

THE SILENT WORD

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LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE in our times would seem to demand ever-increasing dialogue. Effective dialogue begins with the search for a context of self-expression which guarantees in one's listener an attitude of receptivity and a sincere effort towards comprehension. We can see signs of this search in non-directive counselling, in group dynamics, in the division of larger religious communities into smaller ones, in the practice of *révision de vie*. The first concern will always be to find silence in another. But in every exchange of values, we soon learn that we must treat others as we wish to be treated. So it is with silence. Having experienced what it means to speak freely to a sympathetic listener, we learn to become listeners. We discover how to create silence in ourselves. This quest for and experience of silence in human relationships which enrich the christian community can gradually purify and deepen that silence which is an essential aspect of our relationships with God, especially of that relationship which we call prayer.

The absence of God from so many expressions of our modern culture, the explicit or implicit proclamation of the 'death of God' in various currents of contemporary philosophy and theology, deepen the gulf that necessarily separates us from him whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose ways are not our ways.¹ Since our experience of the remoteness of God can often outweigh or even apparently supplant our realization of his nearness to us, we can easily become discouraged and abandon any effort to engage in conversation with him. We can indeed believe that he exists, in the same way as we believe that people live on the other side of the world; but direct and personal communication with him can seem just as impossible as it is with them.

On the other hand, despite our experience of God's remoteness, because we are convinced of the importance of prayer we may be motivated by a sense of sheer duty, and try 'to give the Lord his due' by mechanically filling in an allotted time with the half-

¹ Cf Isai 55, 7-8.

hearted recitation of various fixed prayers, or with spiritual chatter of some kind or other.

Obviously neither of these attitudes can exist for long in the face of serious re-examination of our relationship with God. With unmistakable clarity the words of Christ remind us of his nearness: 'I am with you always, to the close of the age'.¹ No less clear is one of his instructions on prayer: 'In praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words'.²

Since in every exchange between persons, silence can be as necessary and as effective as speech, it may be useful to reflect on the role of mutual silence in our relations with God. Without pretending to offer a complete or systematic presentation of this theme, we shall try within the limits of this article to search the scriptures and to listen to what the word of God tells us about silence in several strains of biblical tradition.

Silence in the Old Testament

'Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling'.³ This cultic invitation to silence prepares the community to meet the Lord who comes during moments of public prayer and sacrifice. Silence is thus first of all an awareness of the Lord's presence, a conscious attention to the mystery of his hidden action among us, an adoration of his power and condescension, and a preparation for the sacrifices we wish to offer to him as symbols of the communion which he establishes between himself and us, his people. The assembled community listens to the proclamation of his word in receptive silence, out of which will flower the community's response to his message.

Silence, as well as speech, is required in a court of law. This fact of experience was used by Old Testament writers to describe one of man's dispositions before the judgement of God.

Listen to me in silence, o coastlands;
let the peoples renew their strength;
let them approach, then let them speak;
let us together draw near for judgement.⁴

¹ Mt 28, 20.

² Mt 5, 7.

³ Zach 2, 13; cf Zeph 1,7; Apoc 8, 1.

⁴ Isai 41, 1; cf Ps 76, 7-9.

In prayer we attend to the continuous judgement passed upon our every word and activity by him who knows our speech even before it is on our tongue,¹ and who tests our minds and hearts,² in order to purify the depths of our being. The judgement passed by our present but unseen Lord is a discernment of the sources of good and evil within us and an evaluation of the successive moments of our existence. In prayer, the Lord's discernment and evaluation are communicated to us as an invitation to a joyful *magnificat* of thanksgiving for his blessings, and as a stimulus to conversion and repentance for our sins.

In St Paul's theology, the function of the old law was to reveal man's sinfulness, to silence our arrogant boasting, and thus to prepare us for God's revelation of his mercy, and for our own response of faith in Jesus our Saviour, through whom alone we are sanctified.

