

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


THE SILENCES OF JESUS

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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THE SILENCES OF JESUS

A medical officer in the United States Air Force said to a group of us in Texas a few weeks ago, "My main problem is not doing what is right but knowing what is right." That honest testimony spoken in a home among friends after church has been churning away in my mind ever since.

Shouldn't Christians of all people know what is right? Do we not claim that Jesus is the truth? Have we not, each of us, seen somewhere a sign in king size letters that reads, "Christ is the Answer." Indeed, it was a Christian poet, Robert Browning, who once said,

"I say, the acknowledgement of God in
Christ accepted by thy reason,
Solves for thee all questions in the
earth and out of it." 1

But clearly, Christians do not know in every instance what is right -- either for themselves or for society-at-large. Christians are found in both major parties. The "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers" columns that grace our newspapers around the country are frequently given over to questions submitted by church people. Christians help swell the ranks of those who look for additional light to "The Farmer's Almanac," the signs of the Zodiac and the departed dead.

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A threatening question arises: Can it be that the church has over-presented Jesus? Is He indeed our light as well as our salvation? Must we revise our estimate of Jesus and confess that He is something less than adequate? Consider all the things that He left unsaid, all the topics that He left untreated. We have so little of what fell from His lips that one can read all the recorded words of Jesus very comfortably within a half hour -- even without a speed reading course.

We are bothered, if not offended, at times by the silences of Jesus -- by what He might have said and didn't. We burn with questions that Jesus did not treat.

The silences of Jesus are significant. While we dare not read too much into them, we can open ourselves to much confusion of soul by not facing up to His silences. Rests in music can be critical. Space in a painting can be suggestive. Pauses in a speech can enhance the meaning of what is being said. Explore with me the circumstances under which Jesus resorted to silence.

* * *

Jesus did not speak on the details of daily living. I have in mind those operational decisions that consume so much of our energy. That Jesus was familiar with the dailiness of life we know from a quick glance at His parables. He never addressed Himself to these details in the course of His public ministry.

This is an area in which we are to be instructed by experience and common sense. "What crops should I plant and when should I plant them?" "I am retiring soon. Should I move to live closer to my son or my daughter. Or should I stay where I am?" "At death should I have my body cremated?" "Should I live on the east side or the west side of town?" "My mother-in-law came to visit us twenty years ago and has been with us ever since. She accompanies us on all vacations. We would like to vacation alone. What should we do?"

One is not making light of such questions. They can wear us down and siphon away our happiness. Life seems to be divided into two kinds of people: those who are at ease with the large questions but fizzle when confronted by the small managerial details of life, (witness the absent minded professor) and those who excel in the art of the daily management of life

but cannot cope at all with the large questions of human existence.

When we are stymied by some question regarding the routine operation of our life, what is usually lacking is not faith but common sense. It is no reflection on Jesus when in such circumstances we consult those who are wiser or more experienced than ourselves. We really don't need Jesus for such questions anymore than we need a man with a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering to help us change a light bulb.

* * *

Jesus did not speak on truths already adequately known. He assumed a familiarity on the part of His hearers with the Old Testament.

Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath Day to indicate that He was Lord of the Sabbath. Christians have insisted across the years that Jesus is also Lord of the Scriptures. That is to say, we judge all biblical truth as it stands in reference to Him.

But this is a long way from saying that the gospels can be understood apart from the thirty-nine books that preceded them or the twenty-three that followed! Jesus did not drop into history as an isolated figure to break fresh ground in every area of human knowledge. He came assuming that those who heard His words already knew some truths by virtue of their membership in the community of faith.

For example, Jesus assumed that God is one. Therefore, there is nothing in His teaching against atheism or polytheism. Jesus assumed that a moral order exists to which men are accountable. Jesus assumed that the Scriptures are trustworthy. Jesus assumed that God works in history to bring about His purposes. Jesus assumed that God is both merciful and just. He came to His own because His own would share these convictions with Him. Jesus built upon these

truths. He did not have to begin by establishing them.

