



## THE WISDOM OF SOLITUDE & SILENCE

*“But oh! God is in his holy Temple! Quiet, everyone—a holy silence. Listen!” Habbakuk 2:20 The Message*

*“But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” “Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of the town to a lonely place, where he prayed.” (Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35)*

Any action of Jesus was preceded by prayer: first he had to be both rested and sure of God's will. Any prayer of Jesus was followed by effective action: preaching, teaching, healing, demonstrating to those with eyes to see the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

The inner quiet that Jesus needed he offers to us. This inner quiet calls up the image of a deep rock pool high in the Blue Mountains, the placid clarity of fresh water, not the fetid stagnation of an old billabong. Inner quiet is no complacent acceptance of fate, no resignation in the face of hardship, no escape from the realities of life; it is a 'still point of the turning world' (T.S. Eliot), a creative and energizing 'contemplation in a world of action' (Thomas Merton). In whatever ways we are called to our Lord's service, release from outer stress and 'inner strife' were never more needed than today. To find and nurture that inner resource of the Spirit is absolutely essential for effective ministry, for basic Christian discipleship. [Let us practice] contemplative prayer: seeking the kingdom within, that state of being where Christ truly dwells in us (2 Corinthians 13:5) That deep stillness, with a place and time uncluttered by physical noise, emotional stress or cerebral musings, is where the Holy Spirit can create, renew, refresh and inspire. *Rowland Croucher, Still Waters, Deep Waters*

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### THOMAS MERTON (1915-1968)

*“Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.”*

When I am most quiet and most myself, God's grace is clear, and then I see nothing else under the sun. What else is there for us but to be tranquil and at peace in the all-enchanting wonder of God's mercy to us? It falls upon this paper more quietly than the morning sun, and then I know that all things, without His love, are useless, and in His love, having nothing, I can possess all things. J III.34-35

The new bells sound wonderful from the woods. St. John's day—Frater Tarcisius and I walked all the way to Hanekamp's in the afternoon. Wonderful, quiet little valley! The silent house, the goats in the red sage grass, the dry creek, and Hanekamp's vineyard. The beautiful silence of the woods on every side! Frater Tarcisius looked about with such reverence that you would have thought he was seeing angels. Later we separated to pray apart in the thinned pine grove on the southeastern hillside. And I could see how simple it is to find God in solitude. There is no one else, nothing else. He is all there is to find there. Everything is in Him. And what could be more pleasing to Him than that we should leave all things and all company to be with Him and think only of Him and know Him alone, in order to give Him our love? To be alone by being part of the universe—fitting in completely to an environment of woods and silence and peace. Everything you do becomes a unity and a prayer. Unity within and

without. Unity with all living things—without effort or contention. My silence is part of the whole world's silence and builds the temple of God without the noise of hammers. Journals. III.27, 29

The contemplative life should not be regarded as the exclusive prerogative of those who dwell in monastic walls. All [people] can seek and find this intimate awareness and awakening which is a gift of love and vivifying touch of creative and redemptive power that power which raised Christ from the dead and cleanses us from dead works to serve the living God...It should certainly be emphasized today that prayer is a real source of personal freedom in the midst of a world in which [people] are dominated by massive organizations and rigid institutions which seek only to exploit them for money and power. Far from being the cause of alienation, true religion in spirit is a liberating force that helps one to find oneself in God. HGL 159

The message of hope that the contemplative offers you...is that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons. The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of the solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit.

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Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself. Teresa of Avila (16<sup>th</sup> c.)

Choose a suitable time for recollection and frequently consider the loving-kindness of God. Do not read to satisfy curiosity or to pass the time, but study such things as move your heart to devotion. If you avoid unnecessary talk and aimless visits, listening to news and gossip, you will find plenty of suitable time to spend in meditation on holy things. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;  
wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing;  
there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope  
are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  
T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', III, *Four Quartets*

Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness. T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', V, *Four Quartets*

Elected Silence, sing to me  
And beat upon my whorled ear,  
Pipe me to pastures still and be  
The music that I came to hear. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The habit of perfection'

All is still and gentle as if all creation shares with tender empathy the last whisper of this dying day.  
The lights are low now, and everything is suspended as if waiting for some final word.  
Bruce Prewer, 'Vespers by the Murray River'

