



In this age of communication and technology, it's difficult to find 'silence'. Our culture is addicted to words, music, mobile phones and the constant beeping of social networking. Silence can make some uncomfortable and the response generally is to fill the space with noise of one kind or another. In the midst of so many words and so much communication, we are looking for summaries, for people to be brief, to learn to skim and scan and for messages to get to the point. We have heard more sermons and teachings than any other generation but still we try to squeeze in more. Perhaps we need to put the noise and input on hold for a while in order to experience some silence.

I have been enjoying some times of solitude and silence over the last few months. I guess it's been helped by having my wife travel to speak at "preschool in a suitcase" workshops all over the globe, travelling a lot myself, and on top of that being on a short sabbatical. I must say reflecting on it now, it's been a very beneficial time. I think I have always been a bit scared of silence but it's become a friend over this time.

As the three disciples joined Jesus on his mountain retreat, they heard three very simple but profound words from Father God referring to Jesus - "Listen to him." We seem to find this simple command so difficult. As busy leaders, there is a tendency towards selectively hearing our peers, our staff, our spouses and our children. Sadly, I think it is also true with regards to listening to the Lord? In our world of noise, activity and agenda filled days, where is there time to listen?

Benedict, in his rule of life, believed that accepting silence is the first step toward intimacy with God. God invites us into silence in order to begin to really hear him. Remember Elijah's trip to the mountain to meet with God. He became aware that God wasn't in the noisy storm, earthquake or fire. Only when he became silent did he hear the still, small voice of God. Silence creates an environment in which God can be heard and welcomed.

In order to come to a place of silence and experience God's presence, I have found it necessary to deal with the noise in my outer and inner life. I need to know how to allow that noise to either become a part of the background or to allow it to become transformational through the surfacing and dealing of those inner thoughts and feelings.

Solitude and silence don't always go together. We can be alone but not silent. For example, as I seek to spend time with the Lord, I move into my rhythm of worship and gratitude, various forms of prayer, meditation and journaling. For years I have done this but I have had to ask the question more recently, 'how often have I spent time in simple silence with the Lord?'

Silence the background noise: Being an introvert myself, I am familiar with the 'Silence of not talking' but if you are living in the city, there is an ambient noise of vehicles, machinery, factories, offices opening, trains and trams and people activity. We get used to those sounds over time. I used to live very close to a town clock that chimed every 15 minutes. It was amazingly that after just a few weeks, I didn't hear those chimes any longer. So we can enjoy

silence even in the city as we learn to let the noise go. I now live in the country which has its own background noises. For instance, we have a community of a hundred sparrows living in the palm tree next to our back door. Their conversation and singing in the morning and evening can be extremely loud. Then as we walk in the stillness of the night, there is a hum and buzz of insects and June bugs, but this kind of noise doesn't have to hurt our silence either.

Pray: Close your eyes. Now in your mind's eye, allow the noises you hear, to move away from you and see an image of Jesus coming closer. Now focus on him.

Silence any disturbances: My mind is easily distracted with random words, thoughts and pictures - a sudden memory or a concerning question that cuts across the silence. They come from nowhere and seek a place in our stillness but they too are to be put away for this moment.

Pray: *Palms up and palms down: Place your palms down on your lap as a symbolic indication of your desire to release the concerns you name to God. Turn your palms up to demonstrate your openness to receive what the Lord brings. Repeat palms down as you release another concern or attitude to the Lord. As you turn your palms up, receive from God. It can be useful to think of the opposite quality from God that you are releasing. e.g. release worry and receive trust; release frustration and receive calmness; release the pain of someone's situation and receive the healing touch of God for them; etc... Alternatively you may like to create an imaginary altar or perhaps a real one with small stones and symbolically place on it all the things that seek to rob you of your silence.*

Silence of the inner reminder and obsessor: When busy people stop, their minds usually carry on. The internal check list runs without being asked and it can be like ticker tape scrolling across their mind's inner screen - things to do, emails to write, calendar events to prepare. For me, it is helpful to just jot down what my mind is recalling in the silence, so I don't have to try and keep remembering all those important or not so important activities. We can also obsess about all kinds of different things and if we do, these too can rob us of silence. "I should just go over my presentation one more time, I should answer that call, text or Facebook bleep, I haven't finished that project, I just need to" It can be never ending and there is always an excuse not to give our spirit, soul and body some silence. As the famous you tube clip, "the psychologist" suggests – two words can be helpful: STOP IT! Those of us who are ultra responsible have to deal with this challenge. On strengthfinder I have "responsibility" up there in the top seven. I constantly feel responsible to follow through on issues and bring closure. I tell myself, 'If I don't do it, who will?'

