

The Silence of the Cross

Given how few words there are recorded between midday and 3pm one might surmise that an overriding presence during Jesus' crucifixion was ...silence. Of course not an undisturbed silence; the groans and agonies of those being crucified would be ongoing, the muffled grief of Jesus' few followers huddled near the cross and the occasional shattering of the silence by the arguments and swearing of the soldiers as they play their gambling games, oblivious to it all. Most of the crowds have probably gone home by now; in fact after the initial jeering, mockery and insults the numbers probably dwindled away pretty quickly, some feeling they had seen the main event, some beginning to get a bit bored at watching yet another slow death by crucifixion, a few perhaps wanting to remove themselves from the scene, feeling uncomfortable, perhaps sensing a chill coming on. Quietness descends as Jesus moves towards death.

The poet E.E.Cummings suggested that silence might have a number of possible fruits among which is the silent terror of confronting ourselves. The terror of confronting ourselves? The mob has got what it wanted, the death of Jesus, that man who disappointed so many, frustrated the anti-Roman imperialistic expectations of others, and insulted those august few responsible for protecting the traditions and practices of Judaism. But now the mob have got what they want they don't seem to want to stay and gloat for too long. Maybe they see once again that crushing a human life is no great victory, and even though they are convinced that their laws and religion permitted and even required it, there is yet a question mark over them and their destructive rage. The silence questions them more eloquently than any words, and instead of confronting the bloodlust that drove them on, the insecurity and fear that compelled them, they move on. Perhaps underneath as the monk Martin Smith SSJE suggests there is a source of self-destructiveness driving them on too. Self-destructiveness, Smith suggests, can be present in the human heart, but our hatred of our own selves is acted out upon one another, and here acted out on Jesus. In relation to this, in the letter of the Hebrews we are asked to contemplate Jesus in his suffering; "Consider him who endured such hostility against himself by sinners" Heb 12.3. But some of the most ancient manuscripts have this version; "Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against themselves". Just so. The hostility unleashed on Jesus the hostility that framed him and forced his appalling end, masks our own hostility against ourselves, our own self-destructiveness. Indeed Stanley Hauerwas, the American theologian suggests that when in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructs his followers to "love your enemies", Jesus is including ourselves within the category of enemies, because we can be our own worst enemy, at times. If we stay with the silence of the cross long enough we may be able to sense our short-sighted, self-destructiveness, so confronting ourselves, but it's a lot easier just to leave the scene with the crowd and go home for tea.

Jesus silence on the cross provides space for self-examination; it is yet another opportunity given to human beings for transformation, an opportunity given by the Tortured One to those engaged in the act of torturing. The silence is a space for questioning, questioning ourselves. The cross might be imagined at times to be a huge question mark, a question mark over our activities, religious and otherwise, a question mark over all that we are attached to. Where does it all lead? To heightened self-regard and cool indifference towards others? To self-righteousness and the hardening of our hearts when faced with criticism, challenge and confrontation? To our life and others' deaths?

How then are we to live with the question mark of the cross on Good Friday? Well perhaps for a start by allowing it to shape us in our relationship with truth, humility and scepticism. Truth, remembering with G.K.Chesterton that if we begin by loving our own religion, our Christianity more than the truth we will proceed to love our own version of Christianity more than any other and end by loving ourselves most of all. Did this not happen in Jesus' case, with his enemies loving their own brand of Judaism or imperialistic Roman law more than truth? Humility, because we can never be receptive to the truth if we arrogantly assume we already have it, that we can be told nothing new and that the likes of Jesus are offensive rabble-rousers devoid of genuine wisdom. Scepticism, not that self-congratulatory and superficial scepticism that stands with folded arms saying "prove it" to everything and everybody, but scepticism with regard to ourselves, sceptical of our ability to get it right all the time or even very much of the time. Sceptical too of our attempts to judge goodness accurately, conscious of our self-destructive tendencies turned outwards, conscious of our undergirding presumptions about others, conscious of our defensive self-justifications and easy dismissiveness.

Our gospel reading ends in silence. Maybe as Thomas Aquinas thought silence is not the absence of speech but what the fullness of speech demonstrates – namely that, even at its best, speech falls short. Surely it falls short today. The silence falls as darkness falls and it is an awful silence, a silence that continues through Holy Saturday; the utter ambiguous silence that leaves us not knowing how it is that God might respond to our work of self-destructiveness and self-defensiveness. But there is another dimension of this silence to be heard. Charles Peguy suggests that the night-fall and the fall of silence mark the beginning of God's bringing to an end of Good Friday. The seemingly endless day of our ingratitude, fear and self-destructiveness is being brought to a close, and our sins are as it were being covered by God's great clear night. But our sins have been done, there's no changing that. Jesus is dead. All is blackness and despair. The long-awaited Messiah has died the despised death of the lowest criminal class. Nothing we can do will bring him back. All the spring flowers and sunshine and Easter eggs and greetings cards and positive thinking in the world will not bring him back. We are left in the wreckage, in the darkness, in the silence. There is nothing – literally nothing – that can rebuild this wreckage, nothing that can lighten this darkness, nothing that can break this silence – except an act of God.