

Taizé - The value of silence

The value of silence

Three times a day, everything on the hill of Taizé stops: the work, the Bible studies, the discussions. The bells call everyone to church for prayer. Hundreds or even thousands of mainly young people from all over the world pray and sing together with the brothers of the community. Scripture is read in several languages. In the middle of each common prayer, there is a long period of silence, a unique moment for meeting with God.

Silence and prayer

If we take as our guide the oldest prayer book, the biblical Psalms, we note two main forms of prayer. One is a lament and cry for help. The other is thanksgiving and praise to God. On a more hidden level, there is a third kind of prayer, without demands or explicit expression of praise. In Psalm 131 for instance, there is nothing but quietness and confidence: "I have calmed and quieted my soul ... hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore."

At times prayer becomes silent. Peaceful communion with God can do without words. "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother." Like the satisfied child who has stopped crying and is in its mother's arms, so can "my soul be with me" in the presence of God. Prayer then needs no words, maybe not even thoughts.

How is it possible to reach inner silence? Sometimes we are apparently silent, and yet we have great discussions within, struggling with imaginary partners or with ourselves. Calming our souls requires a kind of simplicity: "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me." Silence means recognising that my worries can't do much. Silence means leaving to God what is beyond my reach and capacity. A moment of silence, even very short, is like a holy stop, a sabbatical rest, a truce of worries.

The turmoil of our thoughts can be compared to the storm that struck the disciples' boat on the Sea of Galilee while Jesus was sleeping. Like them, we may be helpless, full of anxiety, and incapable of calming ourselves. But Christ is able to come to our help as well. As he rebuked the wind and the sea and "there was a great calm", he can also quiet our heart when it is agitated by fears and worries (Mark 4).

Remaining silent, we trust and hope in God. One psalm suggests that silence is even a form of praise. We are used to reading at the beginning of Psalm 65: "Praise is due to you, O God". This translation follows the Greek text, but actually the Hebrew text printed in most Bibles reads: "Silence is praise to you, O God". When words and thoughts come to an end, God is praised in silent wonder and admiration.

The Word of God: thunder and silence

At Sinai, God spoke to Moses and the Israelites. Thunder and lightning and an ever-louder sound of a trumpet preceded and accompanied the Word of God (Exodus 19). Centuries later, the prophet Elijah returned to the same mountain of God. There he experienced storm and earthquake and fire as his ancestors did, and he was ready to listen to God speaking in the thunder. But the Lord was not in any of the familiar mighty phenomena. When all the noise was over, Elijah heard "a sound of sheer silence", and God spoke to him (1 Kings 19).

Does God speak with a loud voice or in a breath of silence? Should we take as example the people gathered at Sinai or the prophet Elijah? This might be a wrong alternative. The terrifying phenomena related to the gift of the Ten Commandments emphasise how serious these are. Keeping or rejecting them is a question of life or death. Seeing a child running straight under a car, one is right to shout as loud as possible. In analogous situations prophets speak the word of God so that it makes our ears ring.

Loud words certainly make themselves heard; they are impressive. But we also know that they hardly touch the hearts. They are resisted rather than welcomed. Elijah's experience shows that God does not want to impress, but to be understood and accepted. God chose "a sound of sheer silence" in order to speak. This is a paradox:

God is silent and yet speaking

When God's word becomes "a sound of sheer silence", it is more efficient than ever to change our hearts. The heavy storm on Mount Sinai was splitting rocks, but God's silent word is able to break open human hearts of stone. For Elijah himself the sudden silence was probably more fearsome than the storm and thunder. The loud and mighty manifestations of God were somehow familiar to him. God's silence is disconcerting, so very different from all Elijah knew before.

Silence makes us ready for a new meeting with God. In silence, God's word can reach the hidden corners of our hearts. In silence, it proves to be "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit" (Hebrews 4:12). In silence, we stop hiding before God, and the light of Christ can reach and heal and transform even what we are ashamed of.

Silence and love

Christ says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). We need silence in order to welcome these words and put them into practice. When we are agitated and restless, we have so many arguments and reasons not to forgive and not to love too easily. But when we "have calmed and quieted our soul", these reasons turn out to be quite insignificant. Maybe we sometimes avoid silence, preferring whatever noise, words or distraction, because inner peace is a risky thing: it makes us empty and poor, disintegrates bitterness and leads us to the gift of ourselves. Silent and poor, our hearts are overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, filled with an unconditional love. Silence is a humble yet secure path to loving.

Links to the Taize Community Website

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