

Revd Lucy Winkett - In Quietness is Strength? How can we re-discover the wisdom that hides in quietness and silence

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When Philip asked me to come and contribute your anniversary I thought to myself What's the first thing that comes to my mind when I think about quietness in a Biblical sense and it was that quotation 'in quietness is your strength'. So really what I'm going to talk about is the link between quietness and strength and I'm going to interpret strength as one of my favourite words which is fearlessness. I think we need to cultivate, to use a horticultural word, fearlessness which is difficult because we are afraid of many things much of the time. So I'm assuming that because you've come today, you think that quietness and the quietness found in a garden especially, is a good thing. Something you yearn for sometimes and something you know in your soul is good even if you don't get it very often. You think that quiet is a good thing. But I think that one of my starting points in thinking about quietness and the quietness of the garden is that it's not something that everyone thinks is good. It's not something that everyone wants and that by supporting initiatives such as the Quiet Garden Movement we, and by extension the church, is doing something not just nice but something radical and countercultural. Particularly I speak as a Londoner.

Some years ago I went to retreat house with a very large garden and I stayed at just over a month following the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. I was in silence for just over a month. For me that was a huge challenge. Some of you here may have done this exercise yourselves. But I was struck by the very mixed reactions from people I knew when I told them I going to do it. I happened to do an interview on Radio 4 on Woman's Hour around that time and the interviewer was actually quite hostile to the thought of me, who she didn't know, spending a long time in silence. It seemed to her, not just useless but irresponsible, ducking out of life, something not to be applauded but challenged, and the hostility completely took me by surprise. I'll return to that mixed attitude towards quietness and silence later on.

But for now I want to begin by exposing to all of us who might assume that silence and quietness is good that our view is not held by everybody and there are different kinds of silence which I'll come onto. But when we explore that reluctance or even hostility to quietness, we might learn more about what an authentic quietness might be and how we can cultivate it, not only in our lives but in wider society. At St James's, where I'm currently, we are right by Piccadilly Circus. Life at Piccadilly Circus is everything that you might imagine it to be. There was a survey which said that there were more people around that area at 3am than 3pm on a Saturday. But right in the middle of Piccadilly Circus where we are, we've got a garden. It's a really beautiful small garden. At the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Charles the second gave land to Henry Jermyn, to thank him for being his mother's companion in the Netherlands after the execution of Charles I. It was on that land in Jermyn Street, now full of clothes shops, that Christopher Wren was asked to build a new church for the residents of St James's Square and from the beginning it had two churchyards – a paved churchyard and a green churchyard. Over the years that has now become our garden, which is now called the Southwood Garden. We have a gardener, Catherine, who is absolutely brilliant. She says this: "I love the fact that the Southwood Garden is used by different people for different things - lunch breaks, business meetings and events, or just moments of peace and quiet. My interest in horticulture is simple. How can you use it to lift the spirits, soften buildings, create a sense of place, and give people the opportunity to engage with the natural world in the heart of the city, to create bio diverse habitats."

The garden is still full of drought tolerant plants (it's is pretty shady) taking the form of waves rippling through the space.

A couple of reflections from my own experience of our church garden. The garden often looks quiet but it isn't. Although I might walk into our Southwood Garden and seemingly feel it as quiet, even in the city, it isn't really. It's alive with furiously creative bugs and worms and beetles. Sound engineers have placed sensitive microphones in the trunks of trees to record the noise which trees make as they grow, which is significant. It's a kind of screaming. So the quotation I've always loved from Mother Teresa, "We need to find God and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. See how nature, trees, flowers, grass grow in silence; we need silence to be able to touch souls." That beautiful quotation from Mother Teresa where she is meditating on the trees and flowers and the grass growing in silence isn't actually true. Does that spoil it? No it enhances it for me. It depends on the kind of noise we find in silence. So when I walk into our quiet garden I can be distracted by the fact that it is furiously busy with things growing; but I reinterpret it, if I can, as the worship of the Creator by the created. A garden looking quiet to me is actually full of natural sound, the music of creation which is the music that I join in, every time I open my mouth to sing a hymn or to say a prayer. It's a fundamental principle of going to church. It is a fundamental principle of liturgy that our own services are simply joining in what is already happening which is the worship of all creation of the Creator. So a quiet garden isn't quiet, it's full of fabulous noise.

