

## Sensing the Sacred – Silence

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“The first 48 hours are the worst, if you can get through that you’ll be fine!” Such was the response of a Benedictine monk of my acquaintance when I told him I was going to be spending a month with the Carthusians at Parkminster, a very strict order of monks who spend most of their time in silence and solitude. You could say that the Carthusians are to monking what the SAS are to the regular army.

Well, the first 48 hours were pretty tough. It certainly wasn’t fun. To be honest, I found it hard to see it as anything other than an endurance test. But I persevered (many don’t apparently), and after a while, though I can’t say I ever got comfortable exactly, I nevertheless settled in a bit, and even started to appreciate something of life in the artificial desert of the Charterhouse. I noticed how the discipline of silence, and paradoxically the enclosure – apparently so restrictive – actually allowed for the opening up of an interior space that I am seldom aware of in my normal everyday life.

Some of you may have seen a documentary series on BBC2 earlier this year called *The Monastery* in which five ordinary men left their everyday lives and went to live in a monastery for six weeks. The programme emphasised the difficulties some of the men had in coming to terms with a very different way of life in which there were – or at least were supposed to be – significant periods of enforced silence. Some found it stimulating, but others found it very challenging. As it happens, speaking as one of those five men, I can tell you there was rather more talk about silence than actual practice, but never mind.

Still, it’s interesting to reflect on why we might find silence difficult or disturbing. We often talk about an ‘awkward silence’ that descends on a social gathering, or when two people run out of small-talk. But why is it awkward? Why do we feel it necessary to avoid silence, even if it means talking rubbish? Why is it sometimes so difficult to break a silence, to the extent that we might even experience a little stress as we desperately try to think of something to say? It’s as if we think that silence is somehow unnatural, as if nature ‘abhors a vacuum’.

To talk about ‘breaking a silence,’ however, implies that silence is something whole, undifferentiated. Silence is the void, the chaos of the genesis creation account, but also therefore the whole from out of which the part is distinguished. God breaks that awkward silence with His creative word and in so doing brings the world into being. Yet the word needs a silence in which to be born and a background of silence against which to be heard. Silence is where we encounter the ground of being. Indeed, in a sense, it actually *is* the ground of being.

Silence and revelation thus go hand in hand; they are two sides of the same coin. We see this graphically illustrated in the Gospels. Often when Jesus reveals his true self, his divinity, for example in a healing miracle, he orders the person concerned not to tell anyone about it. They must keep silence. For example, the healing of Jarius’ daughter (Mark 5.43), the leper (Mark 1.44), the deaf man (Mark 7.36), and so on. At the time of His transfiguration, the disciples who are with him have an experience of God in the cloud, and their reaction is silence (Luke 9.36, cf. Matthew 17:9 & Mark 9.9). Silence is the only appropriate response to something awe inspiring, like an encounter with truth. We have the same sort of experience in our own small way when we encounter something of great beauty, be it a mountain view or a beautiful painting or whatever.

If an encounter with God leads to silence, then maybe silence leads to an encounter with God. There is a tendency these days to think that simply by correct practice of certain meditation techniques, we can achieve... what? Salvation? Enlightenment? I think it's a mistake to think like this. Our practice merely lays the groundwork, opens us to a possibility, a possibility of the action of grace. So it's not so much about technique but attitude, an attitude of openness, humility, obedience, and self-restraint – which again, is not just about external discipline, though that helps, but letting go of all that comes between us and God – in other words 'me'.

We have to empty ourselves of our selves, like Jesus did on the cross (Philippians 2:7), so that we may hear the word of God dwelling within our hearts. The prayer of silence is the heart of the Christian contemplative tradition, and it is not without precedent. Jesus was in the habit of withdrawing to deserted places to pray (Luke 5.16), often spending the night in prayer on the mountainside (Luke 6:12). As well as advising us not to heap up empty phrases, Jesus commands us to 'pray in secret' (Matthew 6:6). A secret is something we keep silent about. Can you keep a secret? means don't tell anyone, don't say anything about this to anyone.

All this talk of silence, discipline, and emptiness, brings me back to the Carthusians. The timetable and the austerity were hard enough. Getting up in the middle of the night for three hours of church, every day. Nothing but bread and water to eat on Fridays. Cold showers. But the really difficult thing was just being present. This is what Dom Cyril, the novice master would keep emphasising when he came to check up on me every few days or so. "Just be here," he would say. And for the first week or so he would always ask me whether or not I was there yet. It took a few days to really understand what he meant. With little to occupy or distract my mind I became very aware of how much of my time is spent elsewhere – thinking about all the things I could or should be doing, the people I might have been seeing, what I would do when I got out, and so on. Indeed, much of this idle daydreaming was taken up with making plans for the future, surely the most pointless of enterprises, and a clear sign of a distracted mind.

The purpose of cultivating silence is to draw aside the mental screen on which we project the transient and ephemeral phenomena of everyday life, a mode of being characterised by distraction, of being anywhere and indeed everywhere else but here and now. It is to make ourselves present to the presence of God. And I really noticed how most of the time we are simply *not present*, even to ourselves or each other, never mind God. We encounter God in the silent emptiness that is the heart of being, and therefore of our being too. It is the place where we can share in that Being in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Not that we are God, of course, but we are, ultimately, what God is.

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