

Why Not Just Be Silent? – A Digression

But do you really need an “approach” or a “way” or anything? Why not just be silent?

Well, yes, OK, if you’re a lot stronger than I am, provided we are clear what ‘silence’ actually means.

It’s not just “not saying anything aloud”. The phrase “silent prayer” came into use a long time ago – it’s even older than me – to mean saying prayers in your head. Agreed, no sound come out of your lips, but that isn’t silence; the sound is still there inside. Silent prayer in this sense is not silent – though it is prayer.

So the silence I am talking about means no speaking outside or inside your head.

Again, we mustn’t be too literal here. I am sure everyone is different, but equally I am sure we aren’t that different, and while most of the activity inside my head is words, pictures and music aren’t that uncommon. It’s not just the words which have to be silenced – it’s everything else as well.

For many people – I would guess, most people – this is a problem. As soon as you try to silence your mind thoughts just keep sneaking in – oh, not instantly, perhaps, but pretty quickly. Have you turned the oven off? Was the dog seeming a bit down in the mouth? Was that [insert preference here] I met the other day really as sexy as I remember? Is Mum still upset about the teacup?

And however often you catch them and put them well behind you, they will creep back. And so after a bit the whole thing just gets tedious – and neither silent nor prayer, just pointless.

Of course there are exceptions, and maybe you are one, who can silence their world, both their outer and their inner world, without effort. If you are such, I salute you, and I would value your comments.

But this booklet is aimed at everyone else. And it’s about empowering you to get into true silence, with only a few things creeping in that are easy to put well behind you. Only then will you see the point. And that’s why we begin with a very standard approach, that a lot of people will have tried at one time or another.

‘Well Behind You’ – A Digression

Just to make sure there’s no misunderstanding at this point, I’d like to deal with a background detail, to clarify things.

Imagine you are walking up the street with your toddler’s reins in one hand and your dog’s lead in the other. You stop at the Co-op: you tie your dog up outside with a bowl of water and make sure your dog is safe and comfortable, but you take your toddler in with you.

Of course, the toddler keeps snatching for the pretty packages on the shelves. You find it hard to shop while controlling the child, but even so, you don’t march the child out and tie it up next to the dog – you just keep the child well behind you as much as you can, so that you can get your shopping done without rejecting your child.

That phrase ‘well behind you’ is common in books about prayer, and especially about prayer in silence. It is about controlling all the stray thoughts or distractions or misunderstandings that plague us in the silence.

Controlling, but never suppressing. Controlling, but never rejecting. Christianity is never about rejection; it’s about the lengths God has gone to to avoid rejecting us or anybody. So don’t reject all the things that shouldn’t be in your prayer – just accept them, offer them to God, put them well behind you and move on from where you are. They won’t stop, but they won’t interrupt you – they’ll be like a fly buzzing against the windowpane, to quote a famous writer on prayer.

Learning Prayers By Heart – A Digression

I know that many traditions reject this, on the grounds that it is stifling the Spirit, and that the Bible condemns them as ‘using vain repetitions, as the heathens do.’ If this is where God has led you, then that’s fine – I’m not trying to convince you otherwise. It does mean that some of the suggestions I make just aren’t acceptable to you, but that’s going to happen anyway; as I said in my introduction, none of these ideas work for everyone, and nobody will find all of them to work – I say again, I certainly don’t – so it’s to be expected that you will find some ideas off the table, for this or for other reasons. That’s OK by me.

But for others, what you need are prayers you know truly by heart; not just know roughly, or can recall if you think, but know immediately and without having to think or remember. Many Christians know some form of the Lord’s Prayer, for instance, and the Grace is so familiar that many churches with screens don’t bother to display it.

I have found the ‘Jesus Prayer’ –

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”

the ‘Kyrie’ –

“Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy”

and the Gloria –

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end, Amen”

worth knowing, and I’ve seen a few others: the song of the seraphim:

“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.”

The shout of the crowd on Palm Sunday

“Blessèd is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest.”

and the angels' song at Bethlehem:

“Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth.”

recommended as well. Communion services in many traditions have a number of possible prayers, often strung together into a larger item; that might be a source worth exploring. But anyway, you will have your own favourites.

However it is with you, it is worth building up your list of prayers, just adding one more maybe every few years. They aren't a replacement for spontaneous or extemporary prayer; they are useful in their own right for things like this.

