

One of the most intriguing verses of the Bible is the first verse of Revelation chapter 8: 'When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.' So I suppose the question I am asking is; 'What would you do with half an hour's silence?' In this noisy world we may long for such peace. On the other hand the thought of half an hour of silence may be something that terrifies us!

The truth is that no-one has come up with a satisfactory explanation for the 'about half an hour' of silence. But in a book I have read recently, *'Silence, a Christian History'*, the author, Professor Sir Diarmaid MacCulloch, gives us an insight into why silence, in a time of judgment and turmoil, is right and good. For, he reminds us, the creation story in Genesis 1 begins in silence ('a wind from God swept over the face of the waters') and ends at the beginning of chapter 2 with the silence of sabbath, when God rests and does not speak. Sometimes the creative word is right. Sometimes words of truth and justice are right. Sometimes, too, silence is necessary. Silence gives meaning and shape, of course, to the noise around it. Without the silences in music, for instance, we would have just a cacophonous noise.

What MacCulloch does very well is to tell us about the ways in which silence occurs in the Bible, or is a part of Christian prayer, particularly in the Eastern church (and, of course, for Quakers, as we know). But what he also does, and I am grateful to him for it, is to remind us of how often in Christian faith, our silence is a deliberate attempt to cover up things which should be uncovered. Silence can be a collusion with evil. There is good silence. There is bad silence. A shocking example of the latter is the collusion in parts of the Christian church to cover up the horrors of child abuse. There are other examples. We might find ourselves somewhat disturbed to find out about the number of Christians who knew about the holocaust but said nothing.

I find myself deeply disturbed to hear the occasional reports of horrors from communities in Syria and elsewhere. You sometimes feel that the silence between the reports covers up things we find too awful to contemplate. Thanks to the bravery of reporters we do get to hear a few things, and we feel powerless to act. Earlier in the summer the noise we heard from reports from Gaza was of the huge explosions of rockets between the ominous silence of the streets, and the (often unheard) wails of the injured, the bereaved and the dying. We heard that this was a military response to 'unprovoked' rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, and as an attempt to smash the maze of tunnels and the 'terrorism' of Hamas. The Israeli public, we heard, was massively in favour of this bombardment. I can't help wondering if they, in turn, heard what we heard, of the destruction of homes and schools and hospitals. Whatever the morality of each side of the conflict, the evil of over a thousand deaths, mainly civilians, including so many children, is not to be denied. Whoever is responsible must find other ways to resolve disagreements, and find ways to live in peace and to thrive in freedom and hope.

Reflecting on the relative silence of oppressed communities in Gaza I am reminded of the millions of people who practice their faith secretly, because to be open about their beliefs is to expose themselves or their families to violence. In the Indian sub-continent and in China, MacCulloch tells us, there are millions of Christians who cannot practise their faith openly. 'One well informed commentator has suggested that their combined number may be around 120 million, around 6 per cent of the world's total population.'

I want to hear some of those voices. I want to hear the voices of the persecuted Christians of Iraq under the onslaught of so-called Islamic State. They need to be heard, however painful it is for us. And alongside that we must hear the voices of the faithful Muslim

people who abhor such violence and tell us how contrary it is to true Islam. We will hear, sometimes, from those who still risk their lives to bring us the news from such dangerous places, where journalists are abducted and murdered on film.

We could start, too, with the communities in which we live. Who are the voiceless in our midst. Whose voices do we need to hear? Are we prepared to listen even when it is uncomfortable to us?

This September, a new training course begins, as the present Reader training group prepares for assessment and the forthcoming licensing on January 17. Pray for them all. In our churches new study courses and Bible studies begin. In all of these we know how much we learn from listening to one another. Being attentive to God and to one another we open ourselves more fully to the whisper or to the rushing noise of the Spirit. May our silences be good ones. May they be times to listen and times to learn. Through them may we also learn how to speak the word of truth more faithfully as ministers of The Good News.

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