Silence in the face of mystery

God is the encounter we can't control.

by Rowan Williams in the August 29, 2018 issue

It always feels strange to be talking about silence. It seems ironic to talk about it. We're stuck before we start. And that is quite a good place to begin. To know from the word go that talking about silence is a slightly silly thing to do puts words into perspective.

I've been thinking about where and how we encounter silence in our ordinary lives, what the significance of some of those encounters is, and how they connect with some of the ways in which silence appears in scripture and in story. There are three experiences in which silence overtakes us. One of them is rather comical, one of

them is not at all comical, and one of them is somewhere in between.

At some point, we've all had somebody say to us, "Just tell me what's on your mind"—or worse still, "Just be yourself." One quite common response to this is complete inarticulacy. "Just tell me what's on your mind" is a suggestion that fails conspicuously to open things up. And similarly, when someone tells you to just be yourself, the problem is, "Well, what's the self I 'just have' to be?" That's one experience in which silence seems to overtake us.

There's another silence which is less trivial but no less common: the silence that comes after the words "The tests are positive," or after a friend says they're divorcing. It may be the silence that comes after looking at the images of trauma and nightmare elsewhere in the world. It's the silence that comes not with our inability to express ourselves but our inability to know how to react at all to a reality that seems completely out of control.

There's a third kind of silence which always intrigues me, the silence at the end of a really good play or concert, the pause before the applause starts. There's something about that silence that says, "I mustn't wrap this up too quickly. Let's give that little bit of extra space to allow it to be what it is and not rush to react."

What all these experiences have in common is that they challenge our urge to get on top of situations, to control. Thinking back to the news in the hospital waiting room: How do I normalize the knowledge that I'm going to die, or that someone I love is going to die? And when I've been taken into places I didn't know I had in me at the end of a really serious play or concert, again I feel I can't normalize this. I can't just absorb it into my routine ways of being in the world; I've been taken outside my comfort zone and stripped of the ways in which I usually defend myself and organize the world.

That's why I believe these moments of silence are so very important not only for our humanity generally but for our Christian humanity in particular. They're important for our humanity in general because we habitually live in a world where the "right thing" to do with critical moments is to stop them from being critical. The right thing to do with a wild animal is to tame it, so to speak, and the right thing to do with any wild experience is to work out what I can do with it, what I can make of it, and, in short, domesticate it.

But the more our humanity falls in love with this strange idea of domesticating, absorbing, and controlling, the less human we actually get. I would venture to guess that the people we would least like to spend a long time with are those who have answers to every question and plans for every contingency. There's something slightly inhuman about that, because if we believe that our humanity is constantly growing, then there have got to be moments when we are taken beyond the familiar and the controllable. A growing humanity, a maturing humanity, is one that's prepared for silence, because it's prepared at important moments to say, "I can't domesticate, I can't get on top of this."

God is that environment, that encounter, that we will never get to the bottom of and that we will never control. To understand that there's something about silence that is profoundly at the heart of being human begins to open up a recognition: being Christian requires us more than ever to come to terms with those moments when silence is imposed on us, when we face what we can't control.

As I have hinted, a lot of this is about power and the loss of power, and this is quite a double-edged matter. Some people have said, with some force, that we should be very careful here. We must think of people who are silenced, that is, people who lose their power because somebody else shuts them up. In Sara Maitland's wonderful *Book of Silence*, there's a letter that she prints from a friend of hers, Janet Batsleer, who argues, in effect, that silence always means that someone is being silenced.

But I think this is a wrong turn in the argument, even if for the right reasons. It's a serious thing when people's voices are silenced. But that's rather different from the silence that leaves you with nothing to say, the experience of helplessness about who you are, the experience of death and suffering, the experience of extraordinary depth and beauty. If we're silent in the face of these things it's not because we have been shut up; indeed, you might say it's quite the opposite, it's because we've been opened up. And the silence that emerges is not the silence of mute resentment. It's a recognition of something that all human beings, powerful and powerless, sooner or later share—being up against what can't be mastered and managed. And ultimately everybody is silent in the face of the utterly unmanageable, which is God.

One of the most dramatic moments of silence in the New Testament is Jesus' silence before his judges. The Gospel narratives show us how the high priest and Pontius Pilate urge Jesus to speak. "Why don't you answer me?" says Pilate. "Don't you know that I have the power to crucify you or to release you?" And we're told in St.

John’s Gospel that when Jesus gives no answer to the charges made against him, Pilate is “amazed.”