Pray: *Have your phone or notebook ready to jot down anything that needs to be done later. Again, there needs to be a letting go and giving to God. Then a focusing on God to listen and receive.*

Silence the soul worrier: 'Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand.' If you are prone to worry, then follow the instructions above from Philippians 4 to come back to peace and silence. The 'what if this', 'what if that', 'you should have', 'you had better', can stop being a part of our lives as we choose to stop worrying and start to trust God for the right outcomes. What do we do to stop worrying? Perhaps the best thing to do is not to focus on what not to do, but to focus on placing those worries in the hands of God and trusting them to his care.

Pray: Hebrews 12:1 *“let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.”* In your prayers strip away those worries and burdens and give them to Jesus.

Sometimes doing something physical like taking a few deep breaths and imagining the worries going as we breath out can be helpful. Or imagine a river and releasing our worries to float away. Some of us are better worriers than others but the promise is there for us all. His peace is available for the receiving!

Be aware that the worries may return and the process may need to be repeated once more. I was given a wonderful gift a while ago of ‘noise reduction head phones.’ You slip them on your ears and then flip the switch and in an instant you are plunged into silence. It’s amazing. I love to use them when I am flying and all the background noise of the engines and the buzz of the cabin’s conversation disappears. I think the peace of God can come into our lives in just the same way. Give it all to God and flip the switch and we don't have to worry anymore – it’s all under God’s supervision. Easier said than done but Philippians 4 tells us, “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything.”

Silence the inner or outer pain: Sometimes when we stop all our activities, the aches and pains can surface? Physical and emotional pain can be so loud that it can hinder us being still, listening or enjoying any silence. I personally have found physical pain a difficult challenge with bouts of bad headaches over the years and I am aware I have it easy compared to so many who live with constant pain. Even here, there is an intimate place to whisper the name of Jesus and know his presence in the midst of suffering. Benedict spoke of ‘practicing active interior silence.’ In the silence, our soul finds a place to speak.

Some live with emotions on their sleeves, others discover them in the place of silence. Our TV screens have been filled with sadness, sorrow and grieving as we see the faces of refugees and the terrible atrocities from bomb attacks. There are emotional wounds and hurts that we all have to deal with in life. These are not to be swept under the carpet but listened to and worked through. In all these issues, the Holy Spirit is our comforter and paraclete who comes alongside us, to help us embrace the love of Jesus in our time of need and be still and silent in his arms. I am just leaving Australia as I write this letter, leaving our son & his wife and new grandchild behind. Living at a distance isn’t easy but this is the reality at the moment. I mustn’t let what I don't have, stop me from enjoying what I do have and that is the constant access to the Lord every moment of every day.

Pray: Hebrews 12:22 *“Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.”* Philippians 3:10 Paul says, *“I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death...”* There is a depth of intimacy to be discovered as we experience his presence in the midst of suffering. This may be the time the Lord desires to bring his healing touch – receive it.

It has taken us time to get here – this place of silence but its worth it. It is a sacred place. I hope you are able to come to silence quicker than I. I have been battling through on this discipline and am learning to put things to one side to enjoy the Lord’s peace. I begin with 10-15-20 minutes, it varies, but it's a start. I encourage you to do the same.

What this also raises is the need to set aside times of retreat where there is space to deal with all the issues arising in the silence. They can’t just be put to one side but need specific agenda time to work them through and learn from them. This is where a monthly retreat becomes

vital – space to focus on those issues that have risen to the surface and are crying out for some resolution and healing.

Listen to and receive God's presence. Become more aware of the God who will never leave you. Allow the silence to become loud. Put aside the feeling of pressure to do something, think something or be productive. God is wanting to be found in the silence. He so longs for us to receive his presence, his embrace, his comfort and love. It takes time to be comfortable with the silence but slowly we get to enjoy the God filled, peaceful presence. I encourage you again, to seek silence with God for at least ten minutes every day for a month and see what happens. You may not see immediate fruit but after a while you will recognise your spirit is becoming more whole.

Until next month – take some time to be still, silent and listen.

Stephe

A resource for this letter has been “Spiritual Disciplines Handbook” by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun