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'You speak also in
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silence of God in
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‘You speak also in your silence’: the silence of God in the Bible

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‘In the beginning was the Word/*en archē ēn ho logos*’ are the opening words of the prologue of the gospel of John. But here, like Goethe’s Faust, we should perhaps pause.² This is the problem: does the Word reveal God or does Silence reveal God? This question is like many others about God: is it power that reveals God or impotence? Does God reveal himself in dazzling light or in the dark night of the cross?

It is no accident that the Hebrew term for the Face (of God) is plural: *panim*. *Panim* is a special and suggestive word; it implies that the Face of God is one and many, expressed and un-expressed, known and unknown. The Face is both otherness and relationship, Word and Silence. The Face reveals but also obscures. The Face of God (like the person made in God’s image) represents the irreducible totality of personal identity, but also its mystery.

This means that every definition of God is inadequate and whatever is said about the Silence of God must be joined to its reference point, the Word, but also to the mystery that every Word and every Silence contain. This means that we can only know *traces*, never the Face. *Panim!*

So what are the traces that enable us to understand the silence of God in the Bible? Why does God remain silent? I want to follow *three* pathways – and there are others – that are significant in the biblical panorama.

1 Translated by Bishop John McAreavey (Bishop emeritus of Dromore) who attended this lecture and was moved by it. He translated it so that others who struggle with the silence of God will draw strength from it.

2 ‘Tis writ, ‘In the beginning was the Word’. I pause, to wonder what is here inferred’. *Faust*, Part 1, Faust’s study (ii), tr. Philip Wayne, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971, p. 71.

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1. SILENCE OF ANGER AND DISDAIN

I will begin with a series of reasons for the silence and absence of God. God is silent because the human person, in their arrogance, force God to be silent! In the history of Israel the prophets denounced sin as a reason for the absence of God: 'Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh of their bones, who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron' (Micah 3:1-4). The prophet Micah accuses those responsible for the nation of a grave sin: they should be shepherds but instead are cannibals; they should take care of the sheep but, instead, devour them, ignoring justice and trampling the law. This will be their punishment: 'Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly'. This is a reference to the silence of God during the period of exile, when they have lost their land and their security. God is silent and the leaders, when they have lost everything, will search for a stopgap God, sure of finding God in their hour of need, 'but he will not answer them'.

The same reasoning can be found elsewhere in the prophets: 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and so not remember iniquity forever ... Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation ... After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent ...? (Is 64: 1, 9-12)

In response to this prophetic denunciation, we cannot fail to recognise that often the silence of God, today as yesterday, is due to wickedness and idolatry in the hearts of people who seek salvation in deaf and dumb idols that have no power to speak. And then the One who can speak remains silent, the One who created the universe with the Word of his mouth. A large share of the evil and pain in the world and in the Church can be traced to the silence of a God who has been expelled, reduced to silence by the abuse of power and arrogance.

God is silent because the temple has become a den of thieves, false prophets have the last word, the people has become not-my-people and the loved one has prostituted herself. Nevertheless, this interpretative framework of the silence and absence of God is *insufficient*, for the calamities that afflict people cannot all be attributed to human degeneration. Faced with much illness and suffering, the attempt to attribute everything to human sin is unsatisfying and inadequate. I think of the Algerian writer,

Albert Camus; at the age of seventeen seeing a baby girl run over by a lorry, he turns with his finger pointing into the sky and says to a friend, 'You see, he is silent'. We find the same sentiment in the cry of the Italian poet, Giuseppe Ungaretti: 'I am a wounded man ... I am tired of screaming without a voice ... mourn with us, cruelty'.³ This is also the voice of the psalmist praying in psalm 35 and many others: 'You have seen, O Lord; do not be silent! ... Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence' (Ps 35: 22-23); 'Why do you hide your face?' (Ps 44:24). When the voice of the innocent is stifled, when the law is silent and only violence finds expression, when truth is muffled by lies, surely the silence of God becomes a scandal? How many women and men have lamented the silence of God precisely when God should have spoken! Job, Jeremiah, the despairing who live in the dark night of the olives, the agony of blood ... This brings us to the *second* perspective in the Scriptures that seeks a reason for the silence of God.

