

Talk of silence

I wonder if you've ever been to a hot desert, alone. If so, you would have experienced the dry heat sucking moisture from your lips, the almost repressive quiet where all you can hear is the throbbing of your pulse in your ears, and the stark beauty of a land mass constantly shifting with the breeze; or possibly the feeling of utter vulnerability at the arrival of a desert storm, engulfing everything in darkness, stripping everything, perhaps even your soul, of its outer layers. It is no surprise that the great prophets of the ages have spent time alone in the desert, finding themselves, and finding God. Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad all experienced their greatest moments of enlightenment in the desert or other remote places whilst alone. It is in being truly alone that one faces one's demons, one's temptations, one's ego.

Humans are social creatures. We like to be with others, at least for most of the time. Perhaps this is why we have been so successful as a species. There would be no society, no technology, and no economy without this desire to live alongside others. As Aristotle wrote "Man is by nature a Political animal", by which he meant that we have an innate desire to live alongside others in some form of society, and also that we have a natural inclination to reflect on how we ought to live alongside others. We have the urge to communicate with others, to belong and to perform with, and for, others. When John Donne wrote "No man is an island, entire of itself" he was pointing to the inevitable connection people have with one another, the experience of one's self as a connected rather than solitary being. But it is not just that we feel connected to others, by and large we feel lost without others. Why is this?

One reason is that without the chatter, communication, laughter and bonding which comes with being with others, we feel bereft of meaning and purpose. We feel a nausea, as the existentialists would put it, a sickness of being alone with only our selves - love sick, because we have no object for our love, nor indeed our hate, towards others. When we are alone, when we are silent, we are left with our inner selves. And this can be quite scary. Common responses to this silence are boredom, frustration, anger and lethargy. But there is a better way to respond to silence, as I hope to show below.

You have no doubt had times when you cannot sleep at night, when darkness is all around, and you feel alone, your turbulent mind wrestling obsessively with a problem or worry, which often dissipates the next morning in the light of day when we see and speak to others, when we are caught up in the busyness of everyday activity, welcomed back to the security of belonging with our loved ones, our friends and our community. In Buddhist imagery the mind is like a monkey grasping from one branch to the next, always reaching for the next thought. If you don't believe this then test it for yourselves. Try to sit silently and not think for just ten seconds, it is almost impossible, at least for most of us. Yet sitting in silence, in reflection, in prayer and meditation is a great, great opportunity, as well as a huge challenge.

Today I want to extol the virtues and challenges of being alone and being silent, at least for some of the time. The two are not the same, we can often be alone, but often we are far from silent in our minds. But the two can, with practise, be brought together. It is a challenge, a lifelong challenge, but it can bring great peace, and ultimately a closer relationship with the ground of our being, which we

call God. I am just a novice in this endeavour, I flounder constantly, my mind is like an excitable puppy much of the time, but I am trying to practise being silent more often.

But is it not absurd that I am here, today, talking about silence? Is my talk about silence literally an impossible task. As Wittgenstein put it, perhaps "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". A similar conclusion was arrived at by St Thomas Aquinas, often regarded as the greatest theologian of all time. He spent almost all of his adult life writing in defence of a rational belief in God. On the feast of St. Nicholas in 1273, Aquinas was celebrating Mass when he received a revelation that so affected him that he wrote and dictated no more, leaving his great work the *Summa Theologica* unfinished. He then said of his writing "The end of my labours has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me."

It is not that Aquinas was rejecting the philosophical defence of his beliefs as he had espoused them, it was just that experiencing God directly transcended language and logic altogether. In trying to talk about silence we are in a similar realm, we are trying to put something which is beyond our capacity to express it, into words. This paradox is a challenge, but also an opportunity. Perhaps in trying to talk about silence I should instead just *be* silent.....some of you will be disappointed to hear that I am not going to do that, not just yet, there is more to say.

It is not just religious prophets who have understood the value of silence. Great musicians have done so too. Miles Davis, for example, in response to the frenetic beat of Bop Jazz set about creating a new movement of jazz music with much, much more space between the musical phrases. In both music and visual art it is often the silences, the spaces which hold the piece together, which give it its true shape and form, which reveal its true beauty. In allowing for space, in not adding too much noise, too much paint, the art becomes something great. Without space in art there is just white noise.

Nature hates a void, a vacuum, it desires to fill it. We do the same with silence. We fill silence with words, with texting, with emails, with facebook. We, like the birds, desire to tweet. Words are both our greatest ally in communication, and yet also paradoxically destined to fall short. Try to put any experience, totally, perfectly, into words. Not only would you experience a paralysis like Proust, the French writer who spent 30 pages in his book *À la recherche du temps* describing the feeling of waking up, but you would also fail. But it is the desire to do the impossible, to put experience into words, which drives us. It is driving me today as I speak. And this restless desire has such great merits, it is the source of great literature and art, the well from which theology draws water, from the desert.

The picture I have painted so far might sound rather depressing: failure, inability, fear, nausea, silence. Rather I want to *encourage* you to find silence from time to time in your lives, every day, because it is so precious. Why is this? It is in being still and silent that we become, at first, vulnerable, particularly to our own fears. But later, with effort and practise, our minds can become still, and closer to the source of all stillness. The desires and pains of life can become quenched and the mind can become peaceful, and God can enter into our lives.

So, today, everyday, find a little silence. When you awake in the morning, notice your breathing, and be thankful for another day, embrace the opportunities ahead; when you are between lessons, silently notice the shifting clouds outside or the swallow preparing to leave; when you tie up your

shoelaces before a match, be still and focused in the task ahead, mindful and respectful of the opposition in equal measure; when you sit to have lunch, stop and be aware of the who produced the food for you, and be grateful for having it; when you walk past the crypt enter, be still, absorb the quiet of that womblike place; when you have worried and not found a solution to a problem, trust in letting it go unresolved; when you sing, become aware of your voice as a vessel resonating with others ; when you face a difficult maths challenge stop and be still for a moment before trying to respond; when you fail, become aware of what you can learn; when you succeed, be grateful and share a smile with others without seeking acclamation; when you go to bed at night, be mindful of your breathing, be still and know that you are loved.

It is through silence that we may come into contact with that still, small voice of calm, which we find so difficult to make room for in our busy lives. But this choice is perhaps our greatest leap ever. It is beyond reason, it is on the path to faith.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem titled 'The habit of perfection' points to this deeper wisdom as follows:

*Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorlèd ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.*

*Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb:
It is the shut, the curfew sent
From there where all surrenders come
Which only makes you eloquent.*

Let us pray an eloquent prayer, let us be silent for one minute.