And I repeat – just knowing them isn't enough: they have to be completely instinctive.

In Church – A Digression

It would have been unheard-of fifty years ago, but nowadays even people who lead worship have sometimes begun to value silence. It is even creeping into formal orders of service – though far too often it is ignored by the leader or given merely a fleeting break of a second or less.

But if there is an actual silence in a service, and we are in the congregation, how should we use it?

Now it gets complicated: there are no less than three possibilities.

First, the silence is announced, the reason for the silence is known or announced, and the length of the silence is known or announced.

A well-known example is the Two Minutes' Silence at Remembrance Day: the clue is in the name. In this case, we simply do as we are told; we think prayerfully – or pray thoughtfully – about the lives lost, the dead, the living, the pain, the courage, all the consequences to the living, and about war itself. Nothing needs explanation – just be there for that two minutes.

Another example is a Society Of Friends (Quaker) meeting; you know why you are here, you know – roughly – how long the silence will be, and you can use the silence on that basis. Just do it. If you are unsure, ask another Friend before you start; they will be delighted that you are interested enough to ask advice, and will give you every possible support. Or at least, that's my experience.

Second, the silence is announced, and the reason for the silence is announced, but we have no idea how long the silence is.

For example, a leader may announce, “Let us, in a moment of silence, bring our sins before the throne of God.” How long is a moment? Sadly, it is unusual for the moment to be long enough actually to obey the instruction, but at least let's make a start. Who knows whether we can finish – indeed, it may be that we find that no length of time would have been enough – but even starting will colour our response to wherever the leader takes us next. And that is probably enough.

A variant of this is where the silence is actually unannounced, but it happens, and the reason is obvious. Treat it the same way, once you are sure of what is

going on. I realise that being sure of what is going on in a service may be optimistic, but make your best guess.

Third, the silence just happens. No length or reason is given.

In this case, all I can suggest is to fall back on one of the ideas in this booklet; or whatever approach to silence suits you best. Of course, having read this booklet or something similar and gathered some experience in silence will be a big help in this situation!

Finally, if you are someone who leads worship, and you think (probably wrongly) I can help you use silence in worship, there isn't much more to say: announce the silence, say what the silence is for, and (roughly) how long it will last.

So don't just say, "Now we will have a moment of silence" – even if you are in the middle of, say, intercession, the congregation will need to think what the silence is for, and by then the silence may well be over. Instead say, "Now we will have half a minute or so of silence, to bring before God those we know need our prayers." Or something like that.

And similarly elsewhere. Tell the congregation in simple words why and how long.

Oh, and don't guess. Your mobile phone has a clock app on it that gives you minutes and seconds – use it, Or if mobile phones are too modern for you, wear a watch with a seconds hand. If you guess, you will always be too short.

Barriers – A Digression

Barriers – things that try to stop you. Yes, they are there, and they are a nuisance.

Two kinds.

The first kind: external barriers, that stop you before you've even started, these are easy to understand, and sometimes hard to overcome – but they are about your lifestyle, your situation. Can you sneak the amount of time you need from somewhere? Can you turn off alarms and buzzers? Can you get away from other people? Your problem, I'm afraid; there really is nothing I can do to help.

The other kind: internal barriers, that stop you while you are doing it. These are more important to understand: it's difficult to describe experience, but they often take the form of a sudden feeling that you've finished; that it's time to stop for now and come back another time. They tend to happen at fairly predictable times – for instance, I find there's almost always one at around twenty seconds – and they aren't aggressive, just convincing. Also, they usually happen for no obvious reason; they just happen.

Something to consider is that these barriers may be right; especially for a beginner, remember this isn't penance or martyrdom! It is often a good idea to try something, come out at the first barrier, and think and pray about what happened. Did it feel right? Did it feel comfortable? Do you think you understood? Did you get something from it?

If you don't come out at a barrier, then you need to step over it. This is usually easy in itself – it just needs a bit of willpower – but it often leads to a somewhat different experience, often a deeper or clearer version of what you've experienced so far. Bear in mind, therefore, that the more barriers you step over, the more the experience becomes personal; fitted and shaped to you and your needs, and therefore the less I can describe.

And I've heard that it's not unknown for barriers to hide treasure. But I'm very ignorant of such things.

