

THE DEEP SILENCE

*For while gentle silence enveloped all things,
and night in its swift course was now half gone,
your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne,
into the midst of the land that was doomed ...*

Wisdom 18:14-15

Why did God choose to enter the world so quietly? Why did he come “under cover of night”? Why didn’t he “make more noise” during his earthly sojourn? Why did he spend 30 whole years in obscurity before “going public”? Why the silence?

There are two kinds of silence: the dumb, empty kind – like that of a simpleton who has nothing to say; and the rich, pregnant kind – like that of a contemplative whose thoughts are too deep for words. The kind of silence we attribute to God is the latter. It is in fact his first language. It is the kind of language he prefers to use when ‘speaking’ his deepest truths.

The *Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us* (cf. John 1:14) is one such deep truth. When thinking of the Christmas story, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary wrapped in silent contemplation, beholding her newly born baby for the very first time, is quite easy to conjure up. That ineffable event must have been so marvelous to her that a deep, abiding silence must have been her most fitting and eloquent response. This holy kind of silence implies an openness of soul – similar in kind to that other openness from whence prayer proceeds. It is in fact this kind of sacred silence that enables us to hear that “still quiet voice” (cf. 1 Kings 19:12) of God that whispers in our hearts.

There is no place on earth where God is more present than in the human heart.
This heart truly is God’s abode, the temple of silence... The Father waits for his children in their own hearts. [...] Prayer consists of listening to God speak silently within us

Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence*.

Music, like prayer also proceeds from silence:

All music emerges from silence, to which sooner or later it must return. At its simplest we may conceive of music as the relationship between sounds and the silence that surrounds them. [...] When we create music, we express life. But the source of music is silence, which is the ground of our musical being, the fundamental note of life. How we live depends on our relationship with death; how we make music depends on our relationship with silence.

Paul Hillier, *The Music of Arvo Pärt* (1997)

In his *Screwtape Letters* – an imaginary collection of letters between a senior devil (Screwtape) and his neophyte pupil (Wormwood), – C. S. Lewis hilariously describes how music and silence are two things which cannot be found in hell. He goes on to relate – in a way that only Lewis can – how noise is “the music of hell”. The modern world generates so much noise that seeking moments of silence has become both harder and more necessary than ever before.

For us modern day Christians, this might mean turning off our phones, computers, and other technological devices and praying in a place separate from them. The very presence of technological devices keeps us from truly being open to the Word of God because they so easily distract us.

Both sacred music and sacred silence heal the soul because both enable us to encounter God more intimately ... an intimacy that gives God the leeway to silently slip into the chinks of our brokenness and the nether regions of our souls.

In the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, God did not slip in through the cracks – she had no chinks in her character; she was after all, *the* Immaculate Conception. She believed in, trusted and loved God’s promises down to the deepest fibers of her flesh. Her entire being – her ears, her mind, her heart, her flesh – was so attuned to the *words* of Scripture, that the *Eternal Word* of the Father – which she had so often heard with her ears, intuited with her intellect and loved with her heart – deigned to descend and dwell among us. The all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the bosom of the Father, and *became flesh* in her virginal womb.

The liturgical season of Advent coincides with the last month of Mary’s pregnancy. During Advent, we wait in eager anticipation with the Blessed Virgin for the promised Messiah to be born. He is already in the world, but he is “hidden” in her womb. The Church celebrates the event of the conception of the Word of God in Mary’s womb on the 25th of March and then 9 months later, on December 25th, she celebrates the birth of Jesus – *the Joy of Man’s Desiring*. The whole of creation awaited this moment with the anticipation of an expectant woman. In the northern hemisphere, two significant cosmological events occur in nature around these two dates: The Spring Equinox, around the 25th of March and the Winter Solstice, around the 25th of December.

Taking a cue from Mary, we too could learn to enter deeper into silence and scripture and contemplation and history and ..., by listening more intently to the Word of God (for example, through an exercise such as *lectio divina*), so that we might receive Him, and bring Him to the rest of the world.

We are realizing more and more clearly that silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying, to the God Who addresses us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence. It must, of course, be a **silence with content**, not just the

absence of speech and action. We should expect the liturgy to give us **a positive stillness that will restore us.**

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.