

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE

A SERMON BY LESLIE D. WEATHERHEAD

**I want to show you three ways in which silence is significant.** I shall ask you to note first the significance of silence in the hour of the soul's exaltation; second, the significance of silence in the hour of the soul's grief; and, third, the significance of silence in the hour of the soul's refusal to come to grips with reality.

I think the hour that stands out most in my memory of my last summer holiday was an hour of silence. I was staying at Jordans in Buckinghamshire, that lovely, secluded Quaker settlement, with its old-world garden, its ancient barn built from the timbers of the "Mayflower," and its sense of quietude. It always seems like Sunday afternoon at Jordans.

One September morning I got up at a quarter to seven, walked through the kitchen garden, up through the orchard where the owls were still crying, through a gate, and into a meadow. But not only into a meadow, into a great silence. It was in the meadow that I met God. The ground was so drenched with dew that it looked as if it were covered with hoar frost. The sun was peeping over the horizon, throwing long shadows upon the grass. It was an hour of bewitching loveliness. Magic was in the air and awe in my heart. I had that strange impression, which probably you have had many times, that I was being allowed to be present just as God had concluded the creation of the world, that I was seeing the world all new and fresh from his hand. There was a solemn hush which seemed to fall over the whole field and everything in it.

In a way it was a strange experience. You don't *plan* such hours of insight when you go for a summer holiday. Yet at the end of that holiday, having done perhaps all the things you planned to do, you realize the thing that stands out most is an hour of silence when the soul was caught up in rapturous worship and allowed to behold part of the beauty of God. You know that God was near, that he was speaking to you, that he brought you to that hour and to that place, in order to say things to you in the silence that otherwise you would not have stayed to hear.

I had a similar experience some years ago after preaching in Lincoln. I didn't know who was going to be my host, but after the meeting, which was very hoiy, very noisy, and very uncomfortable, a simplehearted farmer came up, almost

shyly, and said that he was to be my host. He apologized for not having a car. If only he could have known how my heart exulted as we bowled through the narrow lanes in a gig. I felt like a child in fairyland. The gig lamps lighted the chestnut haunches of the mare, threw strange, thrilling shadows on the hedgerows and the lower branches of the trees, and frightened here and there a chattering blackbird on its roost. We drew up with a glorious clatter of hoofs on the cobbles of a farmyard. I felt it had all happened before, perhaps a hundred years ago. One has that feeling sometimes. Men shouted and ran to the unharnessing, and then supper followed in a huge kitchen with a mighty log fire. Hams hung from the ceiling. Dogs pushed their noses into your hand in friendly welcome. The kettle sang on the hearth. A great ginger cat sprawled on an oak settee in the chimney corner. We sat down to a white wood table scrubbed as clean and spotless as linen could be. Then followed pipes and talk and a prayer together, and then the never-to-be-forgotten experience. I was led to a bedroom filled with moonlight and the fragrance of lavender sheets. The bedroom window was thrown up, and when I was alone, I knelt at the open window, and the sound that thrilled me was the sound of a very distant train. Chug, chug, chug ... then a lot of quick chugs together. It sounds foolish to say that I was thrilled by the sound of a train, however far off. But the fact is that sounds of that nature interpret the silence. They alone make one apprehend how utterly still and quiet is the night. The silent majesty of that moonlight night, lying upon the hushed fields like the supernatural glory of God, needed some gentle sound to interpret and emphasize it. Then the second interpreting sound - also far away - a village clock striking twelve. I shall never forget that night. I felt so wrapped in the presence of God that I didn't want to lose it in sleep.

I felt that I understood a little better that strange experience of Elijah. After the wind and the earthquake and fire he heard "a still small voice," or if we interpret the original more literally - and you will find the words in the margin of the Revised Version - "a sound of gentle stillness." The sound interpreted the silence. Let us note, then, in the first place how often the hour of the soul's exaltation is an hour of silence.

Some words of Pascal come to the mind in this regard. "All the evils of life," he said, "have fallen upon us because men will not sit alone quietly in a room." Such a statement sounds remote from the busy planning of our minds and the doing of our hands and the running of our feet, but the more I think about it the more I think it is true. Is not the truth of the matter that we live at such a speed and our lives are so rushed and hectic that God has very

little chance with us? He cannot make himself heard above the bustle and the noise. And I know that I need it to be said to me, therefore I dare think you may need it to be said to you, that, when we are engaged on the very work of God himself, we are so hurried and rushed that, as it were, we are closed down to all other stations, open only on one wave length, that of our own concerns, and therefore insensitive and unreceptive to his voice.

If you agree that the soul's hour of exaltation is an hour of silence, try to receive the thought that therefore the time of silence is most likely to produce the soul's exaltation. I will not at this point go into all the psychology that lies behind that claim, but I am certain it is true. We notice and take advantage of this psychological truth in many ways. If rest is marked by relaxation, then to achieve a relaxed state will often bring the desired rest. One is glad to find that even the busy Paul has a word to those eager Thessalonians: "Study to be quiet." And we need that quiet not that we may think more positively, whipping our mind to activity, or do more and more, spurring our will to greater effort, but that we may, in quiescent relaxation of mind, receive and commune.

I find a clue in the behavior of others which helps me to understand my own needs in this matter. There are hours of exaltation when the silence of the soul is carelessly broken into pieces by the noisy burglary of one's peace of mind and the treasures of the silent hour on the part of someone else. If another can rob me of the harvest of the silent hour by some vulgar remark, how often do I rob myself and spoil a silence which God could use, by vulgarly and unnecessarily breaking into it with some petty and unimportant detail?

How exquisitely this kind of outrage is described by Rupert Brooke! I cannot spoil the lovely poem by quoting a small part of it. Listen to this:

Safe in the magic of my woods  
I lay, and watched the dying light.  
Faint in the pale high solitudes,  
And washed with rain and veiled by night.

Silver and blue and green were showing.  
And the dark woods grew darker still;  
And birds were hushed; and peace was growing;  
And quietness crept up the hill;

And no wind was blowing

And I knew  
That this was the hour of knowing,  
And the night and the woods and you  
Were one together, and I should find  
Soon in the silence the hidden key  
Of all that had hurt and puzzled me-  
Why you were you, and the night was kind,  
And the woods were part of the heart of me.

And there I waited breathlessly,  
Alone; and slowly the holy three,  
The three that I loved, together grew  
One, in the hour of knowing,  
Night, and the woods, and you-

And suddenly  
There was an uproar in my woods,

The noise of a fool in mock distress,  
Crashing and laughing and blindly going,  
Of ignorant feet and a swishing dress,  
And a Voice profaning the solitudes.  
The spell was broken, the key denied me.  
And at length your flat, clear voice beside me  
Mouthed cheerful clear flat platitudes.

You came and quacked beside me in the wood.  
You said, "The view from here is very good!"  
You said, "It's nice to be alone a bit!"  
And, "How the days are drawing out!" you said.  
You said, "The sunset's pretty, isn't it?"

By God! I wish - I wish that you were dead!

How significant silence can be! Of such a silence Wordsworth wrote, "I made no vows, but vows were made for me." And the praying of Jesus night after night amid the silent, lonely hills that rise from the Galilean lake would not, I feel sure, be full of wordy petition, but of the sharing of a love-interpreted silence.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!  
O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
The silence of eternity,  
Interpreted by love!

"He went up into the mountain apart to pray: and when evening was come, he was there alone."

Note, secondly, the significance of silence in the hour of the soul's grief. What will you do if grief assails you? Will you rush into activity! Will you try to fill your mind with other thoughts? Will you plunge yourself into the tumult of life? Will you seek in the whirl and rush of both duty and pleasure to dull your aching heart?

I am not minimizing the value of activity. Again and again to get on with the next job is the best medicine you could use. But, however severe the disease, no patient can go on drinking medicine all the time, and, however great our grief, activity must come to an end, and then there is silence which only practice beforehand can help us to use in the hour of sorrow. Without such practice the silence may be full of bitter rebellion, bleak remorse, bitter cynicism. For the mind practiced in the use of silence, activity will accomplish something, but an interpreted silence will accomplish more.

Jesus, I think, must have been very fond of John the Baptist, his cousin. Save the sons of the kingdom, said Jesus, "among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist." John was murdered to please a nautch girl, and the disciples came and told Jesus. He did not sit down and talk to them. He did not preach a sermon on the nature of suffering or the place of evil and death in the world. He said, "Let us go out into a desert place and be alone." He knew the significance of silence in the hour of grief.

There is a clue for us again in the intuitive way we try to help others in their hour of grief. Only the fool intrudes with words. We seem to realize for others that in their hour of grief if they possess spiritual resources, they will turn to them. If they don't possess them it isn't the time to press them. They must in fact be discovered later when the mind is not so disturbed. No one wants explanations when his heart is broken. He wants the healing silence of God. Even if Christ in the flesh could be present in an hour of grief, I think men would ask him nothing, but in his presence they would find everything. There

would be nothing left to ask. He must be so real to us that in the hour of grief we can turn to him and find the healing of a love-interpreted silence in his presence. We cannot receive more than that silent friendship. We don't need more.