2. SILENCE THAT EDUCATES

A silence that educates is a suggestive and fascinating theme. It is the experience expressed magnificently in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 19). After the crushing victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah travels from Carmel to Beersheba and then from Beersheba to Mount Horeb. It is a journey of experience rather than a geographical one. Elijah travels to find a God who will speak to him and reassure him. It is not sufficient to say that he undertakes this journey to find refuge from a wicked queen who seeks to kill him. Beersheba is where Abraham had invoked the name of JHWH (Gen 21:33); where JHWH appeared to Isaac saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, your father; do not fear for I am with you' (Gen 26:24). At Beersheba God spoke to Jacob 'in visions of the night' (Gen 46:1-4). So, it is the place where the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had called on the name of the Lord (Gen 4:1-5; Amos 5:5, 8:14) and God had replied. Mount Horeb, towards which Elijah 'walked for forty days and forty nights', is the Mount of the Word where Moses was called by JHWH by name out of a bush (Ex 3:4). The God Elijah knows is a God of the Word, an implacable warrior, a sharpened sword. He is the God of armies, because 'the sons of Israel have abandoned your covenant, have demolished your altars and have killed your prophets with the sword; I alone remain, and they are trying to take my life' (1 Kg 19:14). This is the God that Elijah is seeking. And yet ...

The Lord passed by. A strong, angry wind was splitting the

3 *Sentimento del tempo*, Milan, 1981, p. 95.

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mountains and breaking the rocks in pieces ... but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire, *Qol demamah daqqan*, a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave (1 Kg 19:11-13).

Qol demamah daqqan, a sound of sheer silence. The Hebrew expression is extremely problematic, one on which rivers of ink have been spilt. The Septuagint and Vulgate transformed it, translating it as 'a gentle wind'. However, the text states that God was found in the voice of a light *silence*. The meaning is not far from what a German mystic used: 'no one knows anything; He is here, there, distant, near; he is deep, he is high. But no, I have lied; it is neither this nor that'. This distant God in the theological mindset of Elijah is radically different from the concept he had until that point. The God of Horeb is no longer the One he had known before, and certainly not the God of Mount Carmel! Elijah, the devout follower of God, now must question the image of God that is rooted in his tradition and in his own experience. For the true encounter with God is not nourished on words. The risk of (using) words is not silence but banality, a word-centredness that seeks only itself. Elijah must learn that God is not primarily spoken but searched for; God's name is not pronounceable and only has meaning when it emerges from an experience.

Elijah must endure the absence of the God whose voice he knows in order to learn to know the God who hides and manifests himself in '*the sound of sheer silence*'. God who had revealed himself to the ancestors with a voice fit to shake Mount Sinai now presents himself as *Qol demamah daqqan*.

Søren Kierkegaard expresses this poetically in this evocative passage:

Father in heaven, you speak to a man in many ways; you who alone possess wisdom and understanding, you nevertheless wish to make yourself understandable to him. You speak with him also in your silence, for he also speaks who is silent in order to examine the pupil; he also speaks who is silent in order to test the beloved; he also speaks who is silent in order that the hour of understanding, when it comes, might be all the more inward. Father in heaven, in the hour of silence when a man stands alone and abandoned and does not hear your voice, does it not seem to him that the separation will last forever. In the hour of silence when a man stands alone and abandoned and does not

hear your voice, does it not seem to him that the separation will last forever. In the hour of silence when a man is prostrate in the desert where he does not hear your voice, does it not seem to him as if it had disappeared completely. Father in heaven ... bless this silence, then, as you bless each and every one of your words to a man. Let him not forget that you also speak when you are silent. Grant him the confidence, if he prays to you, that you are silent out of love, just as you speak out of love, so that whether you are silent or whether you speak, you are still the same father, whether you instruct by word of mouth or educate with your silence.⁴

