

"THE POWER OF SILENCE" OR "SILENCE HAS ITS VOICE"

TEXT: "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you"
(Matthew 6: 5, 6)

INTRODUCTION Traveling through England a number of years ago, I came across a reminder of days long past. Durham Cathedral dates back to Norman times, and on its portal is a "sanctuary knocker" in the form of an impressive lion's head of bronze. In medieval times any fugitive from justice could strike it on the stout oak door and thereby claim the ancient and holy right of sanctuary. Once within the great cathedral, he was absolutely safe from all pursuers. No man could apprehend or arrest him as long as he remained in sanctuary.

DEVELOPMENT This, of course, has long since been abolished. However, in our day we are exposed to attacks far more insidious and hurtful than any bodily blows. Our contemporary atmosphere is heavy with all sorts of fears. We're harassed by oppressive shadows of worry and insecurity, and we're exposed around the clock to all kinds of jarring noise. Our need for silence and for sanctuary is indeed very great, and by this I do not mean a running away from reality....rather, perhaps a turning back to Reality - a Reality that we all too seldom experience or feel amidst the distractions of the day.

The life of every person requires silence and solitude. These rest periods, these times of quiet, cushions of silence are the shock absorbers of life.

We all need it, yet we have not come to accept solitude as a pursuit. We put such emphasis on the social graces. Anyone who does not mingle with others, or who cannot sustain a perpetually meaningless conversation is considered anti-social, odd, or perhaps a bit of a bore. Often it's distressing to parents when a youngster remains alone, in his room, indulging seemingly in old fashioned daydreaming.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French scientist and philosopher, said,

"After observing humankind over a period of years, I conclude that one of man's great troubles is his inability to be still".

Our hospitals today are crowded with patients whose illnesses are often related to stress and tension and the ever-present noise and confusion of life. There's much campaigning today for more and better facilities for the care and treatment of the mentally ill, and obviously this is a valid need, but how much greater is the need for silence and solitude for all individuals, and for doctors and teachers, for psychologists, priests and ministers with the vision to teach people to perceive the importance of meditation and creative thinking, of contemplation, of quiet, of sanctuary....of prayer.

"One of man's great troubles is his inability to be still"

THOREAU My teenage daughter was reading Henry David Thoreau's Walden this past Winter for her 10th grade English. We talked about it together. Every now and then I reread sections of it - a good tonic to our way of life. As you know, he was a Harvard University graduate who "dropped out" of the 19th century Boston life and as a young man built for himself a snug, small, primitive house on the shores of Walden Pond not far from Concord, Massachusetts. Relying for his living solely on his own skills and ingenuity, he lived there alone for more than two years. He rejected worry and reduced his expenses to a point where he could provide for them with labor for a small part of his days. This freed him for reading and writing and contemplating and for long, solitary tramps through the woods.

Most of us would not be able to do what Thoreau did, but we can learn something of his philosophy and adapt it for our own existence. Our modern society requires the ownership and use of so many possessions, mechanical devices and luxuries that we actually spend large portions of our time and money, vast portions of our life itself, on working for that which we could really do without, and for which we have little time or strength left to enjoy because we are so consumed working to pay for them, or to have them repaired, or replaced when stolen, and on and on it goes.

I am not suggesting that we revert to pioneer days, but I do think that we owe it to ourselves to bring something of the solitude and simplicity of former times along with us today. In fact, I believe it is an imperative if we are going to be spiritually and mentally healthy, creative people.

NEED TO LISTEN People will often complain that they never have any original ideas, that they never feel the flow of inspiration, and I generally find myself suggesting to them that they take the time to get still and listen. It's just as impossible for one who surrounds himself with the activity and the clamor and ceaseless babel of conversation or the blare of TV to experience the "in-flow" of creative thought as it is for water to flow through the same pipe with crude oil.

When we consider the word "listen", we think right away of the ears, but have you ever stopped to consider that you really listen with your mind? Listening connotes receiving an inward vibration or response to an outward stimulus, and it implies sensitivity to it. Vibrations are everywhere, and we can and must cultivate the ability to hear and to heed the messages of a transcendent spiritual source within and in the world around us. Shakespeare was pointing to this in As You Like It when he acknowledged the existence of,

"tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
sermons in stones and good in everything."

You are like a radio receiving station - every moment thousands of impressions are reaching you, and you can tune in on whatever you want. You may hearken to the beauty of nature or you may fix your attention on the filth of the city streets; you may take in joy or sorrow, success or failure, optimism or trepidation. We have the equipment to hear, but this capacity to hear rightly must be cultivated. We must learn to listen selectively. When this habit is formed properly, we become receptive to higher vibrations of a cosmic flow from which all intelligence, all love, all healing springs.

It is absolutely astonishing what we can do when we walk and work under the direction of the still, small voice within. Now our form of guidance may not come with the dramatic impact of Moses and the burning bush, or Elijah on Mt. Carmel, or Jesus in the wilderness, but come it wil, if we take the time to listen, to tune in and to expect it.

A recently developed school of psychiatric thought holds that men and women are born with a spiritual urge as compelling as their instincts of sex and hunger. The leader of this approach is Dr. Victor Frankl, a teacher of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna. He holds that while most persons today have conquered their bashfulness about emotional drives, they remain deeply troubled by the repression of their innate religious feelings. "God-shyness" is what he calls this, and he says that in order to achieve emotional health, people must overcome the notion that religion and belief in God are not valid needs and that it is unsophisticated to search for spirituality.

In order for our lives to be meaningful, they must be firmly anchored to faith in God as a foundation of life. People are mor "God-shy" than realize it.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS We need to know that God is forever speaking to us in the form of a creative flow, and that we must cultivate the attitude of listening - in our prayers, in moments of quiet meditation. All religions that have penetrated the occult touch the springs of spiritual demonstration over the physical realm, and have thus practiced a mental discipline called prayer or meditation. This creative silence is a time of "recharging" the battery of your soul, your spirit...not to obtain particular or specific answers although that can occur, but to experience what one has called the "contagion of the triumphant spirit".

In the deep silence of your prayer life, lose the consciousness of your own problems and needs and commune in complete abandonment with the self in total surrender to God's spirit. Jesus did this. Withdrawal and return - off to the quiet place, the place of silence, alone with God - and then a return to the demands, the pressures that life placed on Him. This was the secret of His amazing vitality, his inner strength. I've always been fond of that observation of Emerson,

"Man is an inlet, and may become an
outlet @rall there is in God..."

Seek solitude. Explore the depths of your own self. Reach out to the beyond that is within you. Practice this discipline daily if you can. There's no telling what the results will be and what may happen in your life as God's spirit works through you.

PRAYER Teadh us, O God, how to withdraw from the pressures of life - not in self-interest or self-indulgence, but to find the quietness and the strength that we need in order that we may handle life and handle it well. Help us to remember the example of our Lord, and how in His withdrawing and returning He discovered the power and thunder of silence, and how He fulfilled one of thy laws and made His life great and rich for all others. In His name. Amen