

Reflections and Prayers: on Silence

This is the 33rd in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Silence is.....

For the first time ever, Joan and I watched the televised Remembrance Sunday morning ceremony live from the Cenotaph in London. Every year until 2020 we had been at church. As the broadcast drew to a close the BBC reporter, Sophie Raworth, reflected that the silence of the whole occasion, including the act of Remembrance, was somehow enfolded in the silence of the coronavirus. There was no march past of 10,000 veterans and all other representative numbers were reduced. At the end, there was eerie silence when normally there would have been noisy bustle and camaraderie. We reflected in week 4 of this series that the coronavirus is unseen: but it is also silent. You neither see it nor hear it.



In my working days, I had a Dutch colleague, Auke Boerema, who talked rather a lot: one day, another Dutch colleague wittily remonstrated with him as he was in full flow, 'Auke, do you know why you have two ears and one mouth? It's so you listen twice as much as you talk'. Abraham Lincoln once said, 'better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt'. Wise counsel indeed.

Susan Cain, in her 2012 book, 'Quiet', says, 'Words are potentially dangerous weapons that reveal things better left unsaid. They can hurt people. They can get people into trouble', adding, 'those who know do not speak: those who speak do not know'.

'The Sound of Silence' was a pop song written in 1964 by Paul Simon (of Simon and Garfunkel) after the assassination of President John Kennedy, evoking the idea that responses do not always need words. The writer of a book review in *The Economist* in May 2018, said 'a theme of the age is that people crave silence and can find none. Silence is not just the absence of noise. It is something in itself'.

First pause for thought: when is silence important? When is it especially important for you?

John Bell, November 2020. Photo of the Cenotaph, London, from gov.uk.

Silence in daily life

One of the great joys of our family holidays in central Switzerland was to ride the old open chairlifts, dangling high above the meadows, ascending the Alps. If the cowbells and the crickets were quiet, there were moments of total, magical silence amid God's stupendous creation.

But there can be something more sinister about silence too. We have become accustomed to background noise in daily life, whether it's the music in the shops and malls or the gentle whirring of appliances at home. The TV, the fridge and freezer, the central heating pump and all else are rendered lifeless and silent when power fails.

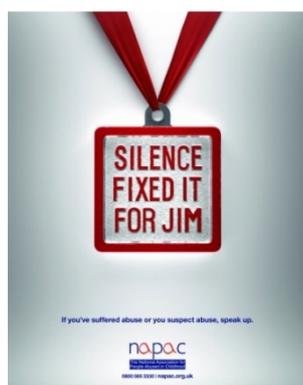
In August 2013, Joan and I were aboard P&O's *Oriana* in the Norwegian Sea when suddenly, one afternoon, the whole ship fell silent: the engines stopped, the air-con stopped..... When all was fixed, the captain announced, 'I was walking along the deck and suddenly I couldn't hear anything – the ultimate danger signal on a ship – silence'.

From physical to interpersonal, some people cope better with silence than others. Think of those silent moments – when seconds can seem like minutes – in one-to-one conversations when neither person speaks, or in meetings when the heads go down, the floor assumes an unexpected fascination and everyone hopes that someone else will pipe up. Maybe the topic is sensitive or embarrassing or an inappropriate comment or a request for a volunteer has been made: who will break the silence and relieve the tension?

In the passage from Ecclesiastes 3 (which Margaret Lee reflected on in week 15) verse 7 reminds us that there is 'a time to keep silence and a time to speak'. It is a dilemma which confronts us all, sometimes on matters of huge significance. And having decided to speak, the question is 'what to say?' and sometimes, 'to whom?'

Questions are being asked at the moment about the circumstances leading to the BBC Panorama programme in 1995 broadcasting Princess Diana's interview with Martin Bashir. It has also been revealed that she approached Max Hastings, then editor of the Daily Telegraph, several weeks before with her story: he judged it wise not to publish it and (it is reported, recognising her vulnerability) advised her to keep silent too. I make no comment on any aspect of this sad case except to suggest that it exposes the dreadful dilemma of when to speak, to whom, and when to keep silence.

The protection of abused and vulnerable people in society, including in the churches, has received long overdue attention in recent years, following the most awful disclosures of abuse inflicted by responsible people in positions of trust; there is evidence of denial and cover-up in the highest echelons of some organisations in which (to quote a report this week) corporate reputation was prioritised over compassion for abuse survivors.



