



The Silences

In a world where many people cannot live with the sound 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 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 for remembering 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 pastures; the caw of a crow; the distant eerie curlew call; and the running stream, flowing unceasingly from fell-side springs. Eternity was in that moment. Nature's voices completed our silence and gave us a sense of the creator's presence. In the beauty of creation; in chapel and people; 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.'* Deep silence is like Elijah's *'sound of gentle stillness'* or *'soft whisper,'* in the presence of God on Mount Sinai - a moment of presence and communion.

There have been many such silent moments in his Office - silences of fear, anticipation, empathy and loneliness, of judgment, of joy and peace, when I have felt moved into that prayer which simply links God's heart and mine. Often, his presence has been humbling, embarrassing, even shattering as he has caused me to search my heart and see my unworthiness. That still moment when you want to run away, yet are glued to the spot where you stand; - not dissimilar to the silence of a noisy African night when nearby gunfire roots you to the spot and you have no idea which way to run. It is in those particular silences he has taken me to the window to look out on the hill of three crosses.

Like many Christians, I still wrestle with the theology of the Cross but not with the experience. I cannot get my mind round theories of atonement but somehow I know that his cross represents what my sin does to God, what God does for me despite my sin and what he does with my sin. My failure to achieve what God made me to be is part of the suffering he bears and yet, by that same suffering he shows me his eternal forgiving love by which I can be broken down and re-molded like potter's clay in his hands. All that he asks is that I believe him and accept and prove what he offers me. I would not want to give the impression that that is easy. It is not. There are the consequences of my failures which still have to be sorted out. Things have to be put right, with God, in myself, and with others.

Then there is the effort of starting all over again - and again - and again. He has gracious patience - or is it his patient grace? Any human father would be tearing his hair out, saying, 'when will you ever learn?' But with God there are always more silences, more journeys to the window of the three crosses. More silent, faltering steps along the road of holiness.

Moving on from those uncomfortable silences of judgment and peace the 'director' has taught me to associate silence with the best experiences in life - experiences of true humility and wisdom; of childlike trust and love and holiness. He taught me how God is a silent giver and how the most effective worship is the secret service of prayer and kindness, often without words. Pictures from the scriptures filled his office window in rapid succession. I shared a silence in the outhouse of a busy Bethlehem inn, silence broken only by the sound of God's own first human cry. There was just a glimpse of those long days and nights in the wilderness where he learned how the Tempter shouts loudest in the silence. We stayed longer among the gentle slopes near the lake when dawn quiet gave him time to keep the Father at the centre of everything. Then, there he was standing in front of Pilate, the spectacular colour of the governor's robes contrasting with his own homespun tunic. This silence was different. The stillness of the lamb before its slaughterer. There was no purpose in words. The sacrificial lamb of the scriptures is not asked to make a case before it is condemned. It is required to be innocent in order to carry the sins of the guilty. - which brought me back to my memory of the fell-side chapel when with bread and wine the silence became tangible and God himself was the silence.