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Word from Silence (Mark 1. 21-28)

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‘The choice for silence or noise ... is ours in every moment. To choose silence as the mind’s default in an accelerating consumer culture – a culture that sustains itself by dehumanizing people through the unrelenting pressure of clamour, confusion, and commodification – is indeed a subversive act’.¹ This is from the first chapter of the book *Silence: A Users’ Guide*, by Maggie Ross. She goes on to say: ‘The world is out of joint’ not only because, culturally speaking, our bodies have been cut off from our minds as a consequence of losing our relationship with the natural world, but also because our minds ‘have lost their relationship with the original silence from which, and within which, we evolved; silence that is essential to language, insight, poetry, and music. This loss of communion’, she says, ‘has gradually eroded our humanity’.² This understanding of the necessary connection between what Ross calls ‘original silence’ and the fullness of our humanity is powerfully explored, I think, in the passage we’ve just heard from Mark’s gospel.

The events recounted in these verses depict the first real engagement Jesus has with his own religious context. Prior to this, as Mark tells the story, Jesus has undergone some kind of profound experience of God. Along with many others, he’d gone to be baptised by John in the river Jordan. And ‘as he was coming up out of the water’, something happened. There was, as it were, an anointing: ‘he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him’. And there was a calling: he heard a voice, saying ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased’. And immediately, he is driven into the wilderness.

Symbolically, it’s as if Jesus’ encounter with God precipitates a reckoning with himself and with those forces in human being that tend to destruction and falsity. He

¹ Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide*, Volume 1: Process (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), p.11.

² Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide*, p.12.

was in the wilderness forty days, Mark says, (a trackless space, an indeterminate time). There, he was 'tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him' (Mark 1.13). And all this time, at least from the point of view of the text, Jesus is silent. He says nothing. Which means that when he finally does speak, there's a sense of his words emerging powerfully from a vast hinterland of deep listening, encounter and testing.

He speaks, then, of the imminence of God, the in-breaking of a new world: 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'. Next, he calls his first disciples in such a compelling way that, with neither argument nor persuasion, they simply follow him. He goes with them to the city of Capernaum, and 'When the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught'. This is, as I said, the first real engagement Jesus has with his own religious context. And those who heard him speak, 'were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes' (Mark 1.22).

As I read this story, I have a sense that it's Jesus' immersion in, his receptivity and continuous return to 'original silence' that is source of his authority. Those who hear him recognise it; they apprehend the astonishing 'newness of what he says and how he says it'. To choose this original silence as the mind's default is, as Ross says, a subversive act. It connects us to the ground of our being. And it challenges the limited, self-defeating habits of heart and mind to which human beings are prone. This comes out in the next part of the story, when the power of Jesus' presence, the authority of his teaching, provokes an outburst from 'an unclean spirit', lodged in a member of the synagogue.

This spirit cries out: 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you Holy One of God'. At first glance, there's something surprising here. How is it that a spirit or energy contrary to the spirit of God is capable of seeing so clearly who Jesus is? After all, don't spirits of greed and pride, fear and envy falsify our sense of ourselves and others, our sense of the good? How is it that this unclean spirit recognises the truth of what confronts it?

But at second glance, this isn't so surprising after all. We know from experience that when *we're* in the grip of false thinking and distorted desire, *we* don't see things clearly. But the false thinking and the distorted desire – they seem to operate at another level. They possess us. And in some mysterious way, they do recognise what threatens their existence, they hold on us. We know this because of the way they resist and avoid exposure.

One of their prime defensive tools is to make noise, to sow confusion, to keep us trapped in the clamour of distracted and futile thoughts. Which is why, when confronted with the noisy, disruptive, agitating resistance of this unclean spirit, Jesus rebukes it, 'saying, "Be silent, [literally, 'be muzzled'] and come out of him". Notice, this isn't about silencing those whose voices too often go unheard, silencing the cries of the oppressed (including what is oppressed in us). Rather, it's about releasing us from the thrall of those pernicious voices (within and without) that alienate us from ourselves and from the good. It's about springing the trap on those habits of mind that stop us accessing our truth, that diminish us and resist fullness of life.

Tonight, we reaffirm our commitment to the work of silence – our vocation as a contemplative community to 'set pools of silence' in this thirsty, noisy world. This passage at the beginning of Mark's gospel sets before us, I think, twin dimensions of this commitment. On the one hand, it expresses our faith, a faith we know to be true in our experience, that God is found in original silence. God is the pregnant emptiness, the fruitful silence from which the creative word is spoken. As it was for Jesus, it's as we enter and find ourselves at home in this silence, that we discover the truth of ourselves and become those capable of speaking with authority, witnessing to the reality of God's nearness and self-gift.

On the other hand, our commitment to the work of silence enables us more readily to recognise that which binds us and others, leads us to be liberated and to liberate for life. Usually, this is not as simple as bidding an unclean spirit to come out. The process of release from self-destructive patterns (in our personal lives and at the

level of culture) takes time; it may involve many convulsions and loud cries, much babble and confusion. And in practice, before the voices that mislead and agitate us can fall silent, we may need to listen for the need or hurt or wound that has given rise to them and to which they've become attached. But in the end, we must be willing to call them out, to give them up, to stop dignifying them with our attention so as to enter fully into communion with the fertile and creative silence of God; so as to become a word of God.

'The reality is', says Ross, 'that our lives ... hang in the balance between speech and silence, action and reflection, distraction and attention, extinction and survival. We bear responsibility for maintaining this balance'.³ And she goes on: 'If there is to be a viable ecology, if we are to remain human, if our lives are to have any meaning ... it is essential that we restore the flow that enables our everyday lives to be informed by the riches found in silence'.⁴ This is what Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr said as she was awarded Senior Australian of the Year last week, speaking of the Aboriginal gift of *dadirri* – 'inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness'. And it is, I think, the heart of our vocation as a contemplative church – to be a space, a community that helps maintain the balance between speech and silence, action and reflection. To keep open in ourselves (and for others) access to that vast hinterland in the light and power of which we see things as they are, name the truth aright and find ourselves beloved and free.

³ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.11.

⁴ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.12.