

The Role of Silence in the Spiritual Life

St. Thomas the Apostle Church

Peoria Heights, Illinois

March 14, 2017

Types of Silence

There are many reasons why a person would be silent. Some reasons are more positive than others.

- Because of a lack of knowledge
- Because of shame or embarrassment
- Because one is resting tranquilly at peace
- Because one is focused on a project or task
- Because one is engaged in deep thought
- Because one is carefully listening
- Because of the need for focused attention on that which is most important

Silence in Scripture

Silence as an expression of comfort for the afflicted

- Job's three friends set out to comfort him. When they saw him at a distance, they did not recognize him. They wept and tore their cloaks.
- Then they sat down with Job for seven days and seven nights in silence. They did not speak for they saw how great was his suffering (Job 2:11-13).

Silence in Scripture

The humble silence of awe before the Lord

- “Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have erred” (Job 6:24).
- “Job answered the LORD and said: ‘Look, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, I will not reply; twice, but I will do so no more’” (Job 40:3-5).
- “Job answered the LORD and said: ‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. I have spoken but did not understand; things too marvelous for me, which I did not know. By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes’” (Job 42:1-6).

Silence in Scripture

Shamed into silence when there is no response

In Ezekiel 16, the prophet recounts the way that Israel was adopted by God when she was a little girl, but how she spurned the Lord after she was captivated by her own beauty.

- “But I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were young; I will set up an everlasting covenant with you. Then you shall remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, those older and younger than you; I give them to you as daughters, but not by reason of your covenant. For I will re-establish my covenant with you, that you may know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never again open your mouth because of your disgrace, when I pardon you for all you have done” (Ez 16:60-63).

Silence in Scripture

Shamed into silence when there is no response

- “In the synagogue, Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come up here before us.’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?’ But they remained silent” (Mk 3:3-4).
- “Jesus and the disciples came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest” (Mk 9:33-34).

Silence in Scripture

Silence is active

- In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus took Peter, James, and John apart with him. He said “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.” He prayed “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.”
- When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
- Withdrawing a second time, he prayed again. Returning once more, he found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open. He prayed a third time. Returning, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand” (Mt 26:36-46).

Silence in Scripture

God is found in silence

- Elijah fled from King Ahab to Mt. Horeb. The Lord told Elijah that he would pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks, an earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was in none of these things. Then there was a soft quiet sound. When Elijah heard this, he hid his face in his cloak and stood at the entrance of the cave (1 Kg 19:11-13).
- Wisdom can remain silent in the discerning heart, but among fools she must make herself known. (Prov 14:33)

Silence in Scripture

God brings calm in times of adversity

- From the Psalms:

In their distress they cried to the LORD, who brought them out of their peril;
He hushed the storm to silence, the waves of the sea were stilled.

They rejoiced that the sea grew calm, that God brought them to the harbor they longed for. (Ps 107:28-30)

- From Lamentations:

The LORD is good to those who trust in him, to the one that seeks him;
It is good to hope in silence for the LORD's deliverance.

It is good for a person, when young, to bear the yoke,
To sit alone and in silence, when its weight lies heavy, (Lam 3:25-28)

Silence in Scripture

God rested in silence

- God spoke when creating the Heavens and the Earth:
 - Then God said: Let there be light.
 - Then God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters.
 - Then God said: Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin.
 - Then God said: Let the earth bring forth vegetation.
 - Then God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky.
 - Then God said: Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures.
 - Then God said: Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature.
 - Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.
- On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation (Gen 1:3-2:3).

The value of Silence in Scripture

Silence disposes us for prayer

- “At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him” (Mk 1:12-13).
- “Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ He told them, ‘Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come’” (Mk 1:35-38).
- “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words” (Mt 6:5-8).

The value of Silence in Scripture

Silence facilitates contemplation

- When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he questioned the announcement of John the Baptist. “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” Gabriel responded, “Now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time.” Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to emerge from the sanctuary (Lk 1:18-22).
- After the Baptist was born, Zechariah named him John. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people. He has raised up a horn for our salvation within the house of David his servant” (Lk 1:63-69).

The value of Silence in Scripture

Silence in Revelation

- When the seven seals are opened, the first four seals are greeted with the four horsemen of the apocalypse. After the fifth seal, the martyrs who have shed their blood call out for vengeance. After the sixth seal, there is an earthquake; the sun turns black; the moon turns blood red; and the stars fall from the heavens (Rev 6).
- “When he broke open the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw that the seven angels who stood before God were given seven trumpets. Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne” (Rev 8:1-3).
 - Silence can mark a divine manifestation, like the scene with Elijah.
 - Silence is observed during certain liturgical rites, especially incensation.
 - God’s magnificence is proclaimed in speech but even more profoundly in silence.