I never realized how dreadfully irrelevant and almost vulgar words could be in the hour of grief until an experience befell me in a home where a little girl dearly loved one particular doll. The doll was broken by the carelessness of a person who turned on the little child and said, in words that seemed to sear one's brain as they were spoken, "I'll buy you another." A child's grief is so real and so terrible that it seemed as bad as saying to a mother who has lost her child, "Well, you have other children," or to a man who lost his dearest friend, "Well, you have other friends." No newly bought doll, however expensive and marvelous, could make up for that dear treasure on whom love had been so lavished that the very paint had been kissed off its face. There it lay in cruel pieces, and nothing could replace it or make up the sense of loss. With the sublime dignity and the spiritual insight that made Jesus put a little child in the midst of men, this little girl looked up into her mother's eyes and said, "Don't talk about it, please, Mummy." She wanted only to be quiet. The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and healing for that heart is silence.

So, in the hour of his men's overwhelming sorrow, he who had insight into human grief did not fill the last hours with advice or, reiterated commands or repeated lessons, but simply said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

But look lastly at the significance of silence in the hour of the soul's refusal to come to grips with reality. One of the most awful states of soul into which man can fall is a condition in which no words can do any good. "Come down from the cross," they cried. "Let the Christ ... now come down from the cross, that we may see and believe." But there was no answer. Only silence. Pilate said unto him, "Whence art thou?" And Jesus gave him no answer. Herod questioned him in many words, "but he answered him nothing." Is there another occasion in history or in literature where silence plays such a significant part as in the scene in Herod's palace when the Master stood before him? Says Luke: "Herod with his soldiers set him at nought, and mocked him, and arraying him in gorgeous apparel sent him back to Pilate." And Herod and Pilate, formerly enemies, became friends over the body of Jesus.

I see in imagination Herod with Christ before him, secretly feeling uncomfortable, as sensual people always do in the presence of goodness,

and trying to maintain "face" by breaking Christ's silence. Herod's dirty jests and derisive laughter are directed at the Master. If he had answered, his answers would have been made the basis of more jesting. "But he answered him nothing." The bawdy jokes and unclean innuendoes made no impression at all. It must have been like watching the foul scum of a stagnant pool fall away from the unstainable white breast of a silent swan, who, with proud head and lovely curved neck and dignified poise, sits enthroned on waters whose filth she scarcely deigns to notice. Why did he not reply? Because in the mood in which his tormenters were, there was nothing to be said. He would only have increased their sin by providing it with further occasion for its foul expression.

O my soul, bring not down upon thyself the silence of Jesus! Better his cry of woe such as the Pharisee heard; better his word of appeal such as the sinner heard; better his cry of rebuke such as the disciple heard. It is a terrible indication of a state of soul when Jesus says nothing. "Be not silent unto me, O God," cried the psalmist, "lest if thou be silent unto me, I become like them that go down into the pit," into the final darkness, into the agelong night.

There are two ways of getting through life, and I think we must decide which we shall follow. Some people try one way and some another. The first way is to stop thinking. The second way is to stop and think. A great many people are trying the first way. They rush from this to that. They fill up every hour. They dare not be alone. They give God no chance. They are never silent, never quiet, never utterly relaxed, receptive, submissive, waiting. This method always fails because, of course, one cannot maintain the pace. One cannot travel fast enough. Something happens that one did not engineer, could not foresee, and cannot forestall. Suddenly God *makes* a silence in their lives, or uses one that illness makes, and then they are afraid. Silence is so strange to them. They have never made it their friend and never made it the occasion of realizing the healing friendship of God.

There is a much better way. It is that, from time to time, we should stop and think. I am not going to say to you, "Keep an hour's quiet time every morning before breakfast." If I said that, you would do nothing about it at all and tell yourself that I was talking nonsense and could not possibly understand just how busy you are. But do let me remind you that the old Hebrew word "Sabbath" comes from a root which means "stop doing what you are doing." So may I suggest that once a week, perhaps every Sunday evening, or whichever time you yourself decide, in addition to daily

prayers, you should give yourself half an hour - if that is all you can spare - and be alone, quiet, silent, listening, and looking? Perhaps he will say to you something in such a silence that will make that half an hour the supreme experience, not of a week, but of a lifetime. Remember how significant silence is in the hour of the soul's exaltation. So, give your soul the occasion of such exaltation by arranging a time of silence for it. Remember that in such a silence he can do something for you so that the hour of grief - and grief must come at some time to us all - may be an hour in which you can lay hold of life's resources, be strong to endure, and able to turn your hurt to the healing of others as well as yourself. And, lest you ever become as those who silence Christ himself by trifling with life, to whom God is remote and unreal, for whom even the eternal and lovely things are cold and dead, stop and think from time to time. Look life in the face. "Study to be quiet." Make time listen. You may miss him in the wind, the storm, the fire. But in an interpreted silence you will find him and make him your friend. There is only one man whom nothing can finally overwhelm. He the man who has God for his friend.

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