

Silence and Conflict – Kenneth Leech

There was silence in heaven for about half an hour (Rev. 8:1).

According to the Talmud, the angels are silent by day so that the prayers of those on earth might be heard in heaven. But according to Revelation 4:8, the angels sing night and day. And so, according to many commentators, the half hour silence is to enable the prayers of the saints to be heard! However, Adela Collins rightly points out that there is no reference to the prayers of the saints being *heard*: they rise with the incense, and incense is not heard. Incense is pre-eminently the symbol of silent worship.¹ Other commentators, though, see the silence as a dramatic interlude before the End, perhaps a catastrophe delayed because of the prayer. Some stress the silence of awe before judgement. Thus Albert Barnes wrote in 1858, 'Silence – solemn and awful silence – is the natural state of the mind under such conditions.'² And only one commentator observes a silence in the face of silence: R.H. Charles, writing in 1913, comments, 'Into the significance of this silence ... we are not yet in a position to penetrate.'³ But by 1920, even he had given in and opted for the prayer of the saints explanation!⁴

I would like to approach the question of the silence in heaven rather differently. The Book of Revelation is a study in warfare, in struggle, in the tribulation of a community under stress, confronted by the demonic power and structures of injustice. It is also a study in worship and prayer and praise. And throughout the drama, silence and struggle are intermingled. Note, for example, how in Chapter 18 (the celebration of the collapse of the oppressive power of Babylon), there is a dialectic of silence, weeping and rejoicing. The once noisy city is reduced to silence. The sound of harpers and minstrels, flute players and trumpeters, is heard no more (18:22). Instead, there is the silence of death. And over such silence, the former supporters of the regime, those who propped up the Babylonian establishment, weep and wail at the collapse of the commercial system, the loss of dainties and luxury goods, the silencing of the millstones. Even the transport system is thrown into confusion. And at the sight of all this the saints rejoice! It is hardly our modern picture of Christianity.

I suggest that in our present society the church is placed in a situation which is not far removed from what is described here: a situation in which a minority, seeking to be faithful to the gospel, to the demands of justice and mercy, and to the values of the Kingdom, is confronted by a cruel and oppressive social and political system which, like Babylon, traffics in human souls (18:13). The difference is that in our day Babylon

has entered the church and uses a Christian vocabulary, even invoking the word of God to disguise its corruption. In the midst of the inevitable and increasing conflict between biblical faith and establishment religion, the need for silence and critical reflection is very great. A church which has lost its capacity for silence and critical reflection can quickly become a church conformed to the dominant ideology.

Bonhoeffer saw this clearly in the Nazi period. He claimed that for the foreseeable future, the role of the church would be restricted to two things: prayer and the pursuit of justice. These essentially silent ministries would be the seedbed out of which all subsequent Christian action would spring. For Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, confronted by the evil of fascism, the *disciplina arcana*, the hidden life of prayer, of Eucharist, and of reflection on the Scriptures, was literally of critical importance. A church which neglected silent contemplation and discernment would be incapable of resistance to evil. The vision of God was central to the struggle and the future of the church. During 1932 the text on which Bonhoeffer preached most frequently was 'We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you' (2 Chr. 20: 12).⁵

For Bonhoeffer the great danger was, that faced with Nazi oppression, the church would succumb to a very different kind of silence: the silence of compromise, the silence of acquiescence, the silence of safety and conformity. André Neher, in his study *The Exile of the Word*, contrasts the evils of Hiroshima, Dresden and Coventry — bombings accompanied by tumult — with the evil of Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, everything unfolded, was fulfilled and accomplished over weeks, months and years in absolute silence and away from the mainstream of history.⁶ That silence, born not of the contemplation of the holy God but of the fear of worldly power, would in the end render the church impotent and, as Bonhoeffer feared, unserviceable. He wrote:

We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. Many storms have gone over our heads. We have learnt the art of deception and of equivocal speech. Experience has made us suspicious of others and prevented us from being open and frank. Bitter conflicts have made us weary and even cynical. Are we still serviceable? It is not the genius that we shall need, not the cynic, not the misanthropist, not the adroit tactician, but honest straightforward men. Will our spiritual resources prove adequate and our candour with ourselves remorseless enough to enable us to find our way back again to simplicity and straightforwardness?⁷

Those are questions which need to be faced by the church in any age.

In the conflict with evil, in the Christian witness in the new Dark Ages which are now upon us, the discipline of the faithful community is of critical importance, and central to this discipline is the offering of the Eucharist. The silence on earth for half an hour, in which the only words spoken are the word of God and the words of praise and prayer, must be maintained by a church set within a society which has become structurally deaf both to spiritual values and to human need. The Eucharist is not an escapist rite, a withdrawal from the world into a disconnected sacramental world: it is a foretaste of a new and coming age, and a stirrup cup to battle. In a society based upon anti-eucharistic principles, the Eucharist, which both witnesses to and creates a community of equality and sharing, is a deeply subversive activity. So also, in a noise-dominated world, a world alien to the contemplative spirit, is silence.

'There was silence in heaven' is paralleled four chapters later by 'There was war in heaven' (12:7). If the life of earthly societies is to be a reflection of the heavenly society, should we not expect to find the same dialectic of silence and war, contemplation and conflict, in our own lives? The call to wrestle effectively with principalities and powers depends on inner silence and on the inner and continual struggle with our own demons. External struggle and interior silence go hand in hand.

The silence in heaven is followed immediately by the rising of the incense, the prayers of the saints. In the old Roman rite, the blessing of incense at the Offertory of the Mass involved the invocation of the Archangel Michael, thus linking the silence of Revelation 8 with the warfare of Revelation 12, Let us then offer ourselves as incense and as instruments, in silence and in struggle, to adore and to serve the Lamb who was slain that we might live in justice, freedom and peace.

Notes

1. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, Wilmington, Del., Michael Glazier, 1979, p.54.
2. Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical on The Book of Revelation*, New York, Harper, 1858, p.217.
3. R.H.Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, T. and T. Clark, 1913, p.145.
4. R.H.Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, ICC, 2 vols., T. and T. Clark, 1920, I. pp.223-4.
5. James H. Bustness, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, p.17.
6. André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publishing Society of America, 1981, p.142.
7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1958, p.27.