

Home Retreat 2: *Silence*

For anyone who does not know me, my name is Fr Cedd. On behalf of Fr Abbot and the Monastic Community here, I would like to welcome you all to the Grange at Ampleforth for this second Home Retreat during these weeks of Lockdown. Last week's theme, addressed by Fr Kevin, was 'Listen, and live'. This week, I thought we could look at a very closely related theme: the theme of silence. Fr Kevin's invitation was that we should spend some time in our lives *listening*; our exploration of today's theme should help us to understand what we need to do if our listening is going to help us to *hear*.

Silence is one of the things that people tend to notice first about a monastery, perhaps especially at this time of lockdown, when things are *very* quiet. There are all sorts of monastic orders in the Catholic Church alone – the Cistercians, the Trappists, the Carthusians, the Camaldolese, the Carmelites, even our own Benedictines and so on – and yet there are some things which are common to all of these orders, despite the (sometimes great) differences between them. An understanding of the importance of silence is one of these things that we all have in common.

I suppose that one of the reasons that silence is such a striking thing is that it seems to be a rarer and rarer commodity in our modern world, especially in the west; they don't seem to be making it like they used to. There is a lot of noise and activity in our lives today, in a way which might not even have been as true, say, 50 years ago. (I don't really know about 50 years ago, but I can just about remember nearly 40 years ago, and it was certainly quieter!).

I say, 'noise and activity', and we might ask why it is that there is so much noise – and potential for noise – and activity – and potential for activity! – in our modern world. We could talk about developments in technology and so on – smart phones, iPods (possibly a bit outmoded now!), Tablets and so on. But that is really only half of the story; even if we accept all that. we would then need to ask why these things exist. And the answer is, probably, because we want them – we want a certain amount of noise and distraction. Now I am not saying that all such distraction is always wrong; I am a great lover of music myself, for example, and was a voracious listener before I joined the monastery. But we have to admit that – at least sometimes – we can have a tendency to try to fill every second of the day with some sort of

distraction, at least when we are not actively employed with some task that needs our full concentration. We might poke about a bit and ask why that is.

Probably at least one answer – some of the time – is that we are frightened of silence. Maybe that sounds a bit ridiculous, but perhaps it is not surprising. I wonder whether you remember the *Rosetta* project, which involved landing a space craft on a (relatively) nearby comet. I remember at the same time thinking about Voyager 1, an American spacecraft that has now gone out beyond the confines of our solar system. Both things got me thinking about ‘space’, and the nothingness of it: the utter silence and emptiness of it all. And this made me shudder slightly. So perhaps it is not surprising – and certainly not ridiculous – that we are afraid of silence. We are – perhaps rightly – afraid of being confronted with nothingness, emptiness, within and without. I remember an acquaintance of mine coming to my simple profession, and – he was quite a forthright and quite ambitious soul – asking what people who joined monasteries were running away from. Well, he was supposed to be staying the whole weekend (with my other friends), but by 2 hours after the profession on the Saturday afternoon, he was in a taxi speeding up Snake Drive, on the way back to London. I didn’t like to put his own question to him, but I think it was partly the silence and space that got to him. And Monks are just as susceptible to this sort of thing. In a very amusing bit of one of his sermons, St Aelred of Rievaulx talks about monks who even end up seeking out the Abbot to ask some nonsense permission or other, because even that little titbit of conversation is preferable to enduring silence and their own company.

But what if, rather than emptiness and nothingness, there is actually something in silence – or better, Someone? In his recent book on monastic spirituality, *Truly Seeking God*, Bernardo Bonowitz OCSO talks in a short chapter on silence about what it was that brought a potential monk to the monastery. He says:

At a particular time, he himself visited the monastery, or was on retreat there, or maybe at some point had done some lone mountaineering, or was a solitary patient in a hospital ward, and in that moment, when for a brief time his own voice stopped dominating the scene, rather than experience a sort of neutral void, he heard someone. Did he hear words, human words? Very probably not, although at times God does make his presence felt by means of human words. He heard that someone was there, present, and, because of the joy, love, devotion that that this ‘hearing’ brought about, he knew that this Someone was God.

This is an important point. We do not embrace silence as monks – as whoever we are – because we are spiritual superathletes, and we need to show that we can out-silence our competitors in the race, to show our prowess. No, it is not just an ascetic feat. We embrace silence (and the solitude that it sometimes needs) because we want to give our attention not to some distraction or other, but to God; because we want to hear, not the voice of a singer in some music or a debater in radio programme or whatever, but the voice of God. Silence is important, then, but only as a means to an end – and what an end.