The value of Silence in Scripture

When should we keep silent and when should we speak?

- Jesus cured a leper, telling him, “See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere (Mk 1:40-45).
- Jesus cured the possessed man living among the tombs. When Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with him. But Jesus would not permit him but told him instead, “Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you” (Mk 5:18-19).

The value of Silence in Scripture

When should we keep silent and when should we speak?

- Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, “Lord, Son of David, have pity on us!” The crowd warned them to be silent, but they called out all the more (Mt 20:30-31).

The value of Silence in Scripture

When should we keep silent and when should we speak?

- After the Transfiguration, Jesus charged Peter, James and John not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant (Mk 9:8-10).
- After the resurrection, the Apostles proclaimed Jesus boldly. The Sanhedrin called the Apostles and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John, however, said to them in reply, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20).

Silence in the Liturgy

- The Psalms periodically call for *selah* – a pause for reflection.

Silence in the Liturgy

Sacred silence, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times. Its nature, however, depends on the moment when it occurs in the different parts of the celebration (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 45).

- In the Penitential Act, the faithful are invited to recollect themselves.
- Before the Collect, a brief silence allows the faithful to become aware of being in God's presence. The Collect expresses the character of the celebration.
- After a reading or after the Homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard.
- After Communion, the faithful praise God in their hearts and pray to Him. Silence can be observed after the purification of the chalice or before the Prayer after Communion.

Silence in the Liturgy

- Even before the celebration itself, it is a praiseworthy practice for silence to be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred celebration in a devout and fitting manner (GIRM, 45).

Silence in the Liturgy

- The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to favor meditation.
- Haste is to be avoided.
- Under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared (GIRM, 56).

Silence in the Liturgy

- In Advent the use of the organ and other musical instruments should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year, awaiting the Nativity of the Lord.
- In Lent the playing of the organ and musical instruments is allowed only in order to support the singing (GIRM, 313).

Silence in Religious Life

According to the customs of each religious order, the following may be observed:

- Silence at meals, with or without table reading
- Silence may be kept apart from times of recreation. A grand silence may be observed at night.
- An annual silent retreat
- The spirit of silence is encouraged, according to the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola.
- St. Gregory the Great reflects on the advantages of a recollected spirit.

From the Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis

- In silence we can retire into ourselves and think of God. Leave alone curiosities.
- If you withdraw from superfluous talk, idle visits, news and reports, you will find enough time for meditation.
- As often as we have been among other people, we return less a person. To live an interior life, it is necessary to go aside from the crowd.
- The greatest saints chose to avoid the company of mankind to live for God in secret. In silence and quiet, the devout soul learns the secret of the Scriptures (Book I, Chapter 20).

From the Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis

- No one can securely travel except he who would willingly remain at home.
 - No one can securely speak except he who loves to keep his peace.
 - No one can securely govern except he who knows how to be subject.
 - No one can securely command except he who has learned to obey.
-
- It is better to remain hidden and care well for oneself than to neglect oneself to work even miracles (Book I, Chapter 20).

Practical Suggestions

- In some conversations with family or friends, we recognize that sometimes our full attention is required. The same is true when we spend time in communion with God.

After talking much, we are often left dissipated. In silence, we often emerge recollected.

- When speaking with family and friends, we need to identify the obstacles that distract us and set specific goals to limit them. The same is true for our time of prayer.

Practical Suggestions

- We don't need to be silent all the time. However, we do need silence for some of the most important things.
- Silence allows us to focus our attention on our most important priorities.
- Some prayer can take place while engaging in activity (e.g. praying the Rosary in the car).
- However, we need some time in prayer in which we give God our full attention, just as we would for one another at important times.

Practical Suggestions

- If we are accustomed to the distractions of the world, silence will be difficult to endure, and even painful.
- We can grow in the practice of silence. With time, what once seemed odious and frustrating will become pleasing and attractive.
- The experience of prayer deepens as greater attention is given to it.
 - At first, all our energy may be required to push away distractions.
 - After time, the soul finds peace and a recollected spirit.
 - Then come the fruits of contemplation.
 - As we focus less on ourselves, we turn toward God and experience greater union with Him.

The Role of Silence in the Spiritual Life