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Grand Poverty: Practising Silence (Mark 10. 17-22)

Sarah Bachelard

When we reflected on the marks of Benedictus five years ago, the reading we just heard was the one I chose to explore the mark of silence. I said then that it might seem a strange text to draw on. We could have read, for example, the famous story from the book of Kings, where the prophet Elijah is instructed to go to Mount Horeb to wait for the Lord to 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 speaks 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 sitting at the feet of Jesus commended for having 'chosen the better part'. So with all these biblical options, why choose this story of a rich man struggling to let go his possessions – a story in which silence isn't mentioned at all? Well, let's see.

A man 'ran up' to Jesus, intercepting him as he was setting out on a journey, and asks, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' It seems he's in the grip of real urgency, a need so consuming that his question cannot wait. Maybe – like many of us – he doesn't really know what he's asking for. But he's glimpsed something in Jesus. He wants something more than the life he's living, and he senses Jesus may have an answer. Though it's perhaps worth noting that he frames his question and understands his desire, in terms of possession: 'What must I do to **inherit** eternal life'? What must I do to 'obtain' God?

Jesus' reply is, at first, neither forthcoming nor encouraging. He says: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone'. It's almost a rebuke, a turning

aside of the man's deference. Perhaps he senses a tendency in him to 'outsource' responsibility for his spiritual life. Jesus 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"'. He seems to be heading off any sense that there might be secret knowledge on offer here, some refined, insider technique for getting closer to God or securing salvation. He reiterates the ordinary wisdom of the 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 or dishonour others.

Then the man said to him, "Teacher, I have kept *all* these since my youth". At this point, it's as though we hear his vulnerability. In Matthew's version of this story, he is described as a 'young man'. Moral uprightness, religious devotion, 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 a deeper yearning: 'looking at him, [he] loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will 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. When the man heard this, 'he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'.

This is a story about the dynamic of conversion – transformation. It's about how we need to be disposed if we're really to receive that for which we most long – intimacy with God, communion with all. The beginning is desire – wanting it. But to go further involves a deepening of availability and receptivity. The demanding truth of the spiritual life is that you can't be filled with the fullness of God, if you're clogging up space with lesser things; you can't receive your life wholly from God, if you won't let go the life you possess on your own terms.

For the rich man in this story, wealth was a source and expression of his self-securing, self-sufficient self – which is why Jesus invites him to let it go and entrust

himself without reserve to the way. But material wealth is not the only possession that gets between us and God. Teachers of contemplative prayer recognise that prime among our possessions are our thoughts – our ambitions, desires, complaints, judgements, anxieties, compulsions, plans. These are what comprise the selves we think we are; they're what anchor us in the identities we know and seek to defend. It's not that this self and self-consciousness is bad. But if it's all we know, if it's the only place we live from, then we perceive and act in ways that are necessarily self-referencing, often divided, and always less than whole. Rather than being deeply in communion with the One who is source of all, we feel ourselves separate – from God, from others, from creation, and even from what is deepest in our own being.

And if we want to realise that uninterrupted communion with God, that 'treasure in heaven', that Jesus promises is here and now available to us, we too must give away our possessions. That is, we must give away our self-referencing habits of heart and mind. John Main said: 'Now perhaps this is the greatest thing that we can do as conscious human beings – to offer our consciousness to God'.¹ The way we do this, according to John Cassian writing in the 5th century, is to refuse the 'abundant riches of thought' by 'grasping the [grand] poverty of a single verse' – a mantra. The way we do it is by practicing silence – the silence of the mind. Notice, then, how radical the practice of meditation actually is. It's not just a surrender of our thoughts but it's the way we enact the surrender of our very selves to God. It's a practice of dispossession at the level of consciousness itself. In this sense, it is our participation in the paschal mystery, marking as theologian Sarah Coakley says, our 'willed engagement in the pattern of cross and resurrection'.²

This is always difficult. There's some part of us, like the rich man in the gospel, 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 John Main says: 'The call of Jesus to

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

² Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p.35.

“leave self behind” is easily muted or compromised. Most often it is just postponed’.³ We tell ourselves we’ll get to it later. Maybe we think it doesn’t really mean *that*. Maybe if we just hang around the edges, doing a bit of meditation, ruminating on matters spiritual, attending a few retreats – that will get us there. It’s so much easier to talk *about* the journey, to talk about the promise of transformation, than it is actually to practise giving up self-possession, giving ourselves away daily in a disciplined and intentional way. But in the end, this evasion doesn’t serve us. It doesn’t answer our yearning for God.

At Benedictus, 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. And the deeper we go, the more we realise how subtle the work of silence is ... how many layers of self must gently be yielded. At first, perhaps, all we’re focused on is trying to break free of the cacophony of our thoughts, to stay tuned faithfully to the mantra. We want to succeed at the practice, to get it right. Gradually, however, we begin to realise this very ambition to be a good meditator is just another expression of self-consciousness. We glimpse that our desire for God, although sincere, is shot through with self-regard – part of our self-image, perhaps, part of longing for a certain kind of spiritual experience (‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?’).

Like the rich man, we are attached to getting somewhere, and only slowly do we begin to understand why the teachers say that even our desire for God must be purified, emptied out. We must be humbled, and we learn how patient we must be with ourselves as we struggle to let go the struggle, to find that subtle resonance where we are intentional and focused yet receptive and at rest, conscious and yet not self-conscious, truly simple – awake and present, beyond the thought of ‘I’. Yet over time, as we keep responding to the drawing of love, as our intention is purified and our capacity for real, objectless attention stabilizes, we may touch into the

³ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p.47.

silence that has been there all along. We come into 'listening distance of the silence we call God' (as the poet R.S. Thomas puts it). Sometimes, we may find ourselves barely there, transparent, simply resting in the Lord, as the psalmist invites: 'be still and know that I am God'.

'In our society', John Main wrote, 'we are so used to striving for things, to owning things, to earning the approval of others, that it is very hard for us to think of ourselves as usefully employed if we are just "resting in the Lord" in this state of *quies*, of being quiet. But what those of us who try to tread this pilgrimage must always remember is that just being in God's presence is all-sufficient'. From this silence flows all peace, insight, joy, and freedom to be; in this silence all things find their place and are reconciled. This is why commitment to the work of silence is at the heart of our life together, and the gift we hope to be and offer for our world.