

The Silences



In a world where many people cannot live with the volume turned down, I have come to love the silences of His Office. This was one of those visits with few words. I sat by the memory window, captivated by a picture to which I often return in moments like these. Just one brief recollection. The event itself could not have lasted more than a few minutes and yet it was a doorway to eternity – a thin moment. A handful of worshippers sat behind me on tiered pitch pine pews. We had shared a simple service of Holy Communion in a small box-shaped chapel characteristic of the Yorkshire Dales. Having taken bread and wine together we welcomed moments of silence to remember our Lord. I knelt, forgetful that beneath the beautifully laundered cloth was a simple cottage table. A small piece of bread had fallen on the cloth close to a wine stain. Through the open door we heard familiar sounds; the summer breeze across un-mown, waving pastures; the caw of a crow; the distant eerie curlew call and the running stream, flowing unceasingly from fellside springs. Eternity was in that moment. Nature's voices completed our silence and gave us a sense of our Creator's presence. In the beauty of creation, in the chapel and its family, in bread and wine, we knelt at our burning bush and awed to inward silence we knew the Lord was there. I often recall that experience because it taught me how beautiful is a God-filled silence which has something of the quality of frosty winter moonlight. Not the absence of noise, but the presence of God. Silence is the language of real love. I enjoy the idea that heaven is the perfect harmony of praise in which every sound combines to create a silence. I can share the Psalmist's longing when he sings - 'For God alone my soul waits in silence.'

Silence in his Office is very different to my other thin place at the edge of the wood. I have heard it said that silence in nature is really an illusion. Moments when there is perfect stillness – not even a breath of air, are so rare we must acknowledge they are mostly in our imagination. I have often heard busy people who, taking a rural break, seeking peaceful solitude, express their disappointment. They may find it unsettling, even frightening to be in strange isolation surrounded by unrecognised noises. Those sounds are hidden and mysterious secret whispers, disturbing, unexpected, even fearsome cries and calls from out of an unusually dark surround. What had at first been turning off noises of humanity changes as our ears attune to wind voices, birdsong, mysterious snuffling of a badger or hedgehog, buzzing of insects, especially the insistent fly inspecting an ear lobe. I sometimes watch a rabbit with ears erect, or a wood mouse constantly pausing to question vibrations in the long grass. They know that silence may not always be a friend. In the Spring I often wish I had a keener and richer hearing. Spring is surely a riot of sound unheard by me. If it were I am sure I could equally be thrilled by it, or tensely excited by buds cracking and creaking open, new tree fingers reaching further towards the skies as they compete in the new-life race, with ferns unrolling and young olive-dressed leaves unfolding as their veins throb. None enter life silently!

His Office gives me another silence. It is an imaginative place where all but breathing and pulse are still, though even here, intrusive thoughts may wander to suggest a mouse scratching behind the skirting or an intrusive bumblebee, and the mystery noises of furniture responding to temperature changes. This silence cannot turn off my mind's inner hearing. Here I listen to my own thoughts, no longer broken into or carried away on waves of music or adjacent conversation. Here, silence may become a door to our inner self where God's voice reaches deep. Mother Teresa of Kolkata knew this so well even where the cries of hunger and sickness broke into every stillness. She wrote, *'If you face God in prayer and silence, he will speak to you. Then you will know your nothingness and emptiness, ready for God to fill you with himself and your mind with his words.'* That is an experience which occurs often in events and stories of the Bible. As with the prophet Elijah on Mount Sinai. Seeking God and his purposes at a most critical time for himself and his people, he heard his Lord speak, not in a way he expected - in violent earthquake, volcanic eruptions, and

windstorm, but in a soft whisper when the raging earth events had passed. Again, John at a crucial moment of revelation speaks of silence in heaven for half an hour. There are moments when we are grateful for thirty minutes of silence. We call it *heaven!* It could well be! The noiseless thin moment is not simply of the mind. It slips easily into the heart and spirit as an experience of love, peace, and presence. The silences of his His Office have become deeper encounters with him when other voices have been eliminated, leaving space to think, to wonder, to listen, to be inspired and guided.