Silence as education: Elijah must continue the journey of life and commit himself to the mission that remains to be completed with the awareness that the human person does not live by virtue of the Word of God but also by virtue of God’s silence. Listening to the silence means listening to God. The silence of God frees the human person from scaffolding, makes them recognise the naked and vulnerable, purifies and transforms them, avoiding the great temptation that is always lurking: the temptation of living their own condition with defence structures, because it is only through this discipline that they will learn to speak authentic words. Education is an essential component of paternity and maternity, and fathers and mothers educate both with their words and their silence.

However, we sense that this perspective, though partly wise and true, cannot be definitive. We must acknowledge that a more refined education does not justify a silence that is unjust and mortifying. There are *limits* to the growth produced by suffering: this is an unbalanced, inexplicable, and unjust test. There are situations when to speak of a divine education becomes blasphemous. What father brings his child to an extreme limit to teach him that the human person does not live by bread alone?

3. SILENCE OF LOVE

Søren Kirkegaard has already offered a reason, writing that ‘just as you speak out of love, so that whether you are silent or whether you speak, you are still the same Father’.

It seems to me that the evangelist Mark offers the *most* adequate understanding of the mute mystery of a God who loves with his silence when he describes the death of Jesus on the cross. Mark speaks of the darkness that envelopes the earth from the sixth to

4 Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong, [Editors and Translators], assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, *Søren Kierkegaard’s journals and papers*, Vol 5 [L-R], Indiana University press, Bloomington and London 1975, pp 558-9.

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the ninth hour and of the cry of Jesus in the darkness exclaiming in a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Mk 15:34). On the cross, Mark presents a mysterious God who ‘would dwell in thick darkness’ (1 Kg 8:12 and 2 Chr 6:1) and in the most atrocious silence. Jesus is presented as dramatically alone, abandoned by his disciples who fled at the time of his arrest (Mk 11:50), condemned by the authorities who, at that moment, act in concert (Mk 15:1), abandoned even by God who does not respond to his cry. The death of Jesus takes place in the silence of God, ‘a sort of execration’ in the literal sense of the term, as opposed to consecration.⁵ It is ‘the mystery of the ultimate test’.⁶

This is the *paradox*: precisely in the extreme moment of the silence of God who does not respond to the cry of his Son, a voice – not that of the disciples who had fled nor of the women who followed from a distance – but that of a pagan centurion, “saw that in this way he breathed his last, and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’” (Mk 15:39). The moment of the *silence* of God becomes therefore the moment of the response, the moment of supreme *revelation*: ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’. The film director, Ingmar Bergman, in one of his masterpieces, *Winter light* (1963) presents a conversation between a sacristan and a young priest in crisis:

Just think, Father, of Gethsemane, all the disciples were asleep; they had understood nothing, and he remained alone. The suffering must have been immense. To realise in that moment that no one understood anything ... But that was not the worst: When Jesus was nailed to the cross and hung there in torment, he cried out “God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?” He cried out as loud as he could. He thought that his heavenly father had abandoned him. He was full of doubt at that moment, a doubt that comes to us all; this must have been the worst suffering. I mean God’s silence. But that story finishes with silence, or was there a response? I don’t remember how it ends ...⁷

Perhaps we should say, when confronted by many human situations, where people live with a desperate need of a response, it is true that God does not give a response. However, if the Son at the hour of his death endured the silence of God, this means that every situation, even the darkest and most tragic, has a *meaning*. Perhaps the silence of God does *not* offer a response (for there is no response

5 A synonym of the verb ‘execrate’ is ‘curse’.

6 Cf. A Vanhoye, ‘I racconti della passione nei vangeli sinottici’ in A Vanhoye-I de la Potterie-C Duquoc-É Charpentier, *La Passione secondo I quattro Vangeli*, Editrice Queriniana 1983, p. 50.

