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*The Joy of Listening to God: Hearing The Many Ways God Speaks To Us*

“*The dark night of the soul*” pp. 212-216

One of the methods God uses to bring about this inner harmony in some people is an experience which is sometimes called 'the dark night of the soul'. This phrase describes the phases of the spiritual journey when the senses no longer pick up the felt presence of Christ but seem to be conscious, instead, only of nothingness. During this winter of the senses God seems to be, not present and attentive and loving, but completely absent. Thomas Merton refers to this experience often and describes it variously: 'spiritual inertia, inner confusion, coldness, lack of confidence'. 'What at first seemed rosy and rewarding suddenly comes to be utterly impossible. The mind will not work. One cannot concentrate on anything. The imagination and the emotions wander away.'

In my prayer diary, I record the pain and bewilderment which the apparent absence of God brings: 'I ache for fellowship with you, Lord, but you seem so silent. You, whom this time last week I held and loved and cherished seem to have gone away again. Come, Lord Jesus, with healing hands...'

What I am referring to here is not simply an absence of warm feelings in prayer but something more profound than that: a definite sense that God had vanished, even abandoned me.

The first time I encountered the horror of this seeming separation from God, I was on retreat. Faced with four whole days of solitude, instead of the sense of anticipation which normally filled me at such times, I was seized with a sudden, severe sense of panic, even fear. I dreaded the moment when I must cross the threshold into silence.

In the convent where I had retreated to pray lived a nun who knew me well. In her I confided: 'Please pray for me. I don't know what's happening but I'm terrified of going into silence. God seems to have disappeared. He just isn't there any more and I'm left with this awful emptiness.'

She smiled and seemed quite unperturbed by the nature of the problem. Friend and confidante as she was, she prayed with me and for me and opened my eyes to the fact that in the school of prayer this particular seminar is a training ground for those who would graduate in the art of listening to God. In the first place, it increases our longing for God.

This became my experience. The darkness which crept over me in the convent on that occasion caused me to shudder and draw back, but it drew from me a call for Christ which came from the very depths of my being and which I experienced as a near-physical pain. It set me on a search for him which was both urgent and full of anguish. Was it, perhaps, the kind of search which sent Mary to the tomb very early on that Easter Day, full of longing to find the love which had been snatched away so suddenly? Was it reminiscent of the anxious hurt of the bride for her bridegroom in the Song of Songs? (3:1-2). Certainly, it seemed an identification with the pain David expresses so poignantly:

> As the deer pants for streams of water,  
> so my soul pants for you, O God.  
> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
> When can I go and meet with God?' (Ps. 42:1-2).

And it echoed his cry of bewilderment: 'Why have you forgotten me?' (Ps. 42:9).
But it did more than expose my genuine desire for God. It sharpened my spiritual ears. God seemed to be hiding, but he had promised never to leave me or forsake me. He must, therefore, be there—somewhere. My spiritual antennae quivered with eagerness and alertness to detect even the faintest sign of his presence.

Meanwhile the nothingness which engulfed me forced me into some necessary sifting. As I thought about my normal programme of priorities—the people I spent time with, the activities I enjoyed, the work I found so fulfilling—I recognised the truth of the situation that in comparison with Christ and his presence the best the world can offer is but a mean and paltry offering. Thus the world lost more of its lure and lustre and what the mystics describe as the capax Dei, the capacity for God, increased. And deep down this was what I wanted. If this yawning emptiness was the enlargement of my inner capacity for God, then I would welcome these desert experiences. The intermingling of cautious trust and longing expressed in a prayer I once heard became my prayer:

You, oh Lord, are the thing that I long for
And yet
I'm not sure that I can bear the emptiness that this longing will involve
If I really long for you then there will be no room for the clutter
of a lot of other longings ...

I must be hollowed out
To become a capacity for you.
I shrink from the pain that will involve
But I must needs feel the poverty of my emptiness
And my poverty meets with your giving in the silence of lovers.

And, of course, when he saw that the time was ripe, God overwhelmed me once more with his felt presence. Meanwhile, having dispensed with the debris within, I had been enlarging the reservoir into which he could pour the life-giving waters of his Spirit's loving, invigorating presence. And when the 'tremendous lover' did return, the wave of joy which broke on the shore of my soul gave birth to a song of heart-felt thanksgiving and relief. And I realised I had learned another valuable lesson: that I must not depend on feelings nor dictate to God how he will appear to me. If he has spoken in a certain way on one occasion, I must not expect that necessarily he will visit me in that way a second time. I must allow God to be God. And I must recall that he is not here to meet my neurotic needs nor to kow-tow to my whims and fancies. He is here to transform me into his likeness. The work of God's Spirit is to grow me up into the likeness of Christ. Just as one third of our earthly existence is spent in physical darkness, night, so God in his wisdom ordains that from time to time my prayer life must work a few night-shifts also. The mystery is, as the psalmist reminds us, that the darkness is not dark to him: 'The night will shine like the day' (Ps. 9:12).

I learned, too, that this darkness is a relative phenomenon. As someone once explained it to me, 'when you've been looking into the sun, you turn round and everything seems dark. Similarly, when you've been gazing at Jesus, everything else lies in his shadow.'
Thomas Merton makes the claim that these night times of the senses increase in frequency as time goes on, that there is a sense in which they can be taken as signs of progress provided the prayer does not give up but determines to respond to the challenge, refuses to view this hollowness as spiritual doom or punishment for sin, but sees it, rather, for what it really is: the opportunity for growth.

Speaking personally, I still shudder when prayer dries up on me, when I listen and hear nothing, when I yearn for God and find emptiness, but I am learning, slowly, that the darkness is but the shadow of his hand, silence but the herald of his call, and nothingness the space prepared for the return of never-ending love.

As we listen to God, the pendulum swings from practicalities to ecstasies, from joy to pain and back again. But always our aim in prayer is to listen to the persistent tick-tock of his voice. When we do this, others take notice, benefit from the overflow, and give glory to God. As the pagan Queen of Sheba put it, reflecting on Solomon's in-touchness with God: 'Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you' (2 Chr. 9:8).