Secondly I walk into our Southwood Garden. It looks quiet but it isn't in another way.

I visited our garden this past week in preparation for this talk. I thought I might sit in a quiet garden to see what might occur to me. There were about 20 people, it as it happened on that day in the garden. None were talking to each other, they were all silent, they were all quiet. But they weren't quiet, they were all on the phone, they were all checking Facebook. Some were reading a newspaper, some were reading a book. The garden in my imagination was full of words and, at general election time, in terms of the newspapers and the Internet it was full of arguments. Therefore Isaiah writes "Thus says the holy one of Israel. Because you reject the word put your trust in oppression and deceit, therefore this iniquity shall become for you shall become like a break in high wall, bulging out about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly in an instant. It's breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that amongst its fragments not a shard is found for taking fire from the hearth or dipping water out of the cistern. For thus says the Lord God the holy one of Israel, in returning and rest you shall be saved. In quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused and said No, we will flee upon horses. Therefore shall you shall flee."

I don't know about you but I recognise that wisdom from Isaiah. I know that in quietness and trust shall be my strength in God but mostly I reply exactly as the Israelites replied. "No I will flee on horses they say, I will ride upon swift steeds they say, therefore my pursuers shall be swift." The horses on which I flee are my to do lists, my busyness, my insistence that I do stuff and achieve stuff. My pursuers are also swift says Isaiah. I'm pursued by the things that I ought to have done and haven't done, and the things that I've left undone that I ought to have done. The horses on which I flee from the quietness which becomes my strength are my thoughts. The desert fathers and mothers of the fourth century wrote about this. They were keen on us fleeing not into a maelstrom of thought but from our thoughts. They called them logismoi – what we might say today is the loop tape, the distracting and repetitive tape that takes place in our heads, going over the things we done, thinking through things that are worrying us about the future and forgetting to be here, just where we are now. Logismoi they said, flee from these repetitive and distracting thoughts. It's a technical spiritual term for the obsessional fantasies that can take over an inner life; that we flee from status and overweening sense of our dignity; that we flee from speech especially easy speech; that we learn to flee even from words. This space inside that we can create when we dare to is also the size of our own heart and mind and imagination. Not infinite spaces, they might be quite restricted spaces, like a small and quiet garden. And Rowan Williams has written in his book *Silence and Honeycakes* that the commitment to stay within the

space of this inner garden, these daily disciplines, this unchanging environment, it's costly. When we've learned more or less successfully to flee some of our illusions in which life appears easier, we will have learned how to inhabit the landscape of truth as more than an occasional visitor, he writes.

Isaiah's word pictures then are about speed, running, swift horses, being pursued, stampeding. It's not difficult in contemporary life to live a life full of stampedes. We live in a noisy world. Has it ever before been this is noisy? Probably not and at the beginning of the twenty first century, it became true for the first time in human history, that more of the six billion people on the planet live in cities than in the countryside. And it must be true surely, that in these cities, like the one we're surrounded by today, 21st century human beings live in a sound environment unique in the history of humanity. It's a world of almost constant manufactured noise. The sound environment we've created for ourselves raises questions, not only about how we live and why we've created that sound environment, but these soundscapes can start to reveal deeper spiritual questions about who we are, about what we're afraid of, about how we cultivate our fearlessness, and in whom we trust.

