

Silence, suffering, and identity

Timothy Scott, Bendigo, 2011

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‘One word spake the father, which Word was His Son, and this Word He speaks ever in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.’ (St John of the Cross)

‘To have understood that nothing is gained by questioning about the Principle, but that it is to be contemplated in silence, this is what is called having obtained the Great Result.’ (Chuang-tse)

‘If you ask him: “What is silence?” he will answer: “It is the Great Mystery!” “The holy silence is His voice!”’ (Ohiyesa)

‘Be silent that the lord who gave thee language may speak.’ (*Dīwāni*, Shamsi Tabriz)

Prayer is communication with God; but not all communication is obviously two way. The silence one may be met with during prayer can feel like a great void, a chasm between oneself and a remote God. Worse, it can feel like a confirmation of the nagging doubt that maybe there really is nothing “out there” to answer. Yet this is to misunderstand silence. The silence one faces in prayer may be said to express a greater truth than were God to manifest into our presence like a genie and grant our prayers like wishes.

The most vital thing we can pray for is to come closer to knowing God. Silence is a very real response that leads us to the truth that God is beyond words, beyond any of the limitations we might place on the divine in calling God this or that, Him or Her, Immanent or Transcendent. Even to call God “good” is in the end a limitation; it is a way for us to understand. But God is infinitely beyond questions of good and evil. God is beyond any question of individual prejudice, and it is

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this that means the Divine can be truly intimate and personal with everyone.

God is beyond words and thus answers with silence. For those of us who want answers in our language this silence is deafening and terrifying. For those who are willing to come to God on His terms, this silence is the sound of His infinite and eternal Presence and Love. ‘Silence’ says Swami Sivananda, ‘is the language of God: it is also the language of the heart.’ Underlying the clamour of our world, God’s silence is always there. It is in meeting this silence that we can finally hear it. As Angelus Silesius remarks, ‘God is so present everywhere that one cannot speak: Thus thou wilt praise Him better through silence.’ For those with “ears to hear,” silence is the eternally proclaimed word of God.

What is it to have “ears that hear”? It is to come to God on His terms. In praying to silence—even when full of doubt and fear—one sacrifices the desires of the ego and opens oneself to the will of God. We show our willingness to do this when we come to a particular place of worship that might be hard to get to, at a time that might be inconvenient, to hear a reading or a teaching that may seem outdated and irrelevant; to pray to a silence that may seem empty and cold. Still we come, rather than demanding that God come to us. Of course God is already with us—‘closer to us than our jugular vein’ as the Qur’an tells us—still it is our act it is our act, our sacrifice, that gives us eyes to see His Presence and ears to hear His silence Word.

What is it to know the unfailing Presence of God? The Judeo-Christian God is described as a “good shepherd.” He cares for his flock while they feed and wander aimlessly, safe and, most often, unaware in this care. The sheep do not find their own pastures; they do not fend off the wolves; they do not grow their own feed for times of drought. All this is done for them by the shepherd, out of His love for his sheep. Sheep, of course, aren’t known for their intelligence. Though their life is secure they wander astray to find their own food. They wander and get lost. It is the shepherd who rescues them and brings them back.

The message of the Good Shepherd story is that of the unfailing and constant love of the shepherd, who will lay down His life for his sheep. As the psalmist tells us: ‘... his faithful love is strong and His constancy never-ending.’ It is this ever-present Love, which allows the sheep—even those who stray—the opportunity for absolute trust in their well

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being. Yet one may only be said to “trust” when one realises the steadfastness of the shepherd. The presence of the shepherd is with us even when we are astray; it is we who do not realise it. The Love of God is with us in our darkest times, but it is our darkness that stops us from seeing that we are not alone. ‘The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it.’

In the Semitic traditions the divine Light and the divine Sound are synonymous. This is epitomized in the *Fiat Lux* of Genesis. We find this in the words of Jalāl al-Din Rūmī when he describes creation thus: ‘... when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’ The brightness of the divine Light is blinding; pure Light underpins all vision but we may only see through colours. The volume of the divine Sound is deafening; incomprehensible in itself, it is the empty sheet upon which the symphony of the world’s music is written. We fear the divine Silence, for how are we to answer it? So we run away, we go astray. But we are not forsaken, the shepherd comes to rescue us, His love is unfailing, the call of His voice never ceases.

How can one answer this Voice? How can one answer God? Simply, by being as God is. ‘Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ Like is known by like. In the *Mundaka Upanisad* we are told: ‘Anyone who knows that supreme Brahman becomes Brahman indeed.’ In the story of the Good Shepherd Christ declares, ‘I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the father.’ How does the Son know the Father? By identity. For ‘The Father and I are one’ (John10:30). We must be like God and to do this we must be like Christ, who, as Peter tells us, left ‘an example for you to follow in his steps.’ This, however, is a hard example, an example of “undeserved punishment,” of suffering and silence in the face of insults and threats: the example of the Cross.

There is merit if, in “stretching forward” (*epektasis*) towards God, one endures the pains of undeserved punishment. This “merit” is the knowledge of God, which comes with identification. It is a merit for it is our very purpose. It is our duty and it is our reward. For to know God is to be as God is. The “undeserved punishment” is the “darkness” of ignorance wherein this world exists. It is the “suffering” of the shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep; suffering born from his love for the sheep that has gone astray in the darkness.

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For Christians Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. His suffering on the Cross was only outwardly the suffering of nails piercing flesh. His deeper suffering burst His heart with His love for his fellow man: 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing.' The good shepherd does not fear the attack of the wolf but through His bruises he brings back the lost sheep on the day of clouds and darkness.

If we are to be shepherds we must suffer out of love for our neighbour. We suffer because we realise that they are really not other than us. The Father and I are one. My neighbour and I are one. This is the key to the bodhisattvic ideal in Buddhism. In Christianity it is summed up in two words: 'Jesus wept.'

God suffers and His cry fills the void with such a super abundance of Sound that all we hear is silence. This is creation. How might we respond? By meeting silence with silence. By accepting our fears and doubts and letting these wash over us and into the void. By trusting in the ever-present Love of God. When we can not see the shepherd through the darkness of our making, when we can not hear Him but are met by silence, then we must trust and have faith. When in despair, when we don't know what to do and all our answers have dried up, then this is good. This is the beginning of letting go of our wilful going astray, letting go of the illusion of looking after our selves. 'I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it,' declares God. So we must step forward into the Silence and Darkness. Be led like a blind person, trusting in our guide. Facing the darkness and silence of the Cross, Jesus admitted his own fear. But he did not desert his flock like a hired man. He placed his trust in his Father. 'Let your will be done, not mine.'