

PREACHED IN THE PARISH OF ST JAMES, MONCTON

And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all mankind to myself

Good morning. Welcome to spring. Welcome to Passiontide, the final two weeks of our Lenten journey. It's an honour to be invited here, for Gwen and I and our grandsons, Zac and Mason. We can't think of St James, Moncton, without thinking of Fr Rufus Oneywuchi and the night Gwen and I spent with the Oneywuchis at the rectory in 1990—thirty one years ago. We were scheduled to go to Africa, not for a visit, but for a year of teaching. And Fr Rufus offered to help orient us to his native continent. What I remember him saying to us was that if we could wake up every morning prepared for an adventure we would be ready for Africa. And that was true. I'm able to be here this morning because another African priest has come to this diocese, to the Parish where I've been temporarily supplying—temporarily for six and a half years. Fr Paul Gwese, with his young family, are just out of quarantine and this is his first Sunday in the parish. He's now the fifth African priest in this diocese. I spent Thursday morning with him. The church being the church we were bound to have more in common than we might have thought, and indeed I found out that he was studying at Mirfield Community of the Resurrection and Leeds University when I was on retreat there for a week in 2005. We didn't meet at the time but we both remember the time well—it was just after the horrible terrorist bombings in the London underground. You see when you get up in the morning you never know what lies ahead. And as you all know memories stir memories stir memories. What I remember clearest about the time at the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield were the silences in the great stone chapel. Nearly dark, you couldn't see the monks really, just hear their wonderful voices slowly singing the psalms of matins and evensong day after day. There was a note in the pew for visitors telling visitors to let the monks lead the singing—that's for clergy who too often like to blast out the responses as if no matter where they are they have to lead the service. Too often when clergy lead prayers or read lessons it sounds as if they're actually telling God things he might not know without their help. But at this monastery the thing I remember weren't words at all. It was the silence

between the psalms. When a word is spoken in a stone room it cuts the air, but silence in a stone room is like nothing else I know—more living even than silence in a wood on a still day. It seemed to go on for ever, I felt myself moving into it. And I knew even then that it would be the profound silences that I would remember from that retreat. There was a Presence unmistakably there. Imagine—remembering a silence—remembering nothing. No. That's not what it is. In the silence God was present.

In the Michael Frost book Rev Wendy has had the parish studying over the past few years the first L in Bells, the word he hangs his thoughts on stands for Listen. Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn and Sent. Listen. The thing we do least well. I was once asked to preach at a three hour service at the parish church in Fredericton---the current Bishop, David Edwards, warned me not to prepare too much because three hours wasn't as much time as he thought it would be. So I deliberately put some silences into my talks, thinking time spent before the Cross of Christ might benefit from silence before the mystery. There were two other clergy there that morning and it was as if we were on the radio---we weren't---but they could not abide the silences---one began filling in with prayer after prayer---and the other read long passages of scripture. Our society does not like silence---I don't like it. And as a consequence we don't listen well. So Michael Frost's challenge to us---modern talkative busy people---that we spend twenty minutes once a week just listening in silence---not five or ten, but twenty---might be the most difficult thing he recommends. Many of you saw the documentary film on Mr Rogers in which he asks, and the film enables, just one single minute of silence. I tried it in church in Shediac and we made it to twenty seconds before every throat in the place had to be cleared. Robert Frost, the American poet, wrote a lament about our inability to be still.

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there

At least not over half.

So, Michael Frost, is he related to Robert?, there we are. Allergic to silence. Hardly able to listen. Prone to not believe in God. Terrified of being alone. Overwhelmed by the jumble of thoughts in our heads. But our Lord prayed those long silences, and the epistle to the Hebrews tells us that he was heard and that he learned obedience---the word literally means being able to hear.

The next two weeks are an invitation by Christ to be with him in His own profound silence. In Holy Week he suddenly ceases to speak—no more parables, no more healings, single word replies to the questions that are piled upon him. Three hours on the cross and hardly a word spoken.

The divine Word speaks. A seed fallen into the ground and bearing much fruit. Lifted from the earth and drawing all humankind to himself.