

1 Kings 19:1-15a
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

NEWSCAST

Children of large nervous furs
will grow more pale this morning
in king populations
where today drug leaders
will promote an ever-increasing traffic
of irritant colors
Signs of this evident group
are said to be almost local

Today a small general open space
was found lodged in the immediate shadow
of the heavenly pole. It was occupied
early in the week by Russian force teams
Their symbols are thought
to be unexplained

In New Delhi a fatal sport parade
involving long mauves and delicate slanders
was apprehended and constrained at three P.M.
by witnesses with evening gestures
in a menacing place where ten were prohibited
many others were found missing in colossal purples
and numerous raided halls...

Martian Doctors recommend a low-cost global enema
to divert the hot civet wave now tending
to swamp nine thousand acres of Mozambique
Our Gemini spores and other space observers note
small inflammations in the Northern Lights
and remedies beat all aspirin to these same Lights
For further confusion
consult your ordinary delay
or wait for the clergy.

From the poem 'Newscast' by the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton – part of his later collection of what he called "anti-poetry," published under the title *Cables to the Ace*. Mimicking the forms of general speech, it draws attention to how we are constantly bombarded by words – whether printed or spoken – coming at us from every direction bidden or unbidden, more often than not only half-listened to, if that, and yet perhaps for this very reason exerting a subliminal influence on our lives. I'm tempted to say "words, words, meaningless words," but that would be to underestimate the effect of our constant exposure to this cacophony of speech. The legion voices outside and, even more so, inside our heads always chattering away, literally driving us to distraction – causing us to lose our minds, submerging our true identities beneath a fog of

superficiality, or multiple personalities. As Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg said: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...”

Ginsberg’s friend and fellow Beat writer, William Burroughs, had a theory that language is a virus – a means of control by *them*, whoever *they* happen to be, which he sought to subvert or overcome by various diverse means, sometimes producing results not dissimilar to the piece I just read by Merton. Strange, perhaps unexpected, parallels: between the Trappist Monk and this sinister, shadowy writer of the beat underworld – and yet both convinced of the value, even necessity of *silence*.

“Most people never stop talking,” says Burroughs, “– ‘talking to themselves,’ as they call it. But who are they actually talking to, and why? Why can’t they simply lapse into silence?” He continues, “Silence is only frightening to people who are compulsively verbalising... Personally I find nothing upsetting about silence at all. In fact it can’t get too quiet for me.” I can just hear him saying that in his weedy, sinister drawl of a voice. He talked about learning to think in *images* without words, beyond words – what an amazing idea: images without words. Is that even possible? Think in images rather than words. Suggests a return to *primaeval*, preverbal thinking. Perhaps that’s what emojis are all about!

Merton too recognised why silence may be frightening – why, if you like, people are *compulsively verbalising*. In silence we come face to face with ourselves “in the lonely ground of our own being,” as Merton puts it. In the silence we are confronted with the questions of our existence (Who am I and where have I come from?), and our commitments (What and who am I here for?), and the authenticity of our everyday lives (Am I true to who I am? Does my life reflect my identity?). I found it moving in our Gospel reading when we see the man from whom the legion of demons had been cast out “sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.” He had returned to himself. When he asks Jesus if he may go with him, Jesus refuses and tells him to go to his own home; a sense of being set free to *return* to where he belonged and to live the life given to him, no longer tormented by the demons who drove him out to live among the dead in the tombs.

The silence Merton is talking about is not so much about negative silence – the *absence* of exterior sound – which more often than not diffuses into daydreams or worries about this or that, wandering thoughts. This is not really silence at all – the inner chattering voices are still there; the compulsive verbalising continues. Rather than this negative silence, this mere absence of sound, he speaks of a *positive* silence which he says “pulls us together and makes us realise *who we are, who we might be, and the distance between the two.*” *A positive silence that makes us realise who we are, who we might be, and the distance between the two.* The gap between our surface, public, social self – the masks we wear, the roles we play on the stage of life, the personas we convey to the world – and what he calls the “*disturbing stranger*” within us who is both ourselves and is other than ourselves. Who is this “disturbing stranger” within us who is both ourselves and other than ourselves?

Elijah stood on the mountain and “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]. There’s a certain irony in this given the display of fire power that Elijah has just witnessed and even orchestrated in his confrontation with the false prophets of Baal: the

challenge for them to call on Baal to ignite their sacrificial fire (nothing happened); versus Elijah's spectacular calling on the LORD almighty to send down fire from heaven. But perhaps because of this, even more the point stands that God is to be heard not in such displays of power but rather in the sound of silence.

Not in the mighty wind of many voices is the voice of God heard. Not in the earth-shattering arguments of logic or even the fire of the intellect is the word of God heard but in the "still small voice of calm," in the sound of sheer silence – the silence of eternity. It is in the depths of consciousness that God is truly heard, perhaps too in the depths of our subconscious and unconscious. In the encounter with the "disturbing stranger" within us who is both ourselves and other than ourselves.

It is easy, perhaps, and sometimes comforting to be satisfied with a false picture of ourselves – constructed through the compulsive verbalising in our heads, the legion of voices demanding our attention – rather than trying to find who we really are in the depths. It is just as easy to substitute a God "made up of words, feelings, reassuring slogans ... the product of religious and social routine," as Merton puts it, for the "invisible God of faith." *A God "made up of words, feelings, reassuring slogans ... the product of religious and social routine," versus "invisible God of faith."* Such an image of God is really nothing more than an idol – an illusion, a product of our minds. It is the gap between the God of earthquake, wind and fire and the God of sheer silence. Between the God we imagine and the God who is.

Mind the gap – as they say on London Underground. Another gap! This time it is the failure to mind the gap between our conception of God and the actual, ultimately unknowable, naked reality of God lies at the heart of many, if not all, religious disputes. We may expect God to speak in the awesome power of earthquake, wind and fire but God's voice is more likely to be heard in the sound of sheer silence as we attend to what is going on in our own hearts.

Sometimes, perhaps we may imagine that God is just a larger version of ourselves – a God of rules and arbitrary justice, of wrath and punishment – a God of law. But what if God is not like that? What if, as St. Paul says, the law was like a guardian to bring us to maturity of faith; and faith is about the freedom to look into