

The Silence of Calvary

Meditations on
GOOD FRIDAY

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CHAPTER I

THE SILENCE
OF CALVARY

THESE IS, THE BIBLE SAYS, “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Eccles. 3:7). Sometimes we know well enough what time it is, but sometimes we find it almost impossible to tell what time it is and what we ought to be doing. Good Friday is such a time.

Good Friday is unlike any other day of the year. We come to Good Friday midway between the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday and the joy of Easter. Here, between those joyous occasions, we stand before the cross, seeing Jesus nailed there, and for the moment we may almost forget what has gone before and what will come after.

What should we do on a day like this? What should our part be in this awful and glorious event? The history of the church gives no clear answer. Some have believed that this is a day above all days to receive communion. Is it not, after all, on the cross that the body of Christ is broken for us and the blood of Christ poured out? And doesn't Paul say that “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes”? (1 Cor. 11:26). In some churches that has been the tradition, and there is good precedent for it.

But some would say, “No.” Some would say that this is the time above all times *not* to celebrate the Eucharist or receive communion. Some would say that that great feast, that victory celebration of the people of

God, cannot take place on this day. They would say that it is the risen body of Christ that we receive in the Eucharist, and to do that on this day is to put the wrong meaning on this day and on the Eucharist as well. The victory is not complete until Easter; there should be no celebration till then. And there is good precedent for that tradition also.

For many years it has also been the custom in some churches to preach during the three hours from noon to mid-afternoon on the words of Christ from the cross. Often it has been an opportunity for various churches to come together ecumenically in a way they cannot do ordinarily, but that custom is, I think, slowly dying out. Perhaps we are so overwhelmed with words coming at us from all our electronic devices that the thought of more words has less appeal than it once did. So the Book of Common Prayer, beginning on page 276, provides alternative forms of prayer for Good Friday and suggested readings for this time and many churches use them.

But one thing seems clear: that on this day we should do nothing, say nothing, think nothing, except of the love of Jesus that is shown here on the cross. Any form of service, any prayers or hymns, that will keep our hearts and minds on that center can help us keep this day as followers of Christ and enter with him into

the suffering and death from which come victory over all the power of evil.

“There is a time to keep silence,” the Bible tells us, and a time to speak.” This is a time for silence.

If we are not sure what to do on Good Friday, it is at least in part because there is nothing we can do. All that can be done is being done, there on the cross. Our role is to be silent observers as Jesus acts for us. And let us remember this: our silence is a mixture of many elements. There is sorrow of course, and a sense of awe and wonder, but never forget that there is also joy even on this day because this is not a time of defeat or failure. What we are watching is a victory being won and being won for us.

This is *Good* Friday, God’s Friday, a day of victory, and our role is first of all as observers: to see and understand as far as we can the suffering and death by which that victory is won.

This is a time for silence. This is a time for the concentration of all our hearts and minds on the cross of Christ and the thing that is happening there for our salvation.

The usual Good Friday meditations ask us to ponder Jesus’s words from the cross, and that is surely valuable. But those words were few and brief and surrounded by silence. What if, then, we centered our thoughts, not on the traditional words from the cross,

but on the silences. The purpose is the same: to provide a focal point for our thoughts and prayers, to assist us, to guide us, because finally each of us has to play our own part, make our own offering, place ourselves there with Christ, take part with him in his suffering and share in his death in order to share in his victory.

These words then are simply guideposts for us to follow and we will need to add to them our own offering of penitence and prayer and praise. The most important part is to find time for silence, because in the silence most of all, we can become not only witnesses, but also participants in this event.

We might begin by placing ourselves in the city of Jerusalem on that first Good Friday. That was not a silent place, at least at first. The city was filled with noise, and the noise was not only that of an important city going about its day's work, but the noise and confusion of the throngs that had come from all over the world to keep the Passover, the great traditional feast of the Jewish people.

There were Jews in Jerusalem who had never have been in Jerusalem before, and who hardly spoke the same language as Jews from other parts of the Roman Empire; there were travelers seeking a place to stay; there were businessmen working to set their affairs in order before the holiday began; there were housewives

preparing their homes and their meals for the celebration. Picture Times Square on New Year's Eve, a department store three days before Christmas, so Jerusalem would have been at that Passover time.

And this year there were other noises. This year someone had come who had drawn crowds after him, crowds of people shouting his praise. For most of the week they had followed him, watched him, listened to him, debated with him. But gradually the crowd's mood had changed: from praise and expectancy to watchfulness and questioning, and at last to doubt and disappointment. Gradually the crowds grew smaller.

But then larger crowds formed, and this time they formed in anger and hatred. Early in the morning the crowd nearly got out of control in the governor's courtyard. They had been whipped up and urged on to demand an execution. This man had failed them. He had rejected the use of force. He had done nothing to rid them of the Romans. He had not done what they wanted him to do, expected him to do.

Some had always considered him dangerous; now all of them were willing to join in shouting, "Let him be crucified." At last the governor had yielded to their demands. There had been the possibility of dangerous rioting. Barely in time to prevent it, the governor had agreed to the execution they wanted.

Still there was noise, but now it was the noise of the people on the way to enjoy the execution; now it was the shouts of the soldiers trying to keep them back and maintain order; now it was the jeers and the insults of those who had worked to see this crucifixion take place:

Hail, King of the Jews! (Mark 15:18)

You that destroy the temple and build it again in three days, save yourself. (Mark 15:29–30)

You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. (Matt. 27:40)

The rulers derided, the soldiers mocked, and the people stood watching.