There used to be an optional version of a Collect for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time in the old translation of the Missal, which went: ‘Father, let the light of your truth guide us to your kingdom through a world filled with lights contrary to your own.’ We might do violence to that prayer for our own purposes. We want God to let his Word of truth guide us to his kingdom, through a world filled with voices contrary to his own. That is one reason why we keep silence, and why – as monks certainly, but probably also in other vocations too, as far as is reasonable and possible – we look for some periods in the day, when we can have the solitude that makes that sort of silence a possibility.

One of my great spiritual ‘pin-ups’ is the twelfth Century Cistercian Father, Blessed Guerric of Igny (feast day on the 19th August). I liked what he had to say about silence and solitude so much that I had it on the inside front cover of my Solemn Profession booklet. He loves the idea of the ‘voice crying in the wilderness’; he is in Advent, and talking about St John the Baptist, of course. But he says that even before John, ‘the solitude had always been dearly loved by the holiest of the prophets as a place where they could listen to the Holy Spirit’. Solitude: not for avoiding people that annoy us, or make demands on us, or whatever, but a place, a circumstance where we can really listen to – and hear – the Holy Spirit speaking to us, speaking in us. He goes on. He is speaking about the monastery, but he might as well be talking about our families and so on too:

By the wonderful favour of God’s loving care, in this solitude of ours we have the peace of solitude and yet we do not lack the consolation and comfort of holy companionship. It is possible for each of us to sit alone and be silent, because we have no one to disturb us with interruptions, and yet it cannot be said of us: ‘Woe to him who is alone, since he has nobody to console him, or if he should fall has none to lift him up.’ We are surrounded by companions, yet we are not in a crowd. We live as it were in a city, yet we have to contend with no tumult, so that the voice of one crying in the wilderness can be heard by us, provided only that we have interior silence to

correspond to the exterior silence that surrounds us.... And now if the depths of your soul were to keep a quiet silence, the all-powerful Word would flow secretly into you from the Father's throne. Happy then is the man who has so fled the world's tumult, who has so withdrawn into the solitude and secrecy of interior peace that he can hear not only the Voice of the Word but the Word himself: not John, but Jesus.

I think there is something very attractive about passages like this from writers (perhaps particularly monastic writers, but then, I am a monk!) who are speaking from experience; who can convince us that the promise they are making to us (that if we embrace silence, we will encounter the One who dwells there), is true. Silence is of course not always easy, but I think that this sort of promise, coming from the pen of one who has experienced the reward for staying with silence, can make it at least seem appealing – worth a try, if nothing else.

I think that is probably enough from me. It is not the last word on silence by any means, but really simply a way of opening the topic up a bit, so that we can reflect on it more in the course of the day.

Perhaps some questions that you could think about:

- Is silence a part of your daily routine at the moment?
- If so, how do you experience it? If not, why do you think that is?
- Do you think you (like me!) are guilty of running away from silence, at least sometimes? Why do you think that is?

Perhaps more practically:

- What could you do to try and build a bit of silence into your daily routine, even if it is only 10 or 15 minutes? When would be the best time? Where would be the best place?

Thinking more about today, this day of retreat, perhaps you could set aside 10 or 15 minutes just to be silent, to listen. Try not to fill the silence with chatter! In case it is helpful, the printed version of this (available on the Abbey website in a few minutes) contains some scripture readings and other passages that you might find helpful to read, either before or after your period of silence, it is entirely up to you.

I hope that you have a blessed day, and you are invited to join the monastic community (via the Audio Live Streaming, also available on the Website) for any or all of the Divine Office, as you wish (1pm Midday office, 6pm Vespers, and perhaps a particularly strong invite to Compline at 8.15pm).

Passages to aid your reflection

1Kings19:9-13:

⁹And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Exodus 14:10-14:

¹⁰When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were in great fear. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD; ¹¹and they said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still."

Lamentations 3:22-26:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,^[a]
his mercies never come to an end;
²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
²⁴"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

Mark 1:35

³⁵ And in the morning, a great while before day, he [Jesus] rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.

Apocalypse 8:1

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Guerric of Igny, Fourth Advent Sermon:

By the wonderful favour of God's loving care, in this solitude of ours we have the peace of solitude and yet we do not lack the consolation and comfort of holy companionship. It is possible for each of us to sit alone and be silent, because we have no one to disturb us with interruptions, and yet it cannot be said of us: 'Woe to him who is alone, since he has nobody to console him, or if he should fall has none to lift him up.' We are surrounded by companions, yet we are not in a crowd. We live as it were in a city, yet we have to contend with no tumult, so that the voice of one crying in the wilderness can be heard by us, provided only that we have interior silence to correspond to the exterior silence that surrounds us. 'The words of the wise heard in quiet,' Solomon says, 'are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.' And now if the depths of your soul were to keep a quiet silence, the all-powerful Word would flow secretly into you from the Father's throne. Happy then is the man who has so fled the world's tumult, who has so withdrawn into the solitude and secrecy of interior peace that he can hear not only the Voice of the Word but the Word himself: not John, but Jesus.