method, he told them the story of the two sons.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> son who agrees but doesn't go to work is a very subtle hint to every self-righteous Christian who goes through all the motions but never has a transformation of the heart. What the story character is saying is, you can pray, and tithe and make a big thing of church and even be a Bible expert but there is no consistency between words and deeds. There is no open heartedness, forgiveness or conversation. Doing the will of the father is as much a problem for the religious as it is for gentiles.

This is contrasted to the first son who shows no promise. Like tax collectors and prostitutes, there is nothing on the surface that looks much like God's people, especially when compared to the pious religious authorities.

Now here's an interesting focus. John gets much of a mention in this text and we may well ask why. It is because tax collectors and prostitutes listened and believed in the message John was conveying while the authorities did not. This passage, including the parable, is very much an invitation for the authorities to rehear John's message and reverse their opinions. Just like the first son who initially rejects his father's demands but changes his mind. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven draws near – so said John.

The church is an authority made of individuals. If no one participates in the wider church conversations where the policies and decisions of the church are made, they have no one to blame. This is the unique difference between us and the Catholic church. This is what Martin Luther was debating. What is the power of God and what is the power of the people? In the Uniting Church, our dictums do not come down from on high but are raised from below through prayer and conversation. They are raised again, prayed over and agreed to at Synod and Assembly.

Tolstoy said it – we want to change the world but it is much harder to change our minds than to change our habits. It is much harder to be an agent of change and face embarrassment than to be righteously, imperiously steadfast. The first son faces his demon – the 2<sup>nd</sup> son did not. Which one was braver? Surely, the first son knew he would face humiliation. The 2<sup>nd</sup> son probably assumed he'd deferred punishment. The righteous who act poorly in this world believe they are deferring their come-uppance to the afterlife. That might be convenient but that is not what Jesus taught. God's plan is that we behave in THIS life....on earth as it is in heaven.

Who stood in the temple and turned the tables? Was that a political act or a fight for justice and equality for all who wanted to worship?<sup>6</sup> It sure cheesed off the

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<sup>6</sup> It seems the Temple had become a very exclusive club. Sacraments were for sale, the richer you were the better the animal to be sacrificed, the more blessing to bestow. That the temple would only take temple currency so a market of

authorities. Martin Luther's claims that the church was exploiting the poor and the priesthood were profiteering by selling indulgences was a defiant act that changed the face of Christianity forever. Until that point, he had been a compliant priest. In defence of the Catholic church, he was invited to Leipzig to debate his ideas – which they did in public conversation over many, many days. He didn't win the argument but he was heard and his words reverberated around the world.

God calls us to listen carefully. Conversations with our Lord, each other and those that lead us are practically an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment. It takes more courage than the other ten. Doubt and risk are not the enemies of faith, nor should they be the excuse for doing nothing. There is nothing in our experiences that tells us Moses believed water could come out of a rock. What he believed in was God and God's faithfulness to his people. Perhaps if we believe deeply enough, we can make grace pour out of a rock.

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'money exchangers' built up to the benefit of anyone other than those who worshipped. That certain people were banned from entering the Temple and could only pray in the forecourt etc etc.