By way of reflection on this, I just want to add a couple of comments about birds in the garden. When I was in our garden this week, I heard the song of many different birds and there's something poignant about the song of birds in the city. The sound of birdsong is a sound that has inspired composers, artists, poets, throughout the centuries. Because scientists tell us that bird bone structure and behaviour are close to dinosaurs, for me the birds are somehow indigenous people of the skies. They are the descendants of pterodactyls, the survivors of the ages. They have that weight and that perspective for me. And the interaction between birds in our city gardens and their urban environment reveals an aspect of lament that I can hear in a quiet garden. Birds sing to find a mate, to mark out territory, to warn other birds of danger. They sing in spring, they sing as dawn breaks and their song marks the passing of time and seasons. But in recent years research by scientists has shown that the birds are singing differently in cities. While their ability to adapt to this urban environment is impressive, the changes in their songs are warnings to us, a bit like a canary in a mine. The birds sacrifice warns us of dangers that we can't see. In cities then, birds are singing not just in the daytime but at night, in reaction to the light pollution because the lights are always on was but also to noise as well. A series of articles in the new scientist magazine explored the findings of researchers at Leiden in University in the Netherlands. They found that birds were singing songs more quickly and at a higher pitch in a city than in the nearby forest. They found that in 10 European cities birds were singing faster and higher than their counterparts in forests. Their theory is that because traffic noise tends to be a low frequency, birds hoping to attract a mate will sing at higher frequencies in order to be heard above the traffic, but in forests the variety is maintained. Robins sing at night in places where noise pollution during the day is at its height. Urban birds are also singing more loudly. There's an amazing study that showed that nightingales are recorded in Berlin in 2000 and 2002 singing at 95dB which is as loud as the New York subway. Birds are having to sing loudly and with higher pitch and faster in order to communicate over the noise that we've created in city. The fact that they have to sing so loudly may damage their lung function and that's where scientists are exploring now. Or they may send the evolutionary process in a new direction. None of these consequences are clear but birds are singing more loudly at higher pitch and more quickly as result of the city noise around them. Scientist are continuing to work on those studies. But I want to listen to the witness of the birds in the city as they show us what effect our choices are having, not only on us but other creatures with whom we share this earth. If they are singing more loudly at a higher shrill pitch with less variation, if they are singing in the dark in order to make themselves heard over the human noise of low pitch monotonous and relentless sound, I want to listen to that witness of the birds because night becomes the new day. It tells me that the urban world is inside out.

I still imagine however the robin or the nightingale continuing to sing over the drone of traffic, a bit like the equivalent of a plant breaking open a pavement. The solid monotone of humans transporting ourselves from here to there and back again doesn't seem to be able to suppress, thankfully, the melodic creativity of the blackbird even if the singing has become more piercing or shrill. And so a quiet garden is a place to listen to the witness of the birds, particularly in the middle of city. A postscript to this – a children's story tells of a Native American walking down the street in New York City, he turns to his companion and says "What a beautiful sound that cricket is making." "I can't hear it above all the traffic", says his guide, "How can you hear that?" "It all depends what you're listening for," he says. As he says this, he takes a coin from his pocket and drops it on the pavement. A hundred heads turn towards the sound of loose money. By placing ourselves in the physical quietness of the garden which is actually full of the sounds of fecundity, reproduction, growth and worship, by placing ourselves in this garden, we give ourselves a good chance of finding the quietness that Isaiah was talking about and about listening for the witness of the birds and plants.

The next thing I want to say is that being in that environment only puts us in the right place. It doesn't do it for us and that's the work that I want to talk about the rest of this time.

Our search for quietness and strength is closely related to our environment so we may put ourselves in a quiet garden. But an assumption that I'm making, as I mentioned at the beginning, from Isaiah's prophetic writing and from my own experience, is that those two things, quietness and strength, are closely linked. Remember I wanted to talk about strength as fearlessness. I think it's because when that loop tape is slowed, when the repetitive logismoi that the desert fathers and mothers talked about, when those distracting and obsessional thoughts are quietened down, what's left after that takes a lot of courage to face honestly, a lot of courage. It's why we, despite saying that we want to, often don't take time to spend time in contemplation. One of the things that I sometimes say at our congregation of St James's, is that the worst thing you can do if you want to learn how to pray is buy a book about it. Because you read the book and think you've prayed. You start to convince yourself. I know about praying because I've read books about prayer. There's no substitute for actually just doing it. We avoid it, so what is that reluctance about, without judgement and without too fierce a self-examination – a godly examination? So what is that reluctance all about? Well when all has been cleared away, when the repetitive thoughts have gone, who wants to sit in that space if it means that God's gaze will fall on us and every aspect of our lives? You might say "Well I do, sounds wonderful". But actually what it does do is expose to us the God that we really believe in, not the God that we say we believe in, or the God that the Church of England tells us we should believe in. What do I mean by that? Even if we say we believe in a God of love, even if we say we trust God, quite often when we sit with our reluctance to be quiet and our reluctant to pray we discover something about ourselves; which is that we are still carrying around an image of God is far from trustworthy. So any attempt to be quiet reminds us that the kind of God we actually believe in, whatever we say we believe, is not a god we want to spend any time with. One writer who has been hugely influential in this area was the Jesuit priest Gerry Hughes who died a couple of years ago. He was convinced that the picture we carry around of God affects how we believe and not only how we believe, but how we pray, whether we want to pray and how faith feels intuitively which in turn effects the way we live. So that's why a Quiet Garden Movement is so radical.