The victims of abuse often didn't tell their story at the time partly because they didn't think they would be believed; whistle-blowers were sometimes dismissed, literally from their jobs. Churches were perceived as respectable cover by many perpetrators, including clergy, as were trusted public organisations, such as the BBC in the most egregious case of Jimmy Savile, whose TV programme had 'fixed it' for disadvantaged people – not least children – to enjoy the experiences of their wildest dreams.

A conspiracy of silence in the venerable BBC protected him, it seems, for decades until the terrible truth of his dark side was finally exposed. Napac, the National Association for People Abused in Childhood, issued the poster shown, using the style of the badges Mr Savile used to give out; the words say it all. He died before he was called to account for his actions. There was silence. It is a shameful story.

Nearer home, it is our hope and prayer that, in the Methodist Church, the deaf ears and blind eyes, which denied victims of abuse of any kind their opportunity to be heard and believed, are gone. Every effort has been made to confess and recognise past failings and to implement proper procedures in respect of complaints and discipline, safeguarding and equality, diversity and inclusion. Above all, the Past Cases Review project cast the widest possible net to enable anyone to come forward with their story of abuse and where appropriate, despite any intervening time lapse, for allegations to be addressed and actions taken.

There is a time to keep silence, but there is a time to speak, and a right to be heard.

Second pause for thought: when did you keep silent and should have spoken up? When did you say something when silence might have been wiser?

John Bell, November 2020. Photo from Napac publicity. The report mentioned is the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse relating to the Roman Catholic Church published on November 10th.

Silence in worship

Silence in Christian tradition is mostly associated with the monastic orders vowed to total silence, or at least for long periods in each daily cycle. They aspire to know the mystical presence and will of God in which words and noise would intrude. It is fascinating to note that codes of silent communications adopted by sixteenth century monks evolved into the pioneering systems of sign language for the deaf in later years.

Without such monastic constraints, it may be that we encounter God in silence and in solitude, with all distractions cast aside. We may speak of the call of God in our lives, but we may sense it in silence and in prayer, even if it is sometimes encouraged by the prompting of friends.

In worship, we probably associate silence with the Society of Friends – the Quakers – who are content to sit quietly in contemplation, discerning God’s presence. I’m guessing that the majority of readers are accustomed



to more vocal styles of worship – Methodists not least in our enthusiastic congregational singing, which is why we’re finding the present times so challenging when we’re permitted to gather in church. Increasingly we do have times of silence to reflect on bible readings and to offer our own intercessions: the days of garrulous preachers uttering interminable prayers, never pausing for breath, are mercifully receding. But, if we’re honest, we’re not always comfortable with silence in worship.

Other readers may identify with those from Norley as I mention the so-called ‘quietening candle’ as a prelude to worship. Churches have adopted different ways of encouraging congregations to be still before worship begins: the candle, lit by a steward; the

bible, carried to the Communion Table; a prayer; organ music played especially quietly – they are all signals that the chatter and wandering about should stop. As you enter cathedrals in cities across the world, you are encouraged to be quiet as you absorb their splendour, rest in thought, sit or kneel in silent prayer and reflect that people may have worshipped and sought God there for centuries.



It was The Tremeloes, an Essex pop group, who reminded us in 1967 that ‘silence is golden’, a phrase derived from an old Arabic proverb. Indeed, it is. Maybe our present abstention from singing will stimulate preachers and congregations to rediscover the value of silence in worship so that we may be still in the presence of the Lord and feel that God’s power may move within us.

Back to remembrance, as promised. There are moments in life, especially national occasions, when the only common factor is the unifying power of silence. People of many faiths and none recall their own thoughts and memories in their own way: words would be a divisive hindrance – silence alone unites. In a corner of the old Central Market in Kuala Lumpur in March 2014, a few days after Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 vanished over the Indian Ocean, there was a paper tree – a bit like a small Christmas tree – on which were hung messages of love, grief, thanksgiving and hope in many languages: Joan and I stood before it with other passers-by, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, younger and older, in solemn remembrance shutting out the background bustle of the market. We were strangers, but united, as one, in our silent remembrance.

Third pause for thought: when is silence helpful in worship? Is silence the most unifying way of remembering sacrifice and loss?

John Bell. November 2020. Photos by Joan Bell, February 2017, of Coventry Cathedral, old and new, a symbol of reconciliation. The old cathedral was largely destroyed on November 14th 1940, exactly 80 years ago to the day.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC’s present hymnal.