



Exploring silence

Alison Woolley investigates the value of silence and its potential for us today.

It is often on retreat that Christians begin to recognise that silence could play an important part in their spiritual journeying. When we first encounter the idea of intentional periods of silence, it can feel as if a whole new realm of possibilities has been opened up. Some of these may delight us, while others can feel quite daunting. Participation in a spiritual discipline of silence is an ancient and well-worn pathway whose transformational value is revealed in the writings of Christians throughout the centuries. Despite this, engagement in a practice of silence isn't something which is frequently discussed or well understood.

Thomas Carlyle's phrase, '*Speech is silvern, silence is golden*',¹ was probably repeated to many of us when we were children. So when we think about what we mean by 'silence', usually we begin saying it has no words or sounds. We define it in terms of *absence*. But with continued thinking we recognise it's not quite that simple. What about the silence we experience when walking in the woods, or gazing out to sea? We readily incorporate

certain sounds within our sense of silence – most often those of nature. And for some, silence can include ethereal-sounding music or even monks chanting the words of psalms. So if silence isn't really about the absence of words or sounds, how can we more accurately portray its role in our spiritual practice?

Wanting to find out more, I began researching the use of silence throughout Christian history and the role that a spiritual discipline of silence plays in contemporary Christian women's lives.

The prayerful practice of silence stretches back to the early Christians and beyond. From the third century, women and men left the booming commerce and cosmopolitan lifestyles of the ancient world for the Egyptian desert. Away from these growing distractions, the silence and barrenness facilitated their focus on God. In the following centuries the simple, ascetic lives of the Desert Mothers and Fathers influenced the development of religious communities. Here, meditative practices



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evolved in Sinai were systematically taught, spawning classic texts by 'Mystics' about the silence of contemplative prayer.

However, following the Reformation, monastic attention shifted from silence as disciplined receptivity to God, towards the Bible and word-based, intercessory prayer. Nuns or monks 'discovered' practices like Teresa of Avila's three-staged contemplative prayer of recollection, quiet and union mostly through their own desire for deeper relationship with God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, as these were no longer being taught.

Following the 1600s' non-conformist flight from the new 'Church of England', the most well-known Christian engagement with silence was amongst 'Quakers'. Yet their communal silence differed significantly from earlier practices. Formerly, silence drew believers towards God through individual disciplines intended to free them from conscious thought and its words. Ultimately, in contemplation all perceptions of self dissolve into an almost inexpressible awareness of profound union with God. This

contrasts with the Quakers' practice of gathering in corporate silence to better hear from God and speak words of 'ministry' to one another when prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Despite the different intent of these two disciplines, they highlight that, although minimising external noises is helpful in developing a practice of silence, this is merely a means to attaining something else. External silence enables our attention to shift to a greater awareness of our own being in the present moment. Gradually, regular, disciplined silence helps to quieten our thoughts and feelings, drawing us towards an internal silence where all that constitutes self is stilled and we become more aware of God. Such silence is not fundamentally concerned with *absence*, but with heightening our attentiveness to God's ever-constant *presence*, within and all around us.

Latterly, Christians have been rediscovering the value of silence. This was partly fostered by greater availability of the Mystics' writings, and new works published since the middle of last century, particularly by Thomas Merton. These coincided with



‘... or gazing out to sea.’

growing interest in Eastern religions and altered states of consciousness, popularised by celebrities and ‘hippy’ culture in the 1950s and 60s. Three other movements capitalised on meditation’s secular popularity, drawing Christians back to recovered practices within its traditions: the ecumenical Taizé community, established by Brother Roger in the 1940s; Christian meditation popularised from the 1970s by John Main and the World Community for Christian Meditation; and at the same time, ‘Centering Prayer’, evolved by Thomas Keating from a discipline described in the anonymous, fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

When researching women’s practices of silence today, I found that they see their daily practice as a necessary balance to life’s demands on them as carers, and the barrage of interruptions and sensory overload from society and modern technology. Over time, in disciplined silence they discovered that any initial desire to hear from God is replaced with recognition that encountering God goes beyond overt communication. Instead, it offered reassur-

ance of God’s unconditional love which, once recognised, gradually nudged them towards acknowledging the defences and masks they have used in attempting to hide the uncomfortable realities of self from God, themselves and others.

The women I interviewed spoke about silence as a free, open and deep space of receiving. They experience silence as a welcoming, homely place of nourishment and refreshment. In this safe environment they feel able to be truly themselves, to confront their own darkness and allow God to transform them into something new and precious. As only silence has offered them this kind of refuge, renewal and sense of possibility, they wouldn’t willingly let go of their practices.

In the women’s portrayals of what they value about their discipline of silence there was a perhaps unexpected, overarching agreement that silence is not a place of solitude, as we often assume. Instead, they spoke of valuing silence as a place of profound connection and of relationality – with God, their own past, present and future being, and ‘others’,



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perceived as humans and all created matter throughout time and space. Inevitably, they also identified difficulties of sustaining a practice of silence, including experiences of no longer having awareness of God as a separate being, reported by contemplatives throughout history. Collectively, they lamented the lack of silence in church worship, the limited understanding about silence amongst Christian leaders, and the poverty of support for developing a practice of silence in their local faith communities. They longed for this to change so that people who know little of silence as a spiritual discipline can discover its value in facilitating ongoing encounter with the presence of God.

Following the completion of my research, I established the Seeds of Silence project in response to these concerns. Seeds of Silence exists to encourage and support people in exploring how a practice of silence can revitalise prayer lives that have become stagnant, and help them find space to deepen their relationships with God, themselves and others. It is through engagement in a spiritual discipline like silence that we acknowledge and surrender

the smallness of our selves into the fullness of God’s limitless love for all people. Here, we can be transformed to be facilitators of the Christlike changes so needed to bring hope for the future into the fractured relationships and communities of which we are a part.

1 Thomas Carlyle, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* p127 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

Alison Woolley is currently writing a book about women’s practices of silence, based on her PhD research. This exploration is complemented by her work as a music therapist with young people with severe learning difficulties and in spiritual accompaniment. Alison is Director of the Seeds of Silence project, which offers tailored workshops and training for church groups, lay preachers and pastoral workers, spiritual directors, clergy and people in training across the UK. It also provides resources, signposting and other forms of support on setting up silence-based prayer groups. See www.seedsofsilence.org.uk or email alison@seedsofsilence.org.uk