Gerry Hughes once produced a kind of identikit picture of God which I'm going to read you now, called Good Old Uncle George. This identikit kind of God is based, in his experience, on how God had been communicated to people who had given up on Christianity and walked away but what I want to suggest is that we often carry around this God inside even if we don't think we do. This is Gerry Hughes's Good Old Uncle George

George was a family relative much admired by mum and dad who described him as very loving, a great friend of the family, very powerful and very interested in all of us. Eventually we're taken to visit good old uncle George. He lives in a formidable mansion, he is gruff his appearance is threatening; we cannot share our parent's admiration for him. At the end of the visit, Uncle George turns to address us. "Now listen dear," he begins, looking very severe, "I want to see you here once a week and if you fail to come, just let me show you what will happen to you." He then leads us down to mansion's basement. It's dark, it becomes hotter and hotter as we descend, and we begin to hear unearthly screams in the basement. There are steel doors. "Now look in there, dear", he says. We see a nightmare vision, an array of burning furnaces with demons in attendance who hurl into the blaze those men, women and children who fail to visit Uncle George or behave in a way of which he approved. "And if you don't visit me, that is where you will certainly go", says Uncle George. He then takes us upstairs again to meet Mum and Dad. As we go home tightly clutching Dad with one hand and Mum with the other, Mum leans over us and says "Now don't you love Uncle George with all your heart and soul and mind and strength" and we say "Yes I do" because to say anything else would be to join the queue in the basement.

At a tender age then, deep conflict has set in and we keep telling Uncle George how much we love him and how good he is and that we want to do only what pleases him. We observe what we are told are his wishes and we dare not admit, even to ourselves, that we loath him. Uncle George is a caricature, but a caricatures of truth; the truth that we often construct a God who is in fact an image of our tyrannical selves. Hellfire sermons are out of fashion at the moment but they were in fashion a few decades ago, are still in fashion in many places in the world and they may well come back here again! Such sermons have a great appeal to certain unhealthy types of mind but they caused havoc with a more healthy and sensitive. The Uncle George kind of God is a God which is wrathful and vengeful, who needs to be appeased.

I suppose my starting point with this caricature of God is to be curious about it rather immediately dismissive. The world we live in is a world of wonder and delight, adventure and abundance. It is also the world of Auschwitz, Kigali, Nagasaki, Columbine, Passchendaele and Mount Sinjar. In the face of that depravity, the spiritual tensions are almost impossible to hold, judgement with mercy, wrath with forgiveness. Uncle George type of God comes from our inability when we read Scripture to do anything but make God like us only bigger. We know about wrath, we know about own anger and fury and violence and jealousy, the alarming and scary feelings that we have, which emerge as soon as we are in silence. So we imagine therefore that God's wrath is like that only bigger, which makes God more violent and more frightening and we end up with something like Uncle George. But crucially a truthful quietness will reveal to us that one of the most important things Christian theology wants to say about God is the God emphatically isn't like us only bigger. God is unlike us, is free, disconcertingly free, utterly and completely undefended, the Creator completely given over to relationship with creation.

We have a second problem which is revealed to us when we start to be quiet. Because we so often formulated our image of God in the language of Uncle George for centuries, we have jettisoned the notion altogether that God is other or resolutely strange and we go to the other extreme. What do we do? We create an equally damaging sort of faith, just as damaging as the uncle George fantasy which is what you might call Great-Aunt Oprah kind of God. I'm okay you're okay kind of God, this kind of God can do no more for me than stroke the busied parts of my ego and can't help me with the damage I do to myself and others. This God disastrously, simply, leaves me as I am, and us as we are, and it as it is. We rush to the other extreme and that kind of God is just as damaging I want to suggest you; because that domesticated God does nothing to challenge my preference for safety over trust or to challenge my preference for illusion to truth. It is a God I can recruit to my own programmes and prejudices instead of a God who will set me free.