The first blow of the hammers, the sharp sound of ringing metal, brought a moment's silence. This was what they had come to see and hear. So there was silence almost for the first time that day, and they could hear his words: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

For a moment there was silence, the kind of silence that falls on any crowd in moments of expectation, or when interest is failing and they wait for something new to take place.

It would happen again and again in the course of that long afternoon. The crowd grew smaller, the shouts and the jeers became fewer; there were even moments of silence, and from time to time those who stood nearest the cross would hear Jesus speak.

Seven times he spoke; seven words were remembered: words of love, words of suffering, words of triumph and victory. These, tradition recorded. Had the noise been less, had the silence been longer, would anyone have heard more? We have no way of knowing. People have often wished that the gospels were longer and more detailed, that more of Christ's words were recorded. There's always an audience for someone claiming to have uncovered new facts about Christ, new sayings of Jesus, new stories about him.

The search will still go on, of course, for writings that will tell us more, but no more is really needed. All that needs to be said, has been said. We already know all that we need to know. And if there is silence enough, if we will quietly wait on God, we will still hear him speak, because Jesus did not so much speak the word of God as reveal it, not so much by words as by actions, not so much in sayings and parables as in his life and by his life. He himself *is* God's word, made flesh so we might hear it. It is he himself and what he did for us that God wants us to know, for by him—by

his life and powerfully by his death—we know God and hear God speak.

When he healed the crippled and blind, when he raised the dead, when he forgave sin, when he fed the hungry, it was what he did, not his words, that spoke of God's healing love. So at Calvary it is the pierced hands and side, the suffering and thirst, the blood poured out, by which Jesus speaks God's word. The wounds, the suffering, tell us God loves us, if we will listen.

So it is silence that God asks of us on Good Friday, silence and watchfulness, to stand beholding the love of God and God's mercy. What we need to do is to silence not only the sounds, but the hurry and clutter and wandering thoughts, to silence every distraction as much as we can, and listen, heart and mind and soul, to God's incarnate word. The hymn says,

Sev'n times he spake, sev'n words of love;
And all three hours his silence cried
For mercy on the souls of men;
Jesus, our Lord, is crucified.

Over and over again God speaks God's word to God's people, but how seldom there is silence enough for us to hear. We would rather hear our own words.

We are hypnotized by the sound of our own voices. And so we fail to hear God speak.

Perhaps we comfort ourselves with the thought that if God really wanted us to hear, if God's command and our obedience were really important, God would compel our attention and make us hear. But the frightening truth is that God will not compel our attention. God has let God's love for us be nailed up on a signpost for the world to see, but if we choose to ignore it, the choice is ours to make.

God has given us freedom, and God will not take it away from us, not even to save our souls. All God asks is that we be silent and listen.

Was there ever a time when people were less willing to be silent than today? The people of Jesus's time in Palestine disliked his words; they tortured and crucified him to make him silent. But we seldom stop and keep silence to hear God's words in the first place. It seems as if we are afraid of silence, afraid of what we might hear.

Talk about the noise of Jerusalem that Good Friday and the noise of the crowd of Calvary! What about the noise of our own community or home any day of the week? Of course there are noises we can't control: the heavy trucks, the motors, the factories and machines. But there are other noises, too, that we might control, that keep us from having any silence whether for

ourselves or for God. The television set: in how many houses is it ever turned off until something inside burns out? It stays on even when no one is in the room—or worse, when others are in the room, even when guests come to call. And the noise follows us out into the street: we see so many with ear buds in place or cell phones attached to their ears, so dependent on noise that they carry it with them. It's as if we were afraid that there might come a time when there was silence and we would be alone with our own thoughts, as if we were afraid of our own thoughts, or afraid of finding that the noise has killed them off and we don't have any thoughts.

But we come to the cross, we should come to the cross, for the sake of silence: to shut out the noise and confusion of everyday life, to quiet the voices of pleasure and pain, need and worry, family, business, and friends, and hear from the cross the word that is spoken there—often in silence more effectively than in words—the incarnate word of God.

The Old Testament emphasizes again and again the silence that is proper in God's presence:

The LORD is in his holy temple;

let all the earth keep silence before him! (Hab. 2:20)

Be silent, all people, before the LORD. (Zech. 2:13)

Perhaps you remember the story of Elijah the prophet. He went out into the wilderness seeking to hear God speak, and he listened for the voice of God in the wind and the thunder and the earthquake.

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

It could also be translated, “a thundering silence.” It was in that thundering silence that God spoke.

Why is it that we so often fail to hear God speak? Is it because God speaks only occasionally, or only to those rare people we call prophets and saints? No, God wants us to hear. And if we do not hear, it may be that it is not because of God’s silence, but because of our lack of silence, because we let ourselves be deafened by our own voices and sounds. These we must learn to silence to hear God.

We have familiar hymns that say the same thing:

Jesus calls us o’er the tumult
of our life’s wild, restless sea,

Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear thy call.¹

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.²

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still small voice of calm.³

Where hearts and minds are turned to him alone
there we will hear God speak.

Let us take for our subject and example the silence
of Calvary.

1. "Jesus Calls Us; O'er the Tumult," *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1985), hymn 549.

2. "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1985), hymn 324.

3. "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1985), hymn 653.