



A LENTEN RETREAT: Week One

The mute button was invented in 1956 by Robert Adler, an Austrian-born engineer working for the Zenith Radio Corporation in Chicago. It was one of the four buttons on his Space Command 400, the first commercially viable TV remote control. The other three buttons – on/off, channel up and channel down – might have seemed more vital, but Adler’s boss, Eugene F McDonald, a former naval intelligence officer who was nicknamed “The Commander”, had insisted on mute.

“He hated commercials,” Adler recalled in 1987. McDonald feared these constant intrusions would kill the new medium of TV. So Zenith boasted that the mute button would allow viewers to “shut off the sound of long, annoying commercials”.

Still, McDonald couldn’t have predicted the pop-up ad, petrol pumps trying to sell you nachos or the ravages of the distraction economy. It is only now, in an age of incessant interruption, that we are beginning to grasp muting’s full potential – not only when it comes to our gadgets, but in real life, too.

In May 2019, the taxi company Uber began trialing a suite of new features for users of its Exec service – including a button you can activate if you want to mute your driver. “Quiet preferred” is the euphemism Uber is using (you can also toggle it to “happy to chat” – lucky driver). But it appears to bring the dream of being able to choose who and what we listen to a step closer.

Twitter introduced a mute function in 2014 and it has proved to be the social network’s most popular feature, a sort of automatic talk-to-the-hand. Instead of “blocking” someone objectionable (which they will know about) you can now discreetly “mute” them (which they won’t know about).

Instagram added its own mute function in 2018, inspired by what it called “complex social dynamics”. Now you can avoid your friend’s nauseating Ibiza selfies and tasting menu stories without fear of causing offence.

The wider trend is known as the “privatization of auditory space”, says Dr Tom Rice, a lecturer in sonic anthropology at Exeter University. “It’s often said in sound studies that we don’t have earplugs. We don’t have any control over what drips into our ears and collects in them. Earphones are the closest we have to that.”

“You are precious in my eyes and glorious, and I love you.”

In the Gospel this week Jesus puts on his earphones and blocks out all the unwanted sounds by going off into the desert to pray for 40 days and 40 nights to listen to the voice of God that strengthened within him the knowledge of his Father’s love for him and the dignity and power of who he truly is. At the end of this long silent encounter with God, Jesus returns and hears immediately the voice of the tempter, the devil, that tries to get him to be less than he truly is. Temptations are really voices that try to get us to be less than we truly are in God’s eyes.

This first week of Lent is a time to use the mute button or put on our headphones and tune out all those other voices and listen solely to the voice of God. And the voice of God is one that is always reminding us that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that we are always and forever loved by God. The beginning of retreat, like all retreats, invites us to slow down, quiet down, and listen to that gentle voice of God tell us how much we are loved by God.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE WEEK

Genesis 1:26-27

Made in the image and likeness of God

Isaiah 43:1-7

You are precious in my eyes

Isaiah 49:14-15

I will never forget you

Psalms 139:1-18

You formed my inmost being

John 3:16

God so loved the world

John 14:15-28

I will never forget you

Romans 8:31-39

With God on our side who can be against us

Use one of the forms of praying with Scripture from last week’s bulletin or simply read the above passages and hear God speaking to you of his love.