So who we think God is, is vital when we dare to be quiet, when we get to put aside those distractions and relentless thoughts. Because if we're carrying around any fantasy of God we simply do not want to spend time in the presence of God whether it's good old uncle George or great aunt Oprah. Who wants to spend time in the presence of either of those? One of them will be whimsically cool, the other will never deeply satisfy me. And so daring to be quiet, takes courage. In quietness we begin to search for an authentic spirituality that's not fooled by our fantasies or ultimately unappealing in shallowness but an authentic truthful quietness into which God as God is, is able to speak.

What might be that authentic quiet spirituality, that authentic spirituality that finds its roots in the courage to be quiet? I think that I can start to offer some thoughts on that question, by saying first of all what I think it isn't. An authentic spirituality of quietness is not a collection of warmth feelings and it doesn't necessarily make me feel better. Spirituality in this sense is not primarily about self-actualisation or self-fulfilment or flourishing. Spirituality is not authentic just because it's sincere or well meant. That might sound a bit unappealing, when I read it out like that it, it doesn't sound very attractive. But I suppose that's partly my point, because I think that authentic spirituality is a courageous and constant search for truth; all the time knowing we will never really know. Truth about ourselves, about life, about what we discern about living and dying from what we can't sense, truth about the world, the universe, the call of God; an authentic spirituality will lead to fulfilment along the way but will also lead to a fundamental dismantling of myself before God; especially when I've built up over a lifetime, a series of fantasies about myself, who I am and what should happen next. I guess that within a Christian context the truth that I suppose I find in my search in Christianity, based on the story of Good Friday and Easter day, is that when light and truth and peace and hope emerge in the world, what human beings often do is crucify it. We crush it in ourselves and in others, especially when we find it challenging. In the gospels and the prophets then, I think we find good news but it's not news that will sooth me or make me successful or a better manager of my time. It's news about God that dismantles me with God's willingness to be vulnerable. I don't even find it easy using the phrase 'my spirituality' as if it was something I could possess or a dog I could walk. Authentic quietness is founded on my willingness, which I have to renew every day, every hour of every day, to be stripped naked and for all my assumptions to be called into question by the God, who I trust with my life and with my death.

So our fundamental spiritual activity in quietness is not so much progressing and moving forwards, or improving, or even learning, our fundamental spiritual activity in quietness is returning; turning back, returning again towards the light, turning again towards the one who made me and loves me, into the endlessly generative and creative source of life and grace. Our fundamental spiritual activity is returning to the quietness that God urges me to, which in turn makes us fearless. Because the journey into quietness brings us into inevitable conflict with the overweening confidence we have in our own ability. That turns in the public square into power hungry humanity, or an over reliance on politics or organisation or money or power, to make the world and life better. One of the main things that is found in a Christian search for quietness is that it helps us with the mess. Christianity, Christian theology, wants to acknowledge the mess we make, the mistakes and the wilful decisions we make to harm ourselves or others or the planet. It gives us a mechanism to live with this - confession, forgiveness, redemption - which happens every moment of every hour of every day. Daring to turn to this kind of quietness, means we can develop over time spiritual muscle memory. We become more courageous to face ourselves as we are, as God sees us, and to learn to live without knowledge, without condemnation, or fantasy.

So finally I want to have a few comments about silence and how it can cultivate our fearlessness. Much is written about intentional silence in the church. Not much is said about it in society and