To be calm and quiet all by yourself is hardly the same as sleeping. In fact, it means being fully awake and following with close attention every move going on inside you. It involves a self-discipline where the urge to get up and go is recognised as a temptation to look elsewhere for what is really close at hand... To pray means to open your hands before God. It means slowly relaxing the tension which squeezes your hands together and accepting your existence with an increasing readiness, not as a possession to defend, but as a gift to receive. Above all, therefore, prayer is a way of life which allows you to find a stillness in the midst of the world where you open your hands to God's promises, and find hope for yourself, your fellowman and the whole community in which you live. Henri Nouwen

Muddy water, Let stand, Becomes clear. Lao Tse (Chinese philosopher, 5th Century BC)

Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace. John Greenleaf Whittier

Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude... Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfilment. Solitude is not first a place but a state of mind and heart... There is an old proverb to the effect that 'the man who opens his mouth, closes his eyes!' The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Stillness and quiet, freedom from the demands of others, becoming inner-directed, these are not goals in themselves. They are steps on the way to learning the meaning of God's love for us. As one finds the reality of that love, it becomes possible to offer oneself to God in a mature way and to give some of the same love and understanding to others, self-giving love without strings attached... Whatever else it involves, one finds in this process of detachment and reattachment the meaning of being born again, of giving up an old life and being given a new one. Morton T. Kelsey

John Climacus of Mt Sinai in the sixth century said: 'When you pray do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple, repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. Do not strive for verbosity lest your mind be distracted from devotion by a search for words...' This is a very helpful suggestion for us, people who depend so much on verbal ability. The quiet repetition of a single word can help us descend with the mind into the heart. This repetition has nothing to do with magic... On the contrary, a word or sentence can help us to concentrate, to move to the centre, to create an inner stillness and thus to listen to the voice of God. When we simply try to sit silently and wait for God to speak to us, we find ourselves bombarded with endless conflicting thoughts and ideas. But when we use a very simple sentence such as 'O God, come to my assistance,' or 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on me,' or a word such as 'Lord' or 'Jesus', it is easier to let the many distractions pass by... [and] slowly empty out our crowded interior life and create the quiet space where we can dwell with God. Henri Nouwen

What is spiritual silence? It is not just the absence of talk. Silence has substance... There is a relationship between outward silence and interior silence. The more silence becomes part of our lives, the less impulsive we become. We are slowed down. The awareness that comes from a grounding silence allows us to respond more authentically. If we can stay in this place of silence without rushing to fill it up in some way, we are humbled to know even for a little while that we in our own power do not have all the answers. We become more willing to listen. Meanwhile, God has been communicating. The guidance of [God, the Inward Teacher] is accessible to all people if we listen. This is the revolutionary revelation: that out of silence, Christ can speak to our condition so we no longer must be captive to sin. Silence can remove the veil between us and the Truth." Kathryn Damiano

*Lord, I have many excuses ready for not finding the opportunity to be still, for not making the time to be quiet. I have high expectations of myself. I hear, sometimes too seriously, the expectations of others. I even blame you sometimes, thinking you want me to do more, for 'more's sake' alone. It's easier to read, or plan, or act, even easier to doodle or admire the view, than to stop and listen. I'm more accustomed to praying in thanks and in intercession than in adoration and submission. I bring you my baggage of activity: these are the things that make the waters muddy: may your Spirit move upon the waters and still them... Muddy water, let stand, becomes clear,*

*Lord, I would be immersed in the tranquillity of your presence. I give you these minutes of solitary, concentrated prayer-in-your-presence. Shut out the distractions of noise and anxious thought. Relieve and relax the pressures of posture and the demands of the body. My very breathing I put under your command: that its intake may infuse me with your Spirit, that its expulsion may signify my cleansing, that its rhythm may match your vibrant rekindling of my deepest being.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.*

*Rowland Croucher*

#### *A Benediction*

*Go into the demands of the day released from inner strife and outer stress after the quiet joy of encounter in stillness, May the Holy Spirit remain an inner resource in the dullest routine and the greatest challenge. Receive God's peace. The Lord bless you and keep you. Amen.*