

Ways of using Silence

In private prayer

with some digressions

Using Silence – An Introduction

At last, silence seems to be becoming fashionable. At last, after decades when the prescribed silences in Books Of Offices and Prayer Books were trimmed down to less than a second, now they are actually lasting long enough almost to be effective. At last the Two Minutes Silence at Remembrance Day services is no longer freakish. Even the media have noticed; we have had several programs – admittedly, ill advertised and at dead times – about retreats and the effects of days of silence on the rejuvenation of the human spirit.

In prayer meetings, too, even – almost, especially – in “Evangelical” or “Fundamentalist” prayer meetings, so often associated with long, vocal, wordy, and loud prayer, the benefits of silently “dwelling in the Word” or “allowing God to speak” are becoming more and more recognised and valued.

So also in private prayer, more and more people are exploring silence, and not just a few seconds of silence, but minutes at a time – even, for a few, hours of silence.

Which is great – when it works. And very often it does work, otherwise why would people do it? But not always; not for everybody. I have heard several people who say they have tried to explore what they thought was the ‘proper’ way to use silence, but it doesn’t seem to do it for them – what are they getting wrong?

Nothing.

Honestly, there’s no need to feel guilty. Prayer is simply getting closer to God: the things we use in prayer – words, silence, music, whatever – are simply tools to use for that. So if one tool doesn’t work for you, just try another one.

But Silence is the Swiss Army Knife of prayer – there are so many different ways of using it. The currently fashionable approach, using a word as a focus, works for a lot of people a lot of the time, but not for everybody, and even those who find it works today may find it doesn’t seem to work tomorrow. But there are many other approaches to try before giving up on silence altogether – and indeed, a change is as good as a rest, they say, so even if you are comfortable with one approach, it might be nice to try something different occasionally.

So over the next few chapters I’ll be describing different ways of using silence. But if you’re looking for something radical or novel – I’m sorry, but

there's not going to be anything like that here. These will be simple, well-known, straight-forward ways of using silence, and some will work for some people, none will work for everyone, and nobody will find all of them to work – I certainly don't. Just follow where the Spirit is leading you; and remember, if one doesn't suit you now, it may do some other time.

Or try one of the ways I won't have described, but that the Spirit is leading you to.

I've also popped in some digressions, to clarify a few things that I find get misunderstood, especially a few jargon terms that may have crept in. They are fairly basic – easy to skip if you're past that sort of thing. But perhaps we should clear away a few even more basic things: namely

A Few Questions That I Get Asked

How long will a session take?

How long is a piece of string? But for beginners – and nobody who isn't a beginner needs to read this – I'd think in minutes, and maybe just in double figures? Or maybe less, especially when you first start.

Unlike many things in life, silence tends to get longer the more you use it; in other words, practice slows you down.

Should using silence like this be part of a normal prayer time, or should it be separate?

Both work for me, but at different times. Bear in mind, though, that the time you will take may change – and by quite a lot – between these two cases. Bear in mind, too, that when you use silence as part of a normal prayer time, the timing may well change with time – the barriers may be more or less frequent, and more or less easy to step over.

I've tried this sort of thing before, and I just can't suppress my thoughts.

Good.

Yes, I mean it. Good.

You don't suppress your thoughts – you don't suppress anything; that's not how Christianity works. Just put your thoughts well behind you, and they'll tag along without being a nuisance.

And In Closing

Well, that's it for my suggestions on using silence. There are more possibilities – dozens more! – but most of them are variations of what I have put forward here. They may be on other material – hymn verses as prayers, for example – or they may be variations on the same principle, as with the various forms of Lectio Divina. All are good; after all, what matters is that you – we – I – use silence to become closer to God, with ears and hearts that are more open to his words and his love.

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.”