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God . . . Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith.³

Silence prepares us to discover the Lord's will in our lives and prepares us to make those choices which are pleasing to him. In the exquisite story about the choice of a wife for Isaac, the servant sent by Abraham for this purpose offers upon his arrival in Mesopotamia a prayer to the Lord.⁴ Rebekah grants the servant's request for a drink, and then, while she draws water for his camels, 'the man gazes at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not'.⁵ He decides that Rebekah's kindness points her out as the Lord's choice for Isaac, and, bowing his head he offers a prayer of thanksgiving.⁶ When Rebekah's father and brother also recognize the Lord's will and consent to her departure, Abraham's servant 'bows himself to the earth before the Lord',⁷ and so in silence he adores the Lord who has thus shown steadfast love to his master.⁸

By introducing us into a new awareness of our radical inability to sound the depths of the mystery of God, silence disposes us for a new revelation of God and a renewed confession of faith. In the

¹ Ps 139, 4.

² Ps 7, 10; cf Jer 17, 10; Apoc 2, 23.

³ Rom 3, 19, 27.

⁴ Gen 24, 12-14.

⁵ Gen 24, 21.

⁶ Gen 24, 26.

⁷ Gen 24, 52.

⁸ Gen 24, 14.

last episode of his dialogue with God, Job, humbled by the Lord's correction, finally admits that when a man is confronted and disconcerted by the mystery of evil, the fitting response is not contentiousness but silence:

Behold, I am of small account;
what shall I answer thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but I will proceed no further.¹

After Job has admitted that he has spoken intemperately, the Lord confronts him in mythical language with two symbols of his marvellous works, Behemoth and Leviathan.² Here, his silent attention to the revelation of the Lord is a confession of the Lord's power, the recognition that his own words were inconsiderate and presumptuous. Job's silence also expresses gratitude for a vision of the Lord which teaches him humbly to recognize his nothingness and imperfection before the almighty Lord:

I know that thou canst do all things,
and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.³

Silence in the midst of trials can express confidence in the Lord: a confidence which he rewards with new proofs of his merciful love. If we cast all our care upon the Lord rather than engage in agitated and fruitless lamenting, our hearts can find rest, assured that he himself will be our comforter and deliverer. But since he gives his grace only to the humble, authentic confidence implies that we recognize that the accomplishment of his will must be the object of our hope, and not the realization of our imperfect desires and inordinate ambitions:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvellous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul. . .
like a child that is quieted is my soul.⁴

¹ Job 40, 4-5.

² Job 40, 15-41, 34.

³ Job 42, 2-6.

⁴ Ps 131, 1-2

Besides the silence which we may seek, desire, and to some extent practise with the Lord's grace, there is a silence which God can introduce into our relationship with him as a radical purification. At times he himself becomes silent and seems no longer to communicate himself. When the word of the Lord becomes rare, when visions are not frequently conceded to the prophets,¹ such silence is taken to be a punishment. The famine in the desert and the miraculous manna were intended to teach the Lord's people to desire, depend upon and direct their lives by the word of God.² Later on in the people's history it was necessary to deprive them of the consolation of God's word itself in order that they learn to desire it:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord,
but they shall not find it.³

The painful privation of God's word and intervention, especially in times of trial, can lead us to pray insistently for the end of his silence.⁴

The greatest threat which the Old Testament sees in God's silence is the possibility that it may result in the soul's desolate departure to the abiding silence of Sheol, the dwelling place of the dead: 'To thee, O Lord, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit'.⁵ Only the Lord's intervention prevents us from slipping into the great silence.⁶ Yet each of us must, at the last, enter the realm of death where, according to the yet imperfect view of the earlier Old Testament tradition, it is impossible to sing to the glory of the Lord.⁷ It is only Jesus who will finally reveal to humanity, through his own death and resurrection, the true nature of the silence of departure from this world.

Christ, the silent Word

In the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh, God completes the revelation of the mystery of silence contained in the scriptures.

¹ 1 Sam 3, 1.

² Deut 8, 3; cf Wis 16, 26.

³ Amos 8, 11-12.

⁴ Ps 35, 22-24; 109; 1; Job 30, 20.

⁵ Ps 28, 1.

⁶ Ps 94, 17.

⁷ Ps 115, 17.

'God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .'¹ But this Son, 'through whom also he created the world', proceeded from the silence of the Father, the unseen God, with whom he was from all eternity. It is he who tells us about the Father, and he is able to do so because, while dwelling among us, he remains in the bosom of the Father.² It is the Son of God himself, Jesus Christ, who is the silent Word.