Prayer In Work, Prayer In Life – A Digression

“Laborare est orare” - “to work is to pray”. That was a motto attributed to the Benedictine monks in mediaeval times, although this precise form is hard to pin down. St. Benedict himself probably said “Laborare et orare”, or something similar “to work and to pray”. A subtle distinction, admittedly, but the relationship between work and prayer - between our “ordinary life” and our “prayer life” has always been important to Christians, and an attack point for anti-Christians.

One of the purposes of silent prayer is to resolve that relationship; to enable work and prayer to become interwoven, so that both become stronger.

This is not a new idea, therefore; St Benedict taught around AD 400, and his teachings never fell out of view. Indeed they were the subject of writing after writing in the centuries since - most famously, perhaps, in “The Practice Of The Presence Of God” - a seventeenth century collection of writings by and about Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite lay-brother, who almost instinctively adopted this idea in his own working life.

But if we are not blessed as Brother Lawrence was, but we want to break down the division between our “ordinary” life and our “prayer” life, how do we start?

Well, first, we need to know what prayer is. I don’t mean the dictionary definition, even less the theologians’ expositions of prayer; no, we need to know prayer from the inside – to know what prayer is from the inside. We need to know how it feels, how it works, how it touches us. We don’t need to “do” prayer; we need to “be” prayer.

And too many people think prayer is saying your prayers.

Silence can get us through that barrier, the “saying your prayers” barrier, to real prayer. To prayer that is experienced, not chanted.

If you glance through this pamphlet you will find a few references to using “vain repetitions as the heathens do”, and fair enough in many cases, but we do need to be clear: this quotation isn’t condemning set prayers - anyone who has experienced it knows how easily extempore prayer can degenerate into repeating the same old clichés over and over, just as vainly. Prayer is, in itself, neither set words nor extempore - it isn’t words at all. It doesn’t matter whether the words are chosen in the moment or go back ten thousand years;

words can carry prayer, but they are not in themselves prayer. Saying our prayers is not wrong, but it is a bearer of prayer, not prayer itself.

The more we use silence, the more we will experience prayer, prayer that is behind the words, prayer that we always knew was there, but is so hard to separate from the words that carry it. Once we can experience prayer without the useful but in the end unnecessary trappings of words, then even silence will eventually become unnecessary and we will at last understand what prayer truly is - and then we can use that understanding to pray in all we do, to underpin all we do with prayer, to understand and obey Paul's call to "Pray - without ceasing, pray!"

Intercession – A Digression

To many people outside the Church, intercessory prayer is the only kind of prayer; yet despite that (or because of that?) intercessory prayer does get a bad reception within the churches!

For a start, there is an artificial distinction made between ‘intercession’ for other people, and ‘petition’ for yourself. I call it an artificial distinction, because it flies in the face of Jesus’ great commands: to love God, and *your neighbour as yourself* – we should not be separating ourselves from our neighbour, but recognising that we are all together in the same boat.

In practice, this apparently esoteric theological error marks the real danger of patronising our neighbour in prayer – telling God that we know better than our neighbour what our neighbour needs. The ancient saying “Nothing about us without us is for us” (“Nil de nobis, sine nobis, est nobis”) sums it up perfectly. At times, this patronising actually overflows towards God – we can start telling God what he ought to be doing, if only he were as intelligent and perceptive as we are!

Second, there is strong resistance among some so-called ‘liberal Christians’ to the whole idea of a God who cares enough about us actually to intervene – actually to make a difference. Such people claim that all that prayer does is to help us to accept submissively that everything is in accordance with the will of a God who does not interfere, or else that God is merely an optional extra in a secularist, deterministic ‘universe’, and all prayer is meaningless anyway.

Neither of these ‘modernist’, ‘liberal’ views is truly Christian; they are impossible to sustain alongside the Cross and the Resurrection! The Bible teaches, the Church has always taught, and Christians have always believed in – more, Christians have always experienced and known – a God who loves us, who loves his whole creation, who actually came down into his creation, as one of us, actively interfering, actively changing everything.

Being a Christian isn’t about accepting a set of beliefs; it is about walking alongside a friend, a friend who would do – and has done – anything for us. A friend who listens, a friend who helps, a friend who cares enough to intervene, at any cost – even the cost of the Cross.