The odd thing in these stories is that Jesus is precisely in the position of someone having his voice taken away; he is a person who has been reduced to silence by the violence and injustice of the world. But then, mysteriously, he turns this around. His silence, his complete presence and openness, his refusal to impose his will in a struggle, becomes a threat to those who have power—or think they have power. “For God’s sake, talk to me!” says the high priest, more or less (“I adjure you in the name of the living God, tell us!”). Pilate’s bafflement and fear in the face of Jesus’ silence are a reminder that, in this case, Jesus takes the powerlessness that has been forced on him and turns it around so that his silence becomes a place in the world where the mystery of God is present. In a small way, that’s what happens when we seek to be truly and fully silent or let ourselves be silenced by the mystery of God. We become a place where the mystery of God happens.

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The sight of somebody praying or meditating in silence is itself something that reduces us to silence. If you go into a Buddhist meditation hall or a convent chapel and you see somebody deep in meditation, you don’t on the whole try to start a conversation, because the very fact that silence is happening tells us that there is something there that we’re not going to cope with, something out of our normal repertoire of resources. And so Jesus’ supreme, eloquent silence before his judges is, in a sense, the moment of supreme revelation in the Gospels. It is where he becomes visibly the mysterious reality that nobody knows how to talk about. “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” asks the high priest, and Jesus says, “If you want.” “Are you the king of the Jews?” asks Pilate, and Jesus says, “As you say.” This terrible refusal to answer the question tells both Caiaphas and Pilate that what is happening in Jesus is something immeasurably out of the ordinary categories and habits by which people organize the world.

Let’s consider how we in our attempts to be silent become “silencing” realities—like the nun in the convent chapel or the meditator in the meditation hall who bring us to silence. We have to be to some extent, in our small way, like Jesus before the judges; we have to be the place where the question of God, the mystery of God, comes alive. It’s not that we’re saying and doing such devastatingly interesting

things or blazing with holiness. Rather, we will transmit something just by letting God be in us and showing that we're struggling to let God be, by holding back, recognizing that we are powerless to express, let alone to "manage," the mystery.

We can apply that to the liturgy of the church. Good liturgy is about silence. I don't mean that good liturgy is all Quaker meeting, but that there's something about liturgy that ought to be pressing us in that direction. In quite a lot of the church's history, both Catholic and Protestant traditions have variously got this wrong. There's been an urge to fill up the void, an anxiety about silence—whether it's the urge to improve the occasion and go on teaching, making sure that people are getting the right ideas, or the urge to keep things happening with lots of ceremonial. Both often seem rather to miss the point; busy and cluttered talk, like busy and cluttered activity, just tells people that we're busy and that we're really rather anxious that they shouldn't get things wrong. Making space, acting, moving, speaking in a way that makes space around it: that's what liturgy needs to be.

I think that is why people so often appreciate so deeply the liturgies of monastic communities, where space around the words happens quite naturally. People have the sense that the words are coming out of a steady, patient attentiveness and they're going back into it. To listen to a monastic choir singing compline is to listen to the opposite of busyness and to witness the opposite of fuss.

We can't all be monastic choirs singing compline. Yet it does seem to me a good question to ask: Is our worship, are our words, the kind of thing that suggests moving out of and into that silence? Is the assembly gathered for the liturgy at least a little like the solitary nun in the convent chapel, something that silences people? So that the reaction of somebody who's not a believer coming into a worshiping community might in those circumstances not be "That's interesting," but "I don't know what to make of this."

In the last few decades, when we've been trying to reconstruct and rethink worship in the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church and lots of others, too, we've regularly made two sorts of mistake. We have said, "It's all rather difficult, so we need to explain it," and we have said, "It's all rather long and we need to trim it." The result is that we've lost sight of the ways in which the slow pace and the carefully chosen word, however mysterious, have their own integrity and their own effect.

The result of this is that I am one of those people who don’t know whether they’re liturgical conservatives or liturgical progressives. I lose no sleep over this, because when we think about liturgy and shared worship, what we have most to think about is whether the actions and the words performed convey any sense that something is happening that nobody there is doing.

Many organists experience something like awe at the scale of the instrument. You put one finger on a small ivory button and something shattering is released. The organist using his or her skills and muscles and intelligence produces an effect massively out of proportion to what this fragile human presence on the bench is apparently doing. And that is very much an aspect of how good liturgy works. Coming out of liturgy and saying, “Did I do that?’ is a perfectly proper experience. Something happens that nobody in particular has done.

So whether we’re talking about the individual impact of the praying, meditating, contemplating person or the corporate impact of a community that has found itself in that kind of environment and framework, the same thing applies. We’re back to where we started, in that territory where we can’t get on top of something—we can’t domesticate, organize, control. This is a necessary aspect of being human, a necessary aspect of faith and, if my reading of the Gospels is right, a necessary dimension of our following of Christ, part of what the Holy Spirit makes possible in us as we are made more Christlike.

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