An aura of silence envelops his mysterious origin of which his acquaintances are entirely ignorant.³ After thirty years of silent obscurity which still remain hidden from us, he begins his public ministry. The gospel narratives of that brief period allow us fleeting glimpses of the silence which characterizes his personality. The words attributed to him, by their conciseness, depth and incisiveness, so strike those who hear them, that men must confess that his manner of speaking is unique,⁴ possessing an authority far surpassing that of the recognized masters in Israel.⁵ His words contain such power because they have their source in silent communion with the Father. Because the Father prescribed what he should say,⁶ and gave him the words which he was to give to others,⁷ because the Father who dwells in him is active in all that he does,⁸ the words which Jesus speaks are really the words of the Father himself.⁹

The union of the Father and the Son is a constant communion in silence. Jesus dwells in the Father's love¹⁰ by doing always what is pleasing to the Father. His whole life is a continual, unqualified 'yes' to the Father's will. To be sure there are moments when Jesus withdraws from the crowds and from his disciples to be alone with the Father.¹¹ But the actual prayers of Jesus during his public ministry which the gospels relate are extremely few: the Lord's prayer,¹² an exclamation of joyful praise of the Father,¹³ a prayer of thanksgiving before the resurrection of Lazarus,¹⁴ a petition for the glorification of the Father's name.¹⁵ The moments which Jesus devotes to prayer and the words he uses are but visible and audible signs of the constant mutual exchange between the Father and the Son in the silence of the divine life.

The evangelists' portraits of Jesus in prayer and in silence are concluded in the passion narratives. John introduces the passion

¹ Heb 1, 1-2. ² Jn 1 1-18. ³ Jn 6, 41-42. ⁴ Mt 13, 54-56; Jn 7, 46.

⁵ Mk 1, 22; Mt 7, 28; 29; Lk 4, 32.

⁶ Jn 12, 49-50.

⁷ Jn 17, 8-14.

⁸ Jn 14, 10-11.

⁹ Jn 14, 24.

¹⁰ Jn 15, 10.

¹¹ Mk 1, 35; Mt 14, 23; Lk 5, 16; 6, 12; 9, 29.

¹² Mt 6, 9-13; Lk 11, 2-4.

¹³ Lk 10, 21; Mt 11, 25-26.

¹⁴ Jn 11, 41-42.

¹⁵ Jn 12, 28.

with a solemn priestly prayer in the cenacle.¹ The synoptics begin their description of the last hours of Jesus with an agonized prayer which is at once a plea for deliverance and a profession of faithful love.² Likewise they represent Jesus in prayer upon the cross.³ But it is his silence, even more than his prayerful words, which reveals his union with the Father during his hour of glorification. The restraint of the evangelists creates in the reader of the passion an attitude of silent contemplation of the events in which the Lord is never alone, for the Father always accompanies him.⁴ His silence during all of the humiliations to which he is subjected and during his trial before the Jewish and Roman authorities invites us, too, 'to wonder greatly' and recalls the prophecy of Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.⁵

The extraordinary silence of the servant of the Lord is the most fitting expression of that mystery which human words cannot adequately formulate: the love of the Son for the Father and his saving will, and for all those to whom his sacrifice brings eternal life.

Even if preceded by a loud cry⁶ or by particular words – 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!'⁷ 'It is finished'⁸ – his death itself is a silent breathing forth of his spirit. By his death, Jesus departs from this world victorious, and returns to the Father in silence. Henceforth the glorious Lord can be seen and heard only by the eyes and ears of faith. Because of his departure, he is able to petition the Father and with him to send the gift of his Spirit.⁹

The Spirit of Christ who dwells in us, and with whom Jesus and the Father are present in us, is the source of our communion with God in silence. The same Spirit recalls to our minds the teachings of the silent Word; because 'we do not know how to pray as we ought, . . . the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'.¹⁰ The Spirit leads us to Jesus, who accompanies us in prayer, work, rest, and sacrifice along our pilgrimage to the eternal silence of the Father, from whom he came and to whom he returned for our sake.

¹ Jn 17. ² Mk 14, 32-42; Mt 26, 36-46; Lk 22, 39-46.

³ Mk 15, 34; Mt 27, 46; Lk 23, 34, 46. ⁴ Jn 16, 32.

⁶ Mk 15, 37; Mt 27, 36. ⁷ Lk 23, 46. ⁸ Jn 19, 30.

⁹ Jn 14, 16-17, 26; 15, 26; 16, 7. ¹⁰ Rom 8, 26.

⁵ Isai 53, 7.