

This is less of an essay, more as a reflection to enable you to think around the subject of incorporating aspects of silence in your services, whatever setting and tradition you come from.

The questions are there for you to respond to, both to stimulate thought, and to jot down some of your answers for my benefit before the session. Please don't see them as an onerous task. Please do however, let me know some of the things you've tried and tested in your ministry. We are co-learners and your experiences will enable others in the group to be encouraged in this area.

Worship through silence

Silence. The word in itself has positive and negative connotations. Silence can be forced upon us by someone else. Or silence can be chosen, and can be creative, generative, joyful and worshipful. Being with oneself in silence is a practice that takes courage, especially through periods of inner unrest. One can begin to understand how taking the time to be silent can move the soul to be more willing and responsive inwardly towards God, and outwardly towards others. Paul commends us to 'pray without ceasing'. [1 Thes 5:17] The benefits uncovered for us to keep regular periods of silence, either individually or corporately, through the tradition of daily prayer and worship, are both spiritually edifying and Kingdom building.

'Strain to enter
Into the treasure chamber's cell
That lies within you,
And there you will see
What treasure is stored in heaven.'¹

Q1: How do you find ways to allow yourselves to simply 'be' with God?

Emptying – kenosis

Prayer is 'letting go' of all that is familiar and confronting the mystery beyond ourselves. In silence, we wait for our ego to melt away and for God to enter in. The word '*kenosis*' or 'emptying' is mentioned in Paul's letter to the Philippians, where Jesus 'made himself nothing'. [Phil 2:7] The thought here is that Jesus did not make his own self the exclusive object of attention and concern, rather he humbled himself in concern for others, even to death. He emptied Himself of all but love. It is no surprise that Jesus Himself withdrew to the desert for forty days to prepare for his own mission, to wrestle with temptation and his own humanness in solitude and silence. He also took time out early in the morning regularly, to be alone with His Father. We too should follow this example of preparation and search for that which lies within, in order to imitate the life of Jesus Christ in our prayer and worship. Authentic spirituality and worship, is always in some way about letting go.

¹ Isaac the Syrian, cited in Vandekerckhove, B. *The Taste of Silence: How I came to be at Home Spiritually with Myself*, trans. Van Puymbroeck, R.V. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015) P19

So how do we enable others to let go in worship? As a worship leader I imagine you've had experience of holding silence for a short while in prayer, or through a meditation, or even as a song gently plays, but what is the intent for a congregation to communally experience the depth of silence together?

Q2a: What are your own experiences of God in prayer?

Q2b: In what ways have you been able to incorporate silence in your services?

The early desert fathers have had a major influence on the regular practice of silence in worship to this day, as they discovered its benefits for their interior life and relationship with God. Christian silence is an openness to the divine that is personal and of spiritual significance. Most of the main monastic orders borne from the early desert Fathers observe periods of silence each day. This is what their worship cycle depends on and this is how they connect with one another and with God in community.

Q3a: How does this fit with your understanding of silence?

Q3b: Can you imagine a place for this 'rhythm' in the life and worship of your church?

Q3c: Does silence work through all traditions of the church or is this specific to certain traditions? For example, if you are used to a band setting with a more contemporary service, how could silence be used well?

Leading others to that place of connection

I have often stood at the front of a church, leading a band in song, or leading the service of the word, noticing the faces of the people in the congregation as they worship. If you are familiar with counselling practices, or even managerial philosophies, you will be aware that we mirror one another quite naturally. A counsellor will reflect back what their client has said, or a manager's style will influence the way the entire company runs. Years ago, I taught drama to young children, and their favourite lesson was to mirror their partner identically in action and sound and develop a 'connection' through following one another closely. It was beautiful to watch when they really worked hard to be at one with each other. It was as if they had begun to understand one another on a deeper, more intimate level.

If we lead worship, we too have that connection with those we lead and we shouldn't underestimate the potential to lead them also into a deeper connection with God as we ourselves encounter Him. To be able to be with ourselves in that silent space comfortably, will enable others to 'let go and let God' as well.

