

THE USE OF SILENCE

Address given by the Rev. S.D. Rogerson, Kilchoman with Portnahaven, to Presbytery of South Argyll on 28th April, 1982.

For about ten days at the beginning of April, I was unable to speak as I was suffering from laryngitis. I used that time of enforced silence to develop the theme I had already chosen for today's meeting - 'The Use of Silence'.

Silence is not a talent readily associated with the Ministry. Yet, I feel a proper understanding of the role and use of silence can be a great asset to the private devotional life as well as to our ministry among our people.

The Bible is full of references to the use of silence in terms of our relationship to God. This is particularly true of the psalms where, in Psalm 46, we find the most famous exhortation to silence - "Be still and know that I am God." But other less well known quotations are, for example:-

"For God alone, my soul waits in silence".

"Commune with your hearts on your beds and be silent".

And in the Prophets, phrases like:-

"Let all the earth keep silent before him".

"Be silent everyone in the presence of the Lord".

And, of course, the use of silence, the art of being still, figures strongly in the pattern of our Lord's life. We find him frequently withdrawing from the crowds into the hills, into a boat, into the desert. Jesus found it very necessary to withdraw from people and places and to spend the time alone with his Father.

If we are to accept the biblical and dominical commands to silence, we then have to take the matter a step further. Let us consider the definition of silence. In terms of a standard dictionary, silence is defined as stillness, quietness, calmness. To us, silence tends to mean the absence of noise. For the purpose of our exercise this afternoon, I would like to draw a distinction between quite separate modes of silence.

The first is external silence - the absence of noise and external distractions. The second is internal silence - the quieting of our inner voices and inner turmoil. These two kinds of silence are not mutually exclusive but one is not necessarily dependent on the other. When I speak of internal silence, I mean the silence of the soul - the total quieting of all that goes on inside - so that thought itself seems to cease. Not the daydream kind of silence, but the positive stilling of the mind, the cutting off of all inner distractions and thoughts and being still in the presence of God.

But to be practical, let us consider, first, the use of these two types of silence in our individual lives.

Each one of us here leads a busy life. For many of us, and especially those of us who are Ministers, having a day off is often difficult. Finding time to be alone, to sit in the study, is often impossible. We rely on holidays and time out of the parish situation to refresh and restore our souls. But each one of us would benefit a great deal from periods of silence. At its most simple, there are days when, to quote Jean Grigor of the Group Relations and Counselling Unit of the Church of Scotland, we need to re-arrange our environments - in other words - make an oasis for ourselves in the middle of turmoil by switching off the T.V. and radio; by taking the telephone off the hook; by locking the study door - and finding somewhere quiet and comfortable for two or three hours where we can be alone in silence. Having done this, we have then created a situation of external silence. This is a golden time for meditation and reflection, for thinking through some of our problems, for planning ahead in the parish, for thinking of sermon material - whatever seems appropriate to us. Such times can be golden - the removal of external pressures and noise and the opportunity to commune with ourselves.

I believe we need this kind of regular quiet, spiritual retreat - call it what you will. The results are a refreshed mind and a recharged battery. It benefits us and it benefits the parish. It is important to follow this pattern. If Jesus found it necessary to withdraw from the demands of the people, I think we ought to find it necessary also. It allows us to do what is so invaluable - take three steps back from a situation - to distance ourselves from the problems we are dealing with - and it allows us an opportunity for reflection and thought. Too often we find that we do all our thinking on our feet, travelling in the car or lying awake in bed at night. Thinking under these circumstances is like living constantly on sandwiches eaten on the move. We end up with mental indigestion and staleness. It should also be noted that falling asleep after lunch in front of the fire for a couple of hours is not the same as creating an atmosphere of silent meditation.

But sometimes the absence of external noise can be more than some of us can bear because that absence of noise suddenly looses the internal chaos.

Internal silence is the greatest gift of all. It requires us to set up, at least initially, the situation of external silence. We need then to quieten our minds; to stop thinking process dead in its tracks; to set up a brick wall round our minds and refuse to let stray thoughts enter; to bring to a standstill all the churning, emotional and thinking processes that are constantly within us and to be still "and know that I am God". For that is the object of the whole exercise - to be still in the presence of God - to be aware of God and listening . How much we would all benefit from a regular dose of that kind of spiritual stillness and silence and to allow the still small voice of calm to break through the cacophony of inner voices. It is of outstanding value as a spiritual exercise. It is also useful as a good health aid. It can be used in a variety of ways - from the total stilling of the mind in the presence of God - simply to be aware and enjoy God - or it can be a way of bringing a particular person or problem and holding it before God. It is also of immense value when we are going through the spiritual deserts of life; when prayer seems difficult, if not pointless; when we can no longer truly communicate with God except through well worn phrases and formulas that don't really come from the heart. How easy it is in times like that to come before God and be still. 'I have nothing to say - but here I am, Lord.'

Worship

One of the themes or hobby-horses of the present day church is congregational involvement in worship. We will not debate or discuss that question today except to say that silence in worship can be used to devastating effect. At its most mundane it brings wandering attentions during a sermon back into focus. If you are unfortunate enough to discover most of the congregation have taken to considering Sunday lunch when you still have several important points to make, a useful tool is to pause for longer than expected. If you have the courage to keep this silence going for a reasonable time, the eyes will come again to the pulpit, wondering if you have finished and they have missed the end or perhaps wondering if you have suffered a heart attack. Whatever, silence is a useful tool.

But to be really serious, I believe its most important role comes in your public prayers. Personally, I have revulsion against the average public prayer of a Church of Scotland service. Not, I hasten to add, because they are generally bad but because no matter how good the prayers are, they can never really be more than the prayers of a Minister on behalf of the people - which is a priestly function I can live without. Surely, public prayer should be prayer by the congregation. I am not convinced that prayers by the congregation are achievable by the use of response or printed prayers either. Rather, I suggest that prayer should be individual and yet corporate. You may or may not agree with any of this but let me explain by normal Sunday morning practice in the prayers of confession and intercession.

I refuse steadfastly to confess the sins of my people on their behalf. Surely, it is of better effect to say - "and now let us confess our sins before God - the sins of the spoken word, the sins of action etc." And then silence.

Similarly with intercessions. "Let us pray for our country and our Queen and for all those in authority over us." And then silence.

Our silence then becomes a time when Minister and people together offer their prayers to God. And the Minister fulfills his true function of leading worship rather than leading and conducting like a one man band. Let us be suggesters of prayer rather than prayers on behalf of an inactive audience. All that is needed is a simple explanation of the system. Then we have true congregational response. And we can finish with a formula such as - "Father, these our prayers we offer them to you as your family etc.

Of course, the period of silence must be long enough to be of use; long enough for people to be aware that silence has fallen; long enough to allow the nervous cough and shuffling feet to be stilled so that true silence does dawn on the act of worship; so that people and pastor become aware of the holy silence of God. Certainly, some may wander and think of the Sunday lunch. I have been known to do that myself. But the very act of being silent will for some be the only time in the whole week when all noise and pressure have ceased and even if they make no effort to pray, they are still at peace and quiet within the house of God; at one with their fellow Christians and quiet in the presence of God.

Too many people are afraid of silence. It embarrasses them. That is because they do not know the meaning of inner silence. And for them it can be frightening to be left alone with the turmoil of the inner mind. But in public gatherings for worship or business, there is a magic moment of transition. We say in church, for example, 'let us keep silent before God'. What we have, initially, is merely the absence of sound but always, if we have the courage to wait, that absence of sound transforms itself into silence - true silence - when the presence of God becomes truly apparent. It is something that really defies quantitative description but it does happen and it is so tangible that it can almost be touched and you can almost say - it has happened now. If, for example, in a prayer of intercession, we begin after the first petition with a silence long enough to allow this transition to take place, then future gaps do not need to take so long. How glorious it is to feel the silence of a truly worshipping and reverent congregation. I believe too, a strong case could be made out for periods of silence outwith the context of prayer within the life of the congregation on a Sunday morning or evening. I believe this, as a regular part of our worship could be most beneficial. Let us keep silence before the Lord. Or perhaps say a verse of scripture for meditation followed by a period of silence.

Pastoral Situations

I believe that the constructive use of silence within the context of a pastoral visit can be made beneficial. Sometimes I fear we are too quick to jump in with our ready made answers and comments. How much more we might achieve by remaining silent.

I don't know whether you've noticed the use of this technique by fairly unscrupulous television interviewers - the kind who are usually out of the camera shot, who put questions to a man or woman in full camera view. They ask a leading question which receives a guarded reply and then they remain silent and usually the person feels under pressure to fill the silent gap and goes on to say something else, usually something they wish they had not said. I am not suggesting that we should engage in this kind of psychological pressure, but in a difficult pastoral situation we should avoid jumping in to fill the awkward silence. We should never feel under pressure to keep the flow of words going. Often, the judicious use of silence allows the parishioner to formulate the words they are looking for, to pick carefully the way they want to put something to us. If people have a difficult

or painful or embarrassing confidence to share with us, we have to allow them time to do it; time and space in silence to find the faltering, stumbling words to express themselves. We must always bear in mind that, compared to the average person, we are experts in the use and abuse of language. For many of them, the sharing and expressing of their innermost thoughts is difficult. We should not fill in the natural gaps in conversation. Maintain a wise silence and much can be revealed and many burdens cast off. Listen rather than speak. This point could obviously be developed much more but I think sufficient has been said to illustrate this particular use of silence. Silence can be used positively. It does not need to be embarrassing. It can be a most effective pastoral tool.

It goes, I trust, without further amplification, that silence is at its most effective during a time of bereavement when we find ourselves sitting quietly by a fireside simply sharing in silence the grief of the widow or mother. Silence gives confidence and strength. Just being there and being a willing, listening ear is of great value. But it must be positive and active silence - the waiting and giving of our whole attention to the person who finds it difficult to speak.

Business Meetings

I believe it is also a useful tool in Kirk Sessions and in Presbytery. Often we have difficult and awkward matters to discuss. Sometimes we get ourselves into real fankles. Shouldn't we be prepared in such situations to call the Session to order and say, 'let us pray', and put the situation to God or ask for his guidance on the matter on hand and then keep silence to allow each of us time to draw breath and to focus our thoughts on the question; to distance ourselves for a minute or two from the torrent of words that so often beset us; to allow space for God to be; for us to become aware of God.

I've often thought our Presbytery meetings would be greatly improved if prior to or even during difficult discussions or debates, we drew apart for a while in silence just to catch breath and gather our thoughts and put ourselves consciously back into the presence of God. How often, too, we arrive at this hall fresh, or, rather, not so fresh, from a long car journey or from lunch in the hotel. We blether and greet one another, read our papers, fill in our expenses form - and then, suddenly, the shout goes up 'Moderator' and we are away into hymns, Bible readings and prayers and straight into business. All this without the chance to draw breath and

to come together. I often think - and it is with some diffidence I suggest this - we would all be in a better frame of mind if, instead of ploughing on, we took the opportunity at the beginning of every Presbytery just to keep quiet and relax into the knowledge and presence of God, to become aware of why we are here and in whose name we are meeting. The chance during the prayer or after the Bible reading to gather our thoughts; to be still and know that we are in the presence of God and it is the business of His church that we are about; to become one, with each other and with God in holy silence.

Conclusion

You may or may not agree with what I have said. It may be that you are all aware of this use of silence. But to me it is important and underused. I find it of great benefit and help and I am grateful for the opportunity of being able to share these thoughts with you.

In conclusion, I would just like to reiterate this. Silence is not something to be embarrassed about or afraid of or to feel uncomfortable in. Silence is a gift of God and we have good biblical precedence for making use of it. Very often we say something or make short speeches to Presbytery or to our Sessions and are frightened or puzzled by the silence that follows. We should not be. We often need time to digest what is said, time to think and to reflect. For example, at the last meeting of Presbytery we had a discussion on Mission. If I remember correctly, there was total silence when the speakers had finished. This was then followed by discussion. I believe that the silence that followed the speakers should not be understood as no response, but response in many of us at a deep level. Always, people need time to think, to pause and to reflect. So often, that is not allowed to happen.

Be silent everyone in the presence of God.

Commune with your own hearts on your beds and be silent.

Be still and know that I am God.

Consider the words of Whittier's great hymn:-

O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity, interpreted by love.
Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease,
Take from our souls the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.
Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm,
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire,
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire
O still small voice of calm.

Be still and know that I am God.

