

THE POWER OF SILENCE

1 Samuel 3. 1-10

Revelation 5. 1-10

John 1. 43-51

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the power of silence, but allow me to begin with a story. There was a remote monastery deep in the woods where the monks followed a rigid vow of silence. This vow could only be broken once a year on Christmas, by one monk, and the monk was permitted to speak only one sentence.

One Christmas, Brother Andrew had his turn to speak and said, 'I love the delightful mashed potatoes we have every year with the Christmas roast!' Then he sat down. Silence ensued for 365 days.

The next Christmas, Brother Michael got his turn, and said, 'I think that the mashed potatoes are lumpy and I truly despise them!' Once again, silence ensued for 365 days.

The following Christmas, Brother Thomas stood up and said, 'I am fed up with this constant bickering!'

This is a humorous story, but it is all the funnier to us because our society cannot imagine being in a community where silence is such an integral part of life together. For many of us, noise and activity have become the symbols of the good life; and filling up our empty time as much as possible has become a gauge of how well we are doing. Cell phones, iPods, MP3s, TVs and radios have all helped to crowd out opportunities for quiet time in our society.

While technology has increased our opportunities for busyness, the problem is that human beings have decreased their capacity for being still. Have you noticed that the Bible does not say, 'Get busy, so that you can know the Lord', but rather in Psalm 46 it says, '*Be still, and know that I am God*' (46. 10).

The lack of God-knowledge is an age-old problem. The first lesson, read this morning from the third chapter of 1 Samuel, describes events that occurred in the Holy Land eleven hundred years before the birth of Christ. It was a time when the Lord God appeared to have abandoned his people. The chapter begins with the statement that the word of the Lord was 'rare in those days', and that 'visions were not widespread'. Does this mean that God had stopped speaking, or stopped trying to communicate with his people? No, it seems rather that at that time in their history, people of Israel had slowly lost the ability to hear God speaking. Prophets, or God's spokesmen, were no longer being heard; and they eventually stopped speaking.

The political leadership in Israel was ineffective. Its religious leadership also was corrupt, and those who should have known better (the sons of the High Priest Eli, for example) did not share his devotion to the Lord. Rather, they were known for their wickedness and their blaspheming of God. Things had reached a very low point indeed in terms of spiritual growth and development.

And that brings us to the boy Samuel. Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli's guidance, who nurtured him in the faith. One evening Samuel was 'lying down in the temple of the Lord', which many interpret to mean that he was sleeping; yet so often in the Scriptures when God gives messages to people and it is reported that they are 'sleeping', it could be that they were simply 'resting', as in a period of deep contemplative prayer; or 'resting in God'. In this 'resting', Samuel hears a voice saying, 'Samuel! Samuel!' Supposing that his mentor is calling him, he runs to Eli and says, 'Here I am, for you called me.'

But Eli replies, 'I did not call; lie down again.' Apparently, Samuel had heard the voice correctly, but he did not know the source of the voice. Being untrained in how to listen for the word of God, Samuel could hear, but he could not understand. Twice more he heard the call, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and ran each time to Eli. Finally Eli understands that it is the Lord who is calling the boy, and he directs Samuel to respond by saying, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

The story tells us two things. Firstly, it reminds us of the importance of discernment. Hearing 'voices' is always a tricky thing when it comes to religion. Sadly, history provides us with too many examples of well-meaning men and women who, hungry for a profound spiritual experience and intimacy with God, hear messages that they honestly believe are from him; and once they act upon them, they cause damage to themselves, their families or to society-at-large.

Samuel, when he heard a divine voice calling out to him, had the presence of mind (in spite of his young age) to check out his experience with a true guide, the priest Eli. With his experience and wisdom, Samuel's mentor was able to help the boy interpret the words that he was hearing. And so it is with us. God indeed may have things to communicate to us (and we should rejoice in this); yet as we listen for such messages, discernment with other 'spiritual elders' is important.

Secondly, our appointed Old Testament passage tells us something about how God comes to us. Rarely is God revealed to us in dramatic ways, with thunderous pronouncements that are clear and obvious to us and to everyone around us. More frequently, it is in the *silence* that God comes; it is in the stillness of the night (or day), when we have let go of the cacophony of the world's messages that we have got so used to hearing. It is then that we are better prepared to 'hear' from God.

The scriptures contain many examples of this. In addition to the boy Samuel in today's lesson, it is in the silence of the cloud that God comes to Moses in Exodus 24; it is in the 'still small voice' (or as newer translations have it, in 'the sound of sheer silence') that God comes to Elijah in I Kings 19; and it is in the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration in Mark 9 that the voice of God in effect commands Jesus's disciples to be quiet, for 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' As the poetry of Psalm 62 puts it: 'For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.'

So what might all of this mean for us? Are you and I waiting for God this morning? Are we longing for new, fresh signs of his pure, loving and gracious presence? Perhaps some of us have found ourselves feeling like St. Augustine when he prayed:

'O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find You. You are everywhere, so You must be here. You have created and re-created me, and all the good I have comes from You, and still I do not know You...Let me seek You by desiring You, and desire You by seeking You. Let me find You by loving You, and love You in finding You.'

If we are seeking God this morning, and if we want to communicate with him at the deepest possible level, then one way to nurturing this close relationship with him is through silence. As St John of the Cross said, 'the basic language of God is silence; and it is only in silence that we hear it.' It is difficult to hear the word of God in the noisy world of today, just as it was difficult to hear it in the noisy and wicked age referred to in our Old Testament lesson.

If you and I can build more *silence* into our daily living, we just might hear God calling us to do extraordinary things with our lives! Amen.