



*For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,  
I will gasp and pant.*

According to these words that come a little after the snippet from Isaiah that we heard read by O'Love God has been holding her peace.  
Keeping quiet.

*Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands (islands) and their inhabitants.  
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice*

Silence and song.

*Sing to the Lord a new song* isn't so much a benign invitation to a fireside sing along, or even to a full on Beatles jam session with Josh Jones; these words stand first as protest.  
God is over the silence.

God will have the sea to roar back at her?

God needs all the islands to sing because, ironically, Israel has become an island unto herself. Israel has stopped responding, stopped singing.

*Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!*

The relationship between God and God's people has fallen to silence.

Not a good silence, where each is listening deep,  
but a silence of some other kind

– silence of disappointment or despair, silence of resentment or forgetting.

Who knows exactly how it is that the bitter and cold silence falls between friends and lovers; but it can and it does.

Sometimes the exact history of how broken silence comes about in a relationship doesn't really matter it is just where things have got to.

Walter Brueggemann helped me think about all this when he said:

"I have been making a list of the kinds of people who don't sing very much.

Angry people don't sing very much  
Anxious people don't sing very much  
Self-sufficient people don't sing very much  
People in despair don't sing very much

Tired people don't sing very much  
Overindulged people don't sing very much"<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that "it struck me that our society [...] is designed to keep people from singing. It does so by keeping us overfed (indulged), overworked (tired), and surely anxious... It does so by seducing us into thinking that shopping or television or big-time athletics are important, when they are mostly narcotics in our society to keep us from noticing."<sup>2</sup>

He might be right.

There are countless ways that we think that we can place ourselves at the centre of our world and think that we can somehow solve our hearts desire and longings all by ourselves.

I am reminded of that most famous passage from St. Augustine's Confessions "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

But we do try and fill our lives chasing other empty desires and our hearts remain empty and we have no singing to the Lord in us.

Elsewhere Brueggemann says that we caught with either an exaggerated self that leaves God no access or place in our lives, or we have an exaggerated God who permits nothing of us.<sup>3</sup>

I think we get the notion of the exaggerated self. I have just been talking about that – how we fill our lives with ourselves and our restless petty desires. There are countless ways that we think we are more significant than we really are.

It might be harder, though, for us to cotton onto a notion of what Brueggemann could mean by an "exaggerated God" who permits nothing of us and so brings us to a painful suppressed silence.

Yet I see it our church too. Maybe not so much, but it is there.

We see it when God becomes for people a sort of closed system. It is precisely this "closed system" that was challenged just a couple of weeks back in our Gospel reading when the wonderful Canaanite woman who confronted Jesus about excluding her and her daughter from the goodness of God's healing.

There are people out there who think that we should be committed to something pure, something omnipotent, something other than the outstretched arms of Jesus but that is what it means to be a biblically based Christian. An exaggerated sense of God leads to a silencing of humanity, just as the Canaanite woman might have been silenced if she had not pressed her case.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann – *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, Vol 2.* P.277

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann – *Finally comes the Poet*

An exaggerated God authenticates tyrants and tyrannical power – that is why the current President of the United States so loves to gather a particular kind of evangelical pastor around him. Their god, pure and great, bolsters his inhumane power.

It is an exaggerated and pure god who the National Socialist regime of Herr Hitler loved, that the Apartheid regime of the former South Africa loved – and let's be clear these tyrants always found ample biblical support for their regime of hate.

Our God wants love. In a way it is God's restless heart is laid bare here.  
Our God wants an end to the silence, our God wants to be in communion:

*now I will cry out like a woman in labour,  
I will gasp and pant.*

Our God aches for an end to the silence, our God wants to be in true communion - which is why the sea and the islands are being enlisted in giving at least some response.

*Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands and their inhabitants.  
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,*

Our God aches an end to the silence, our God yearns for the connection and for the love, which is why see this turning in the middle of Isaiah.

There is a call for a new song because somehow God's people have forgotten that they are God's people. Numbed, hurt, disheartened they believe they belong in Babylon; that there is nothing more to say or do and, so, have cut themselves off from God. So, God himself brings an end to the silence.

*Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the island and their inhabitants.*

I am reminded here of our baptismal liturgy:

E te whānau a te Karaiti / Dear friends in Christ,  
God is love, God gives us life.  
We love because God first loves us.  
In baptism God declares that love;  
in Christ God calls us to respond.

God is calling to us to respond.

Today in the ebb and flow of our life we give thanks for the response to the love of God in the lives of the Saints and Martyrs of the South Pacific. In this commemoration we are invited to hold in mind more than the great European missionaries because in almost every island group of the Pacific, Christianity has in fact spread most effectively through the people's contact with those around them in everyday life. In fact, the main evangelistic work has been done by the Pacific Islanders themselves. We rejoice in this cloud of largely

unknown to us witnesses. They responded to the God who came to them and sought communion with them and all the islands and many, many inhabitants have learnt to sing a new song to the Lord. We give thanks for them.

Can we do likewise? Will we respond to God who comes again and again to us with arms outstretched in love.

In baptism God declares that love;  
in Christ God calls us to respond.

*Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!*



*Sermon preached for the Auckland Diocesan Synod  
Saints and Martyrs of the South Pacific, 2017*

*+jim white*