some commentators are hostile to it, like that Woman's Hour presenter I mentioned at the beginning. There are occasional moments of quiet, a minute's absence of noise is a regular feature of large crowds gathering at the start of rugby matches or football matches, usually in recognition of a death or the anniversary of a death. Although I've been interested recently, I don't if you've noticed it, a minute of applause is increasingly used as an act of remembrance. It was used for the former manager of Watford football club Graham Taylor recently. But silence and quietness is one distinctive contribution the churches can make in a noisy society, after the example of Christ who we read many times often retreated to the mountains to pray night alone. One of the best loved descriptions of God in scripture is that still small voice also translated in the First Book of Kings as the sound of sheer silence. God was not in the earthquake, wind, fire, but God was to be found in the sound of sheer silence. We still struggle to listen for that voice in an over busy institutional church, in over busy world, where those of us who lead services let our congregations down whenever we say "Let us keep silence" and then start talking. It's a modern and, perhaps also not so modern phenomenon, that when we church people talk about silence we are often expressing not so much a deep yearning for that quietness and stillness in which we may encounter God. We are not so much talking about that, as we're talking about a distaste for vulgar noise and a desire for peace and quiet in the same way as a Victorian rector retreated into the study when the children played too loudly. We don't often mean actual silence, we mean the right kind of noise. In a world of constant noise Church community particularly ones who have gardens, homes who have gardens, retreat houses who have gardens, we can teach ourselves in this way to create oases of stillness which is witnessing to a different reality; one that doesn't need endless distraction and clamour to communicate it.

But the reality is, and I'm speaking about church now, we often replicate rather than challenge life in a noisy world. Because of this, collective silence in church services can cause immense anxiety. For parents it's a dead cert that as soon as the person at the front introduces a moment of quiet, the children start to scream and they'll feel the anxiety of not only the effort required trying to keep children quiet but the judgement of everybody else. It's an incredibly anxious time. For older people who live alone it may be that more silence is the last thing they want and the collective silence of a congregation reminds them of their own too quiet home. Silence doesn't just happen and it takes a long time for groups to be comfortable with it.

How can silence and quiet strengthen us and make us fearless?

I wonder if you have thought of keeping a sound diary just as those who want to lose weight keep a food diary. What are the sounds that you hear in a day, how much do you hear and what do you feel about what you hear? How much music is in your life? Do you like music or not and what kind of music is it? Is there, in your everyday life, any silence? How do you feel when there is, what sounds are going on inside your head (snatches of conversation, bits of tune, unidentifiable noises)? All of this is relevant for people of faith who want to find ways to listen for the presence of God, who will challenge us, strip us of our fantasies and make us more courageous than we could ever imagine; not in terms of hearing physical voices but a desire to align our will with the will of God. If we're following an Ignatian interpretation of what that will mean, then our deepest desire, underneath our desires, all our wants and game-playing, what we think we need, underneath all of that is our deepest desire – that will be God's will for us. So the journey is simply to discover and uncover what that is by spending time in quiet.

Rather than telling God how the day has been as soon as the noise abates and the quietness begins, and we think we should pray for so and so in hospital and tell God how it went today, ... rather than saying any of that, we could start with a different prayer to God. "You show me my day. Show me my life as you see it." So that the momentum, initiative is where it belongs, with God not with us. Learning about our own personal attitudes to noise and silence and quietness will

assist us in our attempts to become and remain attentive to the presence and will of God deep inside us.

The truth is that quiet and silence are not neutral. The silence of the silenced, the silence of the unmarked graves of the disappeared, is a silence in which the body of Christ should never be complicit. It's not quietest spirituality we're after but authentic quietness. Hildegard of Bingen, mystic and musician of Middle Ages wrote a piece about the Creation of the World – Adam, Eve, angels, 18 different parts. She expressed the part of Satan as the one who was silent, doesn't sing. So here silence can be Satanic, the silence of the fallen angel, a stultifying silence with which we can't make our peace. But a silence that is underpinned by love, by a willingness to wait, by a level of attentiveness that accepts where we are and who we are before God, is a gift that the churches can give to a distracted world.

I end with a plea for those of us who spend time in churches. We do our people a disservice when we are unable to be silent or invite others into such silence; because in an assentive, creative, exploratory silence – in that kind of silence, we cultivate and deepen our own fearlessness; because we know our identity to be only, and fundamentally, rooted in our creation by God. So we will start to worry less about what people think or say. It's not just about rest or whiling away a pleasant afternoon, this kind of authentic, quiet spirituality can be the preparation, the tilling of the soil inside us that will stand up to injustice and proclaim a new world that Christ puts before us every hour of every day. So even whilst we are constantly attempting to flee on those swift horses of ours, we're called back again and again to the ancient sound of a bell and perhaps to the silence of a quiet garden in order to deepen our vocation to live fully as fearless children of God.

Lucy Winkett May 2017