

17

Finding silence and stillness

Modern living can make us very unaccustomed to silence and stillness.

Often people feel threatened by the thought of silence even for a short time. Sometimes I am amazed by the noise issuing from a neighbouring car as I cross the street here in London and I wonder why people are so unaware of the value of silence.

When I am fortunate enough to visit the country, I often notice the soothing effect that the silence has on me.

When I take the trouble to slow down I become more conscious of the presence of God in my life. It is not even necessary to spend a lot of time in this form of spiritual exercise. It can be done in a minute.

A train journey may give you time to think and be silent. A visit to a park may dispose you to greater awareness of the presence of God. Turning off the radio or TV may give you an inkling of the possibilities that silence has to offer. Whatever happens, don't be afraid of the silence within and without. The real purpose of silence is to be able to 'hear' God with inner ears.



This story from the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah may help you to understand how God seems to have a preference for stillness and silence as a way to communicate with us.



Then Elijah went into a cave and spent the night in it. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here Elijah?' Then he was told: 'Go out and stand on the mountain before God.' Then God passed by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before God. But God was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But God was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a still, small voice, or a gentle breeze. When Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice came to him which said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

(1 Kings 19:9, 11 - 14)

Finding your own cave

When we were children we often had a favourite (sometimes secret) place where we would like to be and no one could follow us. Try to discover the secret place of peace within you and notice times when it is possible to enter into it. It may be in a very mundane way, - for instance, in the bath, walking the dog, jogging or fixing the car. When you have learnt to recognise the possibilities for quiet, capitalise on them. Then in these familiar tasks you become aware of the presence of God.

A simple stillness exercise

This exercise may help you when you have a few moments to devote to stillness and silence.

Listen to all the sounds you can hear outside the room or area where you are.

Don't push those sounds further away, but do not draw them any closer either.

Just let them be - and in this way they need not be a distraction but, in fact, they will be absorbed into the whole.

Then listen, or be aware of the sounds, or, in particular, the people who are there, too.

Once again, don't push them away, mentally, but don't draw them any closer. Just leave each person to be themselves.

Now be aware of yourself: your feet firmly on the ground; your legs; be aware that you are sitting, standing or lying down.

Try to relax your back and shoulders. Let the muscles in your neck relax as a way of letting tensions fall away.

Be conscious of your arms and hands right to the end of your fingerprints.

Try to consciously relax the muscles in your face. Then bring your concentration to rest at whatever you feel is the centre of yourself.

Take one or two good breaths then let your breathing find its own level: don't force it; just breathe naturally.

When you have consciously quietened down, then listen to the atmosphere deep within yourself and try to notice what is your prevailing feeling. It is this atmosphere which you will bring to prayer.



Using scripture as a help to stillness

1. Gently read through a passage of scripture being aware of the atmosphere of the text, so that you can almost 'taste' or 'feel' it.
2. When you are satisfied, let the scripture go as you carry it into your time of silent prayer. Then, in the way you feel most at home with, stay steadily in God's presence; simply breathing in a natural way, keeping a small word or phrase to come back to, even when your mind is filled with thoughts, just wanting to stay in God's presence, whatever you feel like.
3. After your prayer, just read through the passage of scripture again, this time noticing if the mood or texture has changed at all.

Gradually, God may lead you to a deeper understanding of this passage: one which will usually make sense in the context of your daily life. This generally happens gently and almost imperceptibly.

With thanks to Magdalen Lawler SND