



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אָבֻדִּים

Silence

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Silence is an absence of sound, noise, and words. Silence is the presence of a certain pregnancy. A “pregnant pause” is an interruption that nurtures the expectation of something to come. Silence opens spaces, and silence closes communication.

Silence is an invitation to speak; it opens the heart; it creates an expectation for a word to break the silence. In the beginning is the word – and the word transforms silence the way light transforms darkness. Silence can also close the heart if the redeeming word is withheld, if silence is defiant. Silence can express respect and care as well as a lack of respect and indifference.

When we reach limits of language – because of the mystery of the sacred, the mystery of evil – we often move to silence.

The Silences of Jesus of Nazareth

There is a plural here, silences:

The silence in the presence of the Canaanite woman. She is shouting and asking for mercy on behalf of her daughter. “But he did not answer her at all” (Matthew 15:23). Then his silence is broken by her persistence. He speaks the memorable words: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and – even more of an insult: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26)

The silence in the presence of the woman who was about to be stoned as an adulteress. Jesus bends down and writes with his finger on the ground (John 8:6). Then his silence is broken by the accusers’ persistence, pestering him with questions. He speaks the memorable words: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7).

The silence of Jesus in front of the Council after his arrest. He is questioned. “But he was silent and did not answer” (Mark 14:61). The High Priest asks a further question, “Are you the Messiah?” (Mark 14:61), and Jesus breaks his silence.

Words born out of silence. Silence broken by persistence. Which words? Whose silence?

Is breaking the silence an act of violence? Is remaining silent violent?

In refraining from possible speech, something is held back; silence has a moment of reticence. Jesus is silent, with a “silence about something” and a “silence before someone.”

Jesus’ silence is instructive; here, silence is counter-discourse, not a counter-argument but a counter-language game. Jesus’ silence is exposed to the hegemonic listening of those around him, who seek to conquer Jesus’ silence.

Silence and the Holy Land

The violence in the holy land can render us speechless, can change the meaning of words, can make words meaningless.

“I am lost for words.” “Words fail me.” Words are treasures that can be sought and found. It is a loss not to have words. But silence is not poverty, not only deprivation of words. Silence can be required, forbidden, and indifferent.

A fundamental distinction regarding silence is between epistemically justified silence (silence based on knowledge: because I understand what I could say, I say nothing) and epistemically unjustified silence (silence based on ignorance: I have nothing to say). These two forms of silence are alluded to in chapter 20 of the Book of Jesus Sirach: “Some people keep silent and are thought to be wise, while others are detested for being talkative. Some people keep silent because they have nothing to say, while others keep silent because they know when to speak” (Sir 20:5–6).

A wise person, according to the tenor of wisdom literature, knows how to remain silent (Prov 11:12).

Can there be wisdom in the sight of violence that renders us speechless? Can there be a “logos” in the midst of cruelty?

When he visited the concentration camp Auschwitz on 28 May 2006, Pope Benedict XVI said (after having honored the history of the space with silence): “To speak in this place of horror, in this place where unprecedented mass crimes were committed against God and man, is almost impossible – and it is particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany. In a place like this, words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence – a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could

you tolerate all this? In silence, then, we bow our heads before the endless line of those who suffered and were put to death here; yet our silence becomes in turn a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation, a plea to the living God never to let this happen again.”

Silence is also “silence about.” The famous lines of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (7) come to mind: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” What does ‘thereof’ mean? (“Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen”) – What does “darüber” mean?¹ Silence has an object, and silence has a place – when we are silent, there is a positionality to our silence. We are silent “from somewhere.”

The violence in the holy land can make us speechless. The silence of speechlessness: there are no words, or the words available are not appropriate. There is the silence of not knowing enough to say anything. And there is the silence of knowing too much to be able to break the silence.

Silence is eloquent. Silence that waits to be interrupted can be “hospitable silence,” silence that invites a word, the next word. Silence that waits to be interrupted can be “provocative silence” that seeks to force the next move in the conversation.

Silence creates a density that gives power to the word; as Max Picard puts it: “The word came from silence, from the fullness of silence. The fullness would have burst through itself if it had not been able to flow into the word.”²

Silence is like creating a vast landscape that can be populated with language. The word of God in the act of creation is spoken into emptiness and silence; the Logos in the Incarnation is spoken into the emptiness of the world.

Silence of God, silence before God

There is the experience of the silence of God, often described here in the book of Habakkuk 1:13: “Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?”

How can pure eyes look at violence?

There is the silence before what is beyond our imagination and capacity to grasp.

¹ In beautiful and difficult philosophical language: “Since we are prisoners of language, it is actually silence that secures metaphysics its axiological throne” (Darko Blagojević, Vanja Vukićević Garić, 2024. “Significant Absences: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Silence and Joyce’s Poetics of the Unspoken.” *Filosofija Sociologica* 35,1: 75–82, 78). The primacy of concepts is broken which allows a focus on being.

² Max Picard, 1948, *Die Welt des Schweigens*. Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch, 18.

The violence in the holy land can render us speechless. The Catechism of the Catholic Church connects the terms “evil” and “mystery:” “The fact that God permits physical and even moral evil is a mystery” (CCC 324). When we are confronted with the mystery, we reach the limits of language and the limits of our words. It is a mystery that God is silent.

Is God silent?

There is also the silence before God: “Be silent before the Lord God!” (Zephaniah 1:7).

Mystery is not a “lack of knowledge” but an abundance of meaning. “Mystery is the capacity for inexhaustible meaning.”³

God is a mystery. Let us be silent before God. This silence gives birth to goodness. “Charity deserves to be called the Daughter of Silence.”⁴ Silence preserves the purity of the motive and probably also enables the depth of the action. Silence before God is different from silence before evil. But it is still silence.

Living with the Unfinished

Living with silence is living with the unfinished. In his beautiful essay, “Why Read the Classics,” Italo Calvino characterizes a classic as a book that never finishes saying what it has to say.

Mystery never finishes saying what it has to say. The mystery of God. Also, the mystery of evil?

And when is the Kairos for silence to be broken? “I have been silent for a long time, I have been quiet and held back. Like a woman in labor, I will now cry out, I will snort and pant” (Isaiah 42:14). Jesus said to the Pharisees who wanted him to stop his disciples from praising God: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:40).

³ James Hanvey, 2013. “Dignity, Person, and Imago Trinitatis.” In: C. McCrudden, ed., *Understanding Dignity*. Oxford: OUP, 209–228, 228.

⁴ Felix Adler, 1898. “The Moral Value of Silence.” *International Journal of Ethics* 8.3. 345–357, 350.