

## Finding Joy in our Prayer

### Week 3: Praying in the Stillness and the Silence.

#### Soul Gym and Contemplative Prayer

Thomas Keating, a pioneer in contemplative prayer, writes, “this “thunderous” silence is actually the most intense, concentrated “dosage” of divine presence we can bear face-to-face. In a paradoxical way, the dance of creation, beautiful and enchanting as it is, is like a veil over the face of the presence of God—like the veil that hides the Holy of Holies in the temple. These two faces of God—veiled and unveiled—live in symbiotic unity, and out of that unity everything pours into existence, perhaps like a waterfall glistening in the sun.

For Thomas, creativity is “the diffuse shining of God” (to borrow a striking image from that other celebrated contemporary Thomas, Thomas Merton). It’s what allows us to know our Creator not only in the “thunderous” silence of God’s direct presence, but in the dance of life itself.

For me, experiencing that ‘thunderous silence’ involves intentional silence. What does that look like on a daily basis? Each morning, I sit in the same chair, at the same time, for thirty to forty minutes of silence. No talking, no reading, no thinking. I do the best I can to just show up. Some mornings it’s easy and the time flies by. Other mornings it is the hardest thing I do and time stands still, while the noise of my mind wreaks havoc with any chance of silence.

Of course, this outer silence is not my goal. God is always the goal. The outer silence is a necessary means to inner silence but it is the inner silence that gives meaning and content to the outer silence; otherwise, it’s just escape, running away, isolation.

Silence is more than the cessation of talking or the absence of sound. We’ve all experienced times when we were not talking and the world around us is quiet, but the world within us is filled with noise and voices that will not be quiet. The real work and practice of silence is within us.

True silence is not escape but engagement, not emptiness but fullness, not absence but presence. It is a way of showing up and being present to God, others, myself, life, and the world. Mindful of the psalmist’s words, “For God alone my soul in silence waits” (62:1, 6), I surround myself with silence in an attempt to fill myself with silence.

Waiting in silence is not necessarily easy or comfortable. The silence strips away busyness, and distractions. You are confronted with yourself; your thoughts, voices, temptations, all that you are and all that you are not. In this regard the practice of silence becomes an act of repentance, turning around and going in a different direction.

The corollary to silence as repentance is silence as presence. The practice of silence is an act of self-offering, showing up, and making oneself available to God. Silence creates space and a place for God to show up too. I find Silence is the threshold upon which God and I meet, a place of intimacy where two become one. We've probably all experienced those moments of intimacy with another in which there is nothing that can or needs be said and to say anything would destroy the moment and break the intimacy. Deep inner silence lets us rest in God. Nothing needs to be said. Nothing needs to be done. As the mystic, Julian of Norwich experienced, 'All is well'.

My need for and practice of silence is not my personal preference

It is God's longing for me expressed as my own longing for God. "Deep calls to deep" (Ps. 42:7).

The Christian tradition holds silence as an essential practice for anyone who wants to grow spiritually. Elijah found God in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12). Jesus, the gospel writers tell us, often went off to be by himself, to lonely and deserted places, to pray (For example, Mark 1:35).

Where is silence in your life? Is there any silence? How might you be more intentional about practicing silence? It's hard for most of us to find, value, and protect silence.

If you would like to learn more, you are warmly invited to come along to Soul Gym on the first Monday of each month at 2.30pm in St Andrews, Congresbury.

David Kemp