Taize, a community built on silence and simplicity in worship

I was led to a new encounter with silence in worship when I was as Chaplain of a senior school. I took a small group to Taize in France for a week and didn't really understand how silence worked in community and in worship. The preface was simple. Everything is done in

community. Noone is excluded. Everyone works and worships together. Every person who arrives at Taize is welcomed, is part of the community and fully involved in all aspects, from hospitality, to cleaning, to shop duties and most importantly, to participation in the services held morning, noon and night. They embrace a 'whole life' worship style. Everything is done for the glory of God, from prayer and silence, to a day's hard graft. The services themselves are simple. Repetition and rhythm being the foundation. Simple tunes that are repeated over and over again to enable those of all nationalities to participate. A ten-minute silence, a reading and prayer ending with more song.

The teenagers who came were not all Christians but fully partook in the daily ritual. One of the girls asked me how I 'filled the time of silence in my head' and so we discussed prayer, and that God remains present regardless of how we pray. How emptying your head of all thought and allowing God to just 'be' in that moment, can be more worshipful than the greatest symphony ever composed. This girl took this in and ran out of the building at the end of the next service saying she had met with God! She was overwhelmed by the power of the Spirit in that moment and had allowed God to meet her in the silence of her heart. This was extraordinary and revelatory.

Q4a: Should we expect and desire encounters of God in corporate prayer and worship or do we just imagine this to be an individual encounter to keep to yourself?

Q4b: What are the expectations of worship from the people in your church? Would a Taize style service be something that would work in your setting?

I have since been on my own personal quest to uncover how we can include silence in our worship and not be afraid, or embarrassed by the lack of words, or lack of liturgy in church services. How can we ourselves be comfortable enough with silence, so to lead others to that place of intimacy with God ourselves?

Q5a: What do you feel comfortable with in worship?

Q5b: What would make you uncomfortable?

Q5c: Do you think this reflects the general style of the whole church? What could you do to challenge any misconceptions around this style of stillness in worship?

It is well worth meditating on Brother Roger's way of doing things and letting ourselves be inspired by it. When he left his country to come to Taizé, he had no definite plan drawn up in advance. He did not know what God expected of him in the long term. He only knew that he had to start and he was ready to take a first step. By taking a first step, we discover the second and then little by little the next steps along the way. It is this approach that he pursued all his life. Maybe this is how we could approach new ways of incorporating silence into our church worship patterns.

Q6: There are many ways to engage others in silence when we lead worship. How would you do this with a congregation who felt uncomfortable with change or introducing a new approach?

Treasure to be found

The Quakers seek silence as a community 'for the flame to be kindled and to grow'² They practice in shared silence, shared listening and a shared call to action. This treasure is not found through theory, but only by grace.

According to monastic wisdom, the path to silence is all about engagement with everything and everybody. Theologically, this resounds with Jesus teaching to love both neighbour and God. Practicing silence leads to a greater responsibility for the manner in which you carry yourself in life, in the way you deal with people and things.³ The seeker, who journeys into the silent desert of the heart, encounters not only oneself, but also, God.

Q7: We should be true to the people we are. How are you true to the person you are in your prayer and worship? How can you enable others to be true to themselves in worship?

Finding silence yourself can be as simple as standing in a forest glade to take in the smell, to breathe in the clear air and absorb the environment around. Or simpler, in the cacophony of a busy household, to simply take five and pause. In the silence we can tune in to what is essential; to notice what is in their heart once the surrounding world is silenced. Resting in God's presence can be the antidote to the frenetic 'doing'.

Q8a: In what ways have you been caught off-guard by the presence of God? How has God been unexpected through prayer?

Q8b: How can you create opportunities for others to experience this presence in a church worship setting?

We are deprived of silence in our modern world and therefore deprived of the joy that flows into the space silence offers. This is a silence avoiding culture, perhaps driven by fear, with the external noise drowning out anything God might want to say to us. One is reminded of Elijah, at the mouth of the cave, trying to find God in the noise, but it was only in the silence that God's voice was heard calling him out. [1 Kings 19] When we are still for long enough to hear the silence, it is full. There is an energy which comes from silence itself. Major religions, and other spiritual practices such as yoga and mindfulness, share the recognition that

² Maitland, S. *A Book of Silence: a Journey in Search of the Pleasures and Powers of Silence* (London: Granta Publications, 2008) p141

³ Vandekerckhove, B. *The Taste of Silence: How I came to be at Home Spiritually with Myself*, trans. Van Puymbroeck, R.V. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015) p122

silence is an effective tool for spiritual development and that something precious is lost if we avoid this connection.

Q9a: knowing the busy-ness of life outside of the church building, does this make the need for space to be more reflective in a worship setting more urgent?