7 <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=ingmar+bergman+winter+light+quotes>.

to the suffering of a just person) but *rather* a meaning. This will not be the automatic granting of a meaning, for we cannot transform the silence of God into an emotional tranquillizer or provide a facile consolation. 'This offer of meaning implies concretely that, however desolate, pointless, or desperate my situation may be, God is here too. Not only in light and in joy, but also in darkness, grief, pain and sadness, I can encounter him'.⁸ This means that 'my suffering, too – despite Godforsaken-ness – can become the point of encounter with God'⁹, a God who is in solidarity with my silence and who can make it fruitful, so that a cry of pain is not the gasp of a dying person but the pain of a mother giving birth.

This is the core of the paschal mystery that helps us to say this. It is not by chance that the Byzantine tradition has dug deep to grasp the meaning of silence during the paschal triduum. The Great Sabbath, as it is called in the Eastern tradition, that precedes Easter, is a Day of Silence, a day of the silent and deserted tomb. An ancient homily for Holy Saturday attributed to Epiphanius states: 'Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness'.¹⁰ It is the silence of a further *kenosis*, as the Byzantine liturgy sings on the morning of Holy Saturday: 'you descended to search for Adam, and not finding him on earth, O Lord, you have gone to search for him in the underworld'. In another Syriac homily, we read: 'the Creator of Adam has visited Adam in the underworld; having descended, he called, 'Adam, where are you?' just as he had in the garden (Gen 3:9). The same voice that called him among the trees (of the garden) has descended among the dead to call him'.¹¹

The day of the great silence, paradoxically, is the Day of the Search, of Encounter and of Love. Mark is right to end his gospel with the fear and silence of the women (Mk 16:8). People who pay attention to life will find a hundred reasons to believe and a hundred not to believe. However, the events of the Cross tell us that defeat, loneliness, and silence now belong to God and are assumed into the mystery of salvation. Dietrich Bonhöffer, the witness of the Confessing Church, has written:

God comes to people who have nothing but space for God, and the language of Christianity calls this void, this emptiness in human beings 'faith'. In Jesus of Nazareth the bearer of God's revelation, God inclines towards the sinner, follows them with limitless love; Jesus wants to be where human beings are no longer anything. The meaning of Jesus's life is the documentation

8 Hans Küng, *Does God exist?* Collins London 1980, pp. 694-5.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Cf. *The Divine Office*, vol II, p. 320.

11 Cf. S Chialà, '*Discese agli inferi*', Magnano 2000, pp. 34-39.

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of this divine will towards the sinner, towards the unworthy. God's love is wherever Jesus is. This documentation however acquires its true seriousness only when Jesus or God's love not only is present where human beings are mired in sin and misery, but when Jesus also takes upon himself that which stands above every person's life, namely, death; that is, when Jesus, who is God's love, genuinely dies. Only thus can human beings be assured that God's love will accompany and lead them through death. Jesus's death on the cross of the criminal however shows that divine love extends even to the death of the criminal, and when Jesus dies on the cross with the cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It shows once more that God's eternal love does not abandon us even when we despair and feel forsaken by God.¹²

A poem of an Italian poet, Father Turoldo, comes to mind. He composed it in severe pain at the end of his life, when the crutches fall away, dreams of power fade and all that remains is our weak voice, our final cry and the silence of God:

No, belief at Easter/ is not proper faith/ you are too beautiful at Easter! True faith is faith on Good Friday/ when you were not up there! / when not even an echo /replies to his loud cry and almost nothing/ gives shape to your Absence.¹³

12 Clifford J Green, [Ed], *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931* [Dietrich Bonhöffer Works, vol 10], Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2008, pp. 356-7. The Italian text refers to the abandonment and silence of God.

13 D M Turoldo, *Canti ultimi*, Milan 1991