

SILENCE BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Yahweh said to Job: 'Is Yahweh's opponent going to give way? Has God's critic thought up an answer? Job replied to Yahweh, 'My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? I had better lay my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, I shall not speak again; I have spoken twice, I have nothing more to say. (Job 40:1-5)

The Frustration, Formation and Fruitfulness of Silence

Having decided to do this month's reflection on silence and its link to mystery, I expected, or hoped, that lots of profound thoughts and inspirations would come my way. But they haven't! True, I have been travelling a lot and facing upheaval in other ways, but what I have experienced, far from a torrent of ideas, is a dearth of them. I have experienced a kind of silence. It appears that God has not 'spoken' to me on this subject or inspired me in clear ways by other means either. But that is probably precisely the point. God has schooled me not *about* silence but *in* silence! In a way this has been frustrating, disappointing and even unnerving. God has reduced me to silence when I wanted to be eloquent about silence! Yet there is a formation in this and a growth in relationship that goes beyond ideas gained. Perhaps then, it is enough to say that before God we must eventually fall silent. This may be the most important thing I have to say though I will attempt some other thoughts, drawing mainly on the book of Job, hopefully helping us grow in rich silence with God.

The Speeches and Silence of Job

Most of the book of Job is taken up with discussion and scrutiny by Job and his friends of God and God's action, particularly how God treats people and can or cannot be seen as just when the good suffer. After the prologue (ch 1-2), God is silent, not speaking until ch 38. Then God does not address all the points raised in the learned discourses of the previous chapters but asserts that he has a different perspective (ch 38-41). He has a Divine perspective based on his Divine nature and capabilities. He begins thus. 'Who is this, obscuring my intentions with his ignorant words? Brace yourself like a fighter; I am going to ask you the questions, and you are to inform me! Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, since you are so well-informed! Who decided its dimensions, do you know? Or who stretched the measuring line across it? What supports its pillars at their bases? Who laid its cornerstone to the joyful concert of the morning stars? (Job 38:2 -7)'

This Divine perspective, along with its power and wisdom, goes far beyond what humans, along with their perspectives, experiences and minds, can come up with. God is simply far more immense. He made the universe and all its creatures. He established its laws, natural and moral. He has produced a vast array of creatures whose diversity and at times bizarre forms and activities baffle the minds of men and their attempts at classification and understanding. Even the products of human imagination and mythology are under God's sway. God can actually deliver on his word too. In short, who is man to try and measure and assess God? Rather, is not God the measure of man! Who is man to question exactly how God works or to put time scales and demands on when he will fulfil his purposes in justice? His attempts at understanding God are at best limited.

God speaks in two discourses. At the end of the first Job replies briefly as already recorded at the beginning of this reflection. He knows he has spoken too much already and that his words lack depth in comparison with the subject they treat! He pledges to be silent in future. At the

end of the second discourse he speaks again to Yahweh: 'I know that you are all-powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I was the man who misrepresented your intentions with my ignorant words. You have told me about great works that I cannot understand, about marvels which are beyond me, of which I know nothing. (...) Before, I knew you only by hearsay but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:1-3,5-6) Here he goes further. He acclaims the nature of God and acknowledges the errors of his words, now confessing them as sinful and not just a limitation. The epilogue that follows indicates that God is pleased with the state Job has come to, blessing and rewarding him. In fact, in contrast to the other sages, Job is also commended for the 'correct' way he grappled with God and his dealings and his insistence on not settling for the easy or standard religious or philosophical answers of his friends (Job 42:7-10). God is too mysterious to be reduced to neatly boxed definitions and robotic actions. Job has also come to know that silence is a proper attitude before God and one in which man can relate to and know God. Other parts of the Old Testament take up this theme too, for example Psalm 48,10. "Be still and know that I am God!" Job and the psalmist have encountered, recognised and made their home in the mystery of God.

Silence - Submitting to and Being at Ease with the Mystery of God

Mystery is not a problem to be overcome, an issue to be defined but a reality to be accepted, embraced, worshipped and confessed. Put briefly, God is simply much much bigger than us and beyond all our attempts to grasp the Divine reality. God is revealed but also hidden in the Bible and also in history and experience more generally. Silence is also part of the climactic Revelation in Jesus Christ. As Ignatius of Antioch says, 'Listen to the silence of Jesus as well as to his words. He teaches in both!' To listen well we have to be silent. This means bringing our mind but also our heart and even our will to rest. It means putting aside our restlessness and assertiveness. Silence affirms God's mystery and is willing to recognise the limitation and poverty of the creature faced with the immensity of the Creator. It requires and fosters humility, itself grounded in truth. It thus allows us to receive from God, to be docile and obedient to God. In this we achieve our true dignity. Learning and practising silence before God leads to a life of obedience, trust, peace and wisdom. It is linked to forgiveness allowing its fruits to grow in us. Thus we can learn to live in the present, having stilled regrets about past and anxieties for future. Thus set free by the grace of Christ we can just 'be' –at rest in God's arms like a child (cf Psalm 131).

Reaching out to Others through the Experience of Silence

Today's world is full of rush, agitation and noise. There is little silence, without or within us. People want to be in control and have the measure of things so words and actions abound without. They distract themselves from facing vital issues within, or tranquillise and numb life's pain in various ways. Where will they find God in all this? How can they be taught to pause and listen? People tend to find silence alien and elusive even when they also begin to yearn for it. TV programmes like 'The Monastery' and 'The Convent' have indicated how Christians schooled in silence can help other people find God by getting used to silence. And what about us? It is important to accept and admit our own fears and difficulties with facing silence. Let us also get more used to silence, to affirming God's loving presence there, even in his seeming absence, and also accepting its challenge to discipline, change and growth! Then we too might be better able to help others also to be still and know that God is real and revealed in Jesus Christ - in his words & his silence.

© Andrew Brookes

[Gospel Seeds: 06/08] andrewbrookes@straitmail.co.uk

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