Q9b: How do we achieve stillness, if at all in our lives and in the space we create as worship leaders?

Imagine for a moment, the energy of a group of people that you are leading who experience the depth and power of silence together, as something that brings them together with the Spirit. Imagine further, the impact that these encounters with the living God could have on an entire church community who work together to serve God in mission, empowered by their encounters. This is transformational and life giving. This is true worship.

Q10: Contemplative prayer is a loving attentiveness to God (Richard Foster). What can we do in our lives to be more lovingly attentive to God this week and beyond?

Here are some ideas to try out at home. Each of these could be incorporated into a church worship setting. As you give them a go, imagine how you might do this in your particular church, if at all. You may have many more ideas, so bring them to the session next week to share with the rest of the group:

- Create a space in your home where you can focus solely on Jesus and carry Him into the rest of the day intentionally. A small chair, a stall with a candle to light to mark the beginning of your time with Christ.
- Try imaginative contemplation: Go into the bible story with all five senses. Eg Mary at the resurrection – Peter on the beach. How do you feel, what is Jesus saying to you personally, what is going on, what do you notice?
- Lectio Divina: pick up the bible – read it slowly - see what word or phrase sticks out.
- Discover new Apps which help – the centering prayer, Pray as you Go, the Examen,
- Read some Celtic prayer liturgy in the mornings.
- Take a simple prayer - The Jesus prayer. And breathe it – inhale the mercy of God; exhale the toxins of the day – Have mercy on me– pray with a knotted string. At each knot, pray the Jesus prayer, maybe while walking. Think through all emotions. Let go of each of them. Mark the first thing that comes to you in those moments. ‘The sense I had was.....’
- Using icons. We will have a look at how to do this in the group session if you are unfamiliar.

Taize history from the website if you fancy knowing more:

Taize is a community of brothers established in 1940 when, at the age of twenty-five, Brother Roger left Switzerland, the country where he was born, to go and live in France, the country his mother came from. For years he had been ill with tuberculosis, and during that long convalescence he had matured within him the call to create a community.

The small village of Taizé, where he settled, was quite close to the demarcation line dividing France in two: it was well situated for sheltering refugees fleeing the war. Friends from Lyon started giving the address of Taizé to people in need of a place of safety.

In Taizé, thanks to a modest loan, Brother Roger bought a house with outlying buildings that had been uninhabited for years. He asked one of his sisters, Genevieve, to come and help him offer hospitality. Among the refugees they sheltered were Jews. Material resources were limited. There was no running water, so for drinking water they had to go to the village well. Food was simple, mainly soups made from cornflour bought cheaply at the nearby mill. Out of discretion towards those he was sheltering, Brother Roger prayed alone; he often went to sing far from the house, in the woods. So that none of the refugees, Jews or agnostics, would feel ill-at-ease, Genevieve explained to each person that it was better for those who wished to pray to do so alone in their rooms.

Brother Roger's parents, knowing that their son and daughter were in danger, asked a retired French officer who was a friend of the family to watch over them. In the autumn of 1942, he warned them that their activities had been found out and that everyone should leave at once. So until the end of the war, it was in Geneva that Brother Roger lived and it was there that he began a common life with his first brothers. They were able to return to Taizé in 1944.

The first brothers' commitment

In 1945, a young lawyer from the region set up an association to take charge of children who had lost their parents in the war. He suggested to the brothers that they welcome a certain number of them in Taizé. A men's community could not receive children. So Brother Roger asked his sister Genevieve to come back to take care of them and become their mother. On Sundays, the brothers also welcomed German prisoners-of-war interned in a camp nearby Taizé.

Gradually other young men came to join the original group, and on Easter Day 1949, there were seven of them who committed themselves together for their whole life in celibacy and to a life together in great simplicity. In the silence of a long retreat, during the winter of 1952-53, the founder of the community wrote the Rule of Taizé, expressing for his brothers "the essential that makes the common life possible".

Brother Roger was murdered in 2005.

'Through his Spirit, God is present to every human being. Brother Roger had a place in his heart for all human beings, of every nation, and in particular for young people and children. He had a passion for communion. He often repeated the following words: "Christ did not come to earth to create a new religion, but to offer to every human being a communion in God." This unique communion, which is the Church, is there for everyone, without exception.'

Brother Roger 12 May 1915 – 16 August 2005

Caroline Turvey – October 2020

