**#4 The value of silence 27 March**

*‘Now is the moment for prayer,*

*leave your speaking,*

*your doing,*

*your thinking,*

*for this one thing, prayer,*

*wait,*

*your heart stilled upon God,*

*waiting,*

*stilled,*

*is the prayer’* *(from St Mary’s Abbey, West Malling in England)*

Let’s look at two articles, one from Taizé and the second from St George’s Anglican Church in Paris

**Taizé** **The value of silence**

Three times a day, everything on the hill of Taizé stops: the work, the Bible studies, the discussions. The bells call everyone to church for prayer. Hundreds or even thousands of mainly young people from all over the world pray and sing together with the brothers of the community. Scripture is read in several languages. In the middle of each common prayer, there is a long period of silence, a unique moment for meeting with God.

**Silence and prayer**

If we take as our guide the oldest prayer book, the biblical Psalms, we note two main forms of prayer. One is a lament and cry for help. The other is thanksgiving and praise to God. On a more hidden level, there is a third kind of prayer, without demands or explicit expression of praise. In Psalm 131 for instance, there is nothing but quietness and confidence: "I have calmed and quieted my soul … hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore."

At times prayer becomes silent. Peaceful communion with God can do without words, maybe not even thoughts.

How is it possible to reach inner silence? Sometimes we are apparently silent, and yet we have great discussions within, struggling with imaginary partners or with ourselves. Calming our souls requires a kind of simplicity: "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me." Silence means recognising that my worries can’t do much. Silence means leaving to God what is beyond my reach and capacity. A moment of silence, even very short, is like a holy stop, a sabbatical rest, a truce of worries.

The turmoil of our thoughts can be compared to the storm that struck the disciples’ boat on the Sea of Galilee while Jesus was sleeping. Like them, we may be helpless, full of anxiety, and incapable of calming ourselves. But Christ is able to come to our help as well. As he rebuked the wind and the sea and "there was a great calm", he can also quiet our heart when it is agitated by fears and worries (Mark 4).
Remaining silent, we trust and hope in God. One psalm suggests that silence is even a form of praise. We are used to reading at the beginning of Psalm 65: "Praise is due to you, O God". This translation follows the Greek text, but actually the Hebrew text printed in most Bibles reads: "Silence is praise to you, O God". When words and thoughts come to an end, God is praised in silent wonder and admiration.

**The Word of God: thunder and silence**

At Sinai, God spoke to Moses and the Israelites. Thunder and lightning and an ever-louder sound of a trumpet preceded and accompanied the Word of God (Exodus 19). Centuries later, the prophet Elijah returned to the same mountain of God. There he experienced storm and earthquake and fire as his ancestors did, and he was ready to listen to God speaking in the thunder. But the Lord was not in any of the familiar mighty phenomena. When all the noise was over, Elijah heard "a sound of sheer silence", and God spoke to him (1 Kings 19).

Does God speak with a loud voice or in a breath of silence? Should we take as example the people gathered at Sinai or the prophet Elijah? This might be a wrong alternative. Loud words certainly make themselves heard; they are impressive. But we also know that they hardly touch the hearts. They are resisted rather than welcomed. Elijah’s experience shows that God does not want to impress, but to be understood and accepted. God chose "a sound of sheer silence" in order to speak. This is a paradox:

**God is silent and yet speaking**

When God’s word becomes "a sound of sheer silence", it is more efficient than ever to change our hearts. The heavy storm on Mount Sinai was splitting rocks, but God’s silent word is able to break open human hearts of stone. For Elijah himself the sudden silence was probably more fearsome than the storm and thunder. The loud and mighty manifestations of God were somehow familiar to him. God’s silence is disconcerting, so very different from all Elijah knew before.

Silence makes us ready for a new meeting with God. In silence, God’s word can reach the hidden corners of our hearts. In silence, it proves to be "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit" (Hebrews 4:12). In silence, we stop hiding before God, and the light of Christ can reach and heal and transform even what we are ashamed of.

**Silence and love**

Christ says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). We need silence in order to welcome these words and put them into practice. When we are agitated and restless, we have so many arguments and reasons not to forgive and not to love too easily. But when we "have calmed and quieted our soul", these reasons turn out to be quite insignificant. Maybe we sometimes avoid silence, preferring whatever noise, words or distraction, because inner peace is a risky thing: it makes us empty and poor, disintegrates bitterness and leads us to the gift of ourselves. Silent and poor, our hearts are overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, filled with an unconditional love. Silence is a humble yet secure path to loving.

*(https://www.taize.fr/en\_article12.html)*

**The Jesus Prayer**   Is an ancient Christian prayer practice dating back to at least the sixth century. The Way of the Pilgrim recounts the prayer through the experience of an Orthodox pilgrim, but it has been rediscovered as a prayer of the heart and is a good example of ‘praying without ceasing’  (1 Thess. 5:17.) The Jesus prayer is an attempt to pray constantly.

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,**  **have mercy on me.**

“ **Don’t rush** "

Do not count how many times you have prayed the prayer. If you are using a prayer rope, you will become aware, but it is not necessary. What is important is to pray the prayer well.

**Be careful with your breathing**

You may have read that one can unite your breath with the prayer: it can be a help, and it can be a hindrance as well. If you concentrate on your breathing, you can hyperventilate, a disadvantage. This in turn will change the way you feel. Do not feel compelled to unite your breath to the prayer.

**You are praying to the Person**

The Jesus Prayer is addressed to Christ. It is not a way to relax nor a mantra. The purpose of the Jesus Prayer is to pray personally to Christ.

**Don’t imagine things as you pray the Jesus Prayer**

It is important not to visualise during the Jesus Prayer. As surprising as this may sound, don’t even imagine Christ. Visualisation is not part of prayer. That’s not to say that we don’t visualise during prayer, just don’t plan or intend to visualise. Christ is beyond any image you can bring up. He is still a person.

**Don’t expect instant quiet**

People often experience more noise than is expected. It is wonderful to enter into the heart. We must recognise though, that while the heart is an inner paradise, it is an injured and damaged inner paradise, and it is full of noise. To take note of this noise is not a bad thing. We need to confront this noise without discouragement. Keep praying, the noise level will come down over time.

**Understand that the heart is competent to pray and wounded.**

This is hard for us to grasp. We have sins and passions that come out of the heart; it is not fully functional, and we feel this when we pray. At the same time, the heart was made by God to have direct, unmediated communion with Him. We need to keep in mind that while our hearts are wounded, they are created for prayer.

**Know that prayer is a grace and also a work**

We need to ask the Holy Spirit for help when we pray. Since our baptism, we are trying to draw our prayer towards His prayer within us. It is hard work to fight distraction, the thoughts and energies that appear not only instantly but even multiplied when we begin to pray. And God gives us grace so that it is balanced with our work. We realise that any sweetness we experience in prayer is all due to His grace.

**Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you to silence**

If after some time with the Jesus Prayer you believe that the Holy Spirit is leading you to a deeper place where the prayer seems to disappear, then go. The deeper place has no words. St Isaac the Syrian wrote that silence is the language of the world to come. It is a loaded silence. It is fruitful, full of communication, but it is non-verbal, non-discursive. The Fathers of the Church call it pure prayer; no word, no image. If you are drawn to that type of prayer by Christ, then go with Him. We ought not to be disappointed if pure prayer does not come often. We pray out of obedience and out of love because we need to. “

*(Advice from an Orthodox priest quoted by St George’s Anglican Church, Paris)*