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**Grand Poverty: The Mark of Silence (Mark 10. 17-22)**

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Today we're reflecting on the second 'mark' of Benedictus, the mark of silence. I'm conscious that the reading we've just heard might seem a strange way to open our exploration of this theme.

It wasn't the first text to come to my mind either. I'd wondered, for example, about reading the famous story from the book of Kings, where the prophet Elijah is instructed to go to Mount Horeb where the Lord will pass by – there's a mighty commotion, a great wind, but the Lord is not in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake; after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord is not in the fire. After the fire, there is the sound of sheer silence in which, at last, Elijah recognises the presence of God (1 Kings 19. 11-12). Or I could have chosen one of the gospel passages which speak of Jesus' silence – when he withdraws to pray alone, for example, or when he refuses to answer his accusers. Or that story, beloved of the contemplative tradition, of Mary and Martha – with Martha distracted by her many tasks, and Mary silently listening at the feet of Jesus commended for having 'chosen the better part'.

So with all these biblical options, why have I chosen this story of the rich young man – a story in which silence isn't mentioned at all? Well, for me, this is a story which expresses in a very profound way the essential dynamic of silent prayer – and it's this dynamic that is the heart and soul of our life at Benedictus. Let's start by looking more closely at the story.

The rich young man, so our text says, ‘ran up’ to Jesus, intercepting him as he sets out on a journey. There’s urgency here, a necessity that cannot wait. He asks, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ What must I do to get God? The rich young man wants something more, something deeper than the life he’s living. Maybe – like many of us – he doesn’t really know what that means or could look like. But he’s glimpsed something in Jesus, and he’s wants what he’s got – real, intimate, powerful connection with the source of his life.

Jesus’ reply is not very forthcoming, not very encouraging. He says: ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’. He turns aside the young man’s deference, his projection. And he goes on, ‘You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother”’.

Jesus seems to be heading off any sense that there might secret knowledge on offer here, some refined, insider technique for getting closer to God or securing salvation. He reiterates the accepted and ordinary wisdom of his tradition: if you want to be in relation with God, your life must be congruent with the nature of God. Love is incompatible with malice, cruelty and exploitation. So do not murder, do not bear false witness, do not cheat, do not refuse to honour those who give you life.

He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept *all* these since my youth”. I feel as though, at this point, we hear the vulnerability in this rich young man. Moral uprightness, he’s saying, hasn’t led me to intimacy with God; I’m still hungry for something, wanting something. And Jesus responds to this vulnerability, this exposure of his deeper yearning: ‘looking at him, [he] loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me”’.

There's real irony here. Jesus says, you lack only one thing – but, as it turns out, this one thing costs everything. If you really want God, you must be handed over without self-protection and without conditions – total self-entrustment. When the rich young man heard this, 'he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'.

This is a story about the dynamic of transformation. It's about how we need to be disposed if we're to receive that for which we most long – intimacy with God, communion with all things. We need to be radically available, which means being radically dispossessed. You can't be filled with the fullness of God, if you're clogging up the space with lesser things; your life can't be received wholly from God, if you won't let go the illusory securities afforded by money, prestige and power. And that includes moral prestige and the power of religious respectability. *Anything* we possess on our own terms, to secure our own ends, gets in the way.

Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Mary, Peter, Paul – our tradition is filled with the stories of those who have consented to this movement of dispossession, to an undoing of the identity and forms of belonging they'd known, so as to receive their lives, their very selves as gift and call. Discipleship is about saying yes to this invitation to hand yourself over and to the constant vulnerability of living responsively, our security sourced in our relation to God and not in possessions or achievements of our own.

For the rich young man, material wealth was an expression of this self-securing identity – which is why Jesus invited him to let it go. But material wealth is not the only possession that gets between us and radical availability for God. The early teachers of contemplative prayer recognised that prime among our possessions are our thoughts ... our plans, our self-talk, our obsessions and ambitions, our complaints, judgements, anxieties, compulsions – ultimately our self-consciousness itself. It's not that they thought all thinking was bad. They just recognised how our habitual patterns of thought,

our attachment to our story about ourselves, keep us stuck in destructive illusions and separate from God. How do we give away these possessions? How do we let them go? By practising silence. The silence of the mind.

Silent, contemplative prayer is a practice of dispossession at the level of consciousness itself. John Main said: 'Now perhaps this is the greatest thing that we can do as conscious human beings – to offer our consciousness to God'.<sup>1</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> century John Cassian spoke of rejecting and refusing the 'abundant riches of thought' by 'grasping the [grand] poverty of a single verse' – a mantra. And theologian Sarah Coakley has described this kind of silent prayer as a 'defenseless prayer of silent waiting on God'.<sup>2</sup> What makes this practice so profoundly transforming is that (in Coakley's words) 'it marks [your] willed engagement in the pattern of cross and resurrection'.<sup>3</sup> You hand your self-consciousness over, you let go your self-possession, and respond to Christ's call, to 'come follow me'.

This is always difficult. There's some part of us, like the rich young man, that can't believe the call is this radical. We're shocked and, even if we don't quite go away 'grieving', we find ways around it. As Main says: 'The call of Jesus to "leave self behind" is easily muted or compromised. Most often it is just postponed'.<sup>4</sup> Maybe we think we'll get to it later. Maybe we think it doesn't really mean *that*. Maybe we think if we just hang around the edges, doing a bit of meditation, attending a few retreats – that will get us there. It's so much easier to talk *about* the journey, to talk about discipleship and the promise of transformation, than it is actually to practise giving up self-possession in a

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<sup>1</sup> John Main, *Moment of Christ: Prayer as the Way to God's Fullness*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.35.

<sup>4</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p.47.

daily, disciplined and intentional way. But in the end, this doesn't serve us. It doesn't answer our yearning for God.

Benedictus is a community which is serious about the call of discipleship, the journey of transformation. We practise silent meditation as part of every service because we don't just want to talk *about* the journey, we want to take the next step. We want to support each other to respond to Jesus' call to leave behind everything that separates us from communion with God, everything that leaves us isolated, fearful and lacking love. In our silence we are together radically available, risking everything for love of God. As we are faithful to this way, we will be blessed and so become blessing for the world.