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Jesus did not speak to advocate any particular political or economic system. I used to get a periodical that came regularly to my desk entitled, "Christian Economics." I always winced at the title. It was a right wing journal. The implication in the name was that only right wing economics was deserving of the adjective "Christian." I also wince when I hear about a political party in some European countries called The Christian Democratic Party. This seems to me to be far too presumptuous. To say that there are Christians in a political party is one thing but to say that a party is Christian is to play loose with the good name of Christ. The planks of a given political party may be very close to the mind of Christ. But again this is not to say that the party as a whole can rightly be called Christian.

Jesus did not endorse any political or economic system. Economics in His day was a very simple matter. There was no paper money. There were no cartels. There was no corporate ownership of business. There was no such thing as an international monetary market. Indeed, the nation that He knew had a pronounced rural and individualized economy. The city of Jerusalem in His day probably numbered something less than 200,000 people.

As to politics, Jesus avoided joining with the Herodians, the quislings of His time, whose strategy was to work with the occupation powers. He refused to identify with revolutionary Zealots whose aim was to overthrow everything in sight. He resisted even the moderation of the Pharisee party.

Christianity has lived with and within every conceivable political and economic system. This does not mean that one system is as good as another or that

Christians ought not to struggle for relative improvement in a given situation. We are here, in part, to help Christify the systems under which we live. Jesus, by His silence on these matters, is not to be co-opted by any political or economic ideology.

As the great Harnack one time put it, "Jesus laid down no social program for the suppression of poverty and distress, if by program we mean a set of definitely prescribed regulations. With economical conditions and contemporary circumstances He did not interfere. Had He become entangled in them, had He given laws which were ever so salutary for Palestine, what would have been gained by it? They would have served the needs of a day and tomorrow would have been antiquated: to the gospel they would have been a burden and a source of confusion." 2 Instead, Jesus entrusted to His people yeasty ideas and system-breaking concepts to the end that history might move more and more in the direction of God's will.

Witness, for example, the impact of Christian truth on slavery - a delayed impact, but one that was predictable nonetheless. "When the gospel taught that God had made all men and women upon earth of one family; that all alike were His sons and His daughters; that whatever conventional distinctions human society might set up, the supreme King of Heaven refused to acknowledge any; that the slave, notwithstanding his liberty, was Christ's slave; when the Church carried out this principal by admitting the slave to her highest privileges, inviting him to kneel side by side with his master at the same holy table; when, in short, the Apostolic precept that 'in Christ Jesus is neither bond nor free' was not only recognized, but acted upon then slavery was doomed." 3

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Let us move on to notice another area in which Jesus did not speak. He consistently refused to speak truth to those who would not receive it. He counselled

His disciples not to cast their pearls before swine. During His trial Jesus restrained Himself and did not speak. He would not speak before the Sadducees, declining to reply to purjured witnesses. When He stood before Pilate, Pilate said to Him, "Have you no answer to make? But Jesus made no further answer." (Mark 15:3-5) When He stood before the adulterous Herod this venomous ruler questioned Him. But the record says that "Jesus made no answer." (Luke 23:9)

He was driven to silence when He perceived that minds were closed or hearts hardened. The ancient word still stands, "If any man's will is to do His will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God." (John 7:17)

* * *

Moreover, Jesus did not speak truths that His disciples were unable to receive. We remember from the morning Scripture reading (John 16:4-15) how the disciples gathered in the upper-room expressed concern about what would become of them. Jesus turned to them in that very intimate association and said, "I have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now." (John 16:12) Even Jesus could not communicate truths that outran the experiences of His hearers.

The more I travel around within the church the more I am driven to conclude that one of the reasons why it is so difficult for Christians to communicate with each other is that we are all operating out of different circles of experience. I wonder whether it is humanly possible for a Christian nestled away in some hamlet in Iowa to really perceive the mind of Christ for the city. Were we there and he here, perhaps his perception would be clearer and ours would be the duller.

"I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now." Even Jesus had to wait. But He also said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide

you into all the truth." (John 16:13) He still has some things to say to His Church that we are not yet ready to receive.

I remember hearing of a minister's son who spent a summer during his teens working on a mission project somewhere in the Caribbean. When he got back in September he was elated by his experience. Charged up with a great sense of the vision of Christ in the world he turned to his father and said, "Dad, why is it that you never talk about this mission stuff?" Actually, his father had been preaching about missions for ten or twelve years, but he had been preaching ahead of the experience of his son. "I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now."

"O could I tell, you surely
would receive it.
O could I only say what I
have seen.
How can I tell,
or how can you receive it?
How -- till he taketh
you where I have been."

F.W.H. Myers - "St. Paul"

The Christian life is an open-ended adventure. Jesus means freedom. All of us who believe are in "the molten phase of becoming." Encumbent upon us is what Robert E. Speer one time called the "duty of advancement." We move from faith to faith and hopefully from strength to strength. Jesus did not speak truths that His disciples were unable to receive.

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Finally, Jesus did not speak to satisfy man's idle curiosity. There are two things that we tend to be troubled about. One is the unevenness of providence. The other is how the story will end - and when. Jesus refused to get involved in such questions.

Following the resurrection, Jesus was walking with His disciples along the shore of the sea of Galilee. They had breakfasted together. As they ambled along the beach Jesus told Peter that he would die a martyr's death. Trailing Jesus and Peter at this moment was the beloved John. Peter turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, what about this man? It is one thing for me to anticipate a martyr's death, but what about him -- what will he suffer for you?" But Jesus said to Peter, "If I will that he tarry till I come what is that to you, follow me." (John 21:22-23) He refused to satisfy the curiosity of Peter regarding the mystery of providence.

Again, after the resurrection, the disciples gathered about Him and asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:7) You will not receive answers, but you will receive power after the Holy Spirit is come upon you. He also gave them a mandate that would occupy them fully: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Even Christian people are to live with a sense of mystery concerning last things. It is better to be overwhelmed by a great truth than to overwhelm a small truth.

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To sum it up; Jesus did not speak on the details of daily living. Jesus did not speak on truths that were already adequately known. Jesus did not speak to advocate a particular political or economic system. Jesus did not speak to those who would not receive it. Jesus did not speak to those who were unable to receive it. Jesus did not speak to satisfy man's idle curiosity. And yet, for all of these silences, at times maddening, He is still what Robert Browning called Him, "The master light of all our seeing." For in Him as nowhere else the commonwealth of values that belongs to the kingdom of God are most clearly ex-

pounded and most lovingly commended; humility, trust, service, faith, hope and love. We have no reason to be troubled by the silences of Jesus. He told us enough to make a saving difference in our lives without diminishing the venture.

Many years ago the founding pastor of Riverside Church spoke to this very point: "We had better stand by Christianity for awhile longer. We are terribly tempted to call it impractical. But do we mean that what is going on in this unchristian world now is practical -- economically practical, practical for our children's future? In the long run it will be found out that no other world except a Christian world is practicable. Ah, Lord, once more thou art saying to thy people, 'Will ye also go away?' and we would answer Thee now, To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." (Harry Emerson Fosdick)

CLOSING PRAYER

*We thank Thee, God, for the life and
words of Jesus.
Forgive us if in some foolish self-
deception we have imagined ourselves
beyond reach or need of His ministry.
Let His words come home to our arid and
anxious hearts with Pentecostal power,
That we may be changed from what we are
to what we ought to be.
In His name we pray. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Browning, Robert, "A Death in the Desert"
2. Speer, Robert E., The Principles of Jesus, p. 238, Fleming H. Revell Co., New York 1902
3. Bishop Lightfoot, quoted in The Expositor's Greek Testament, Vol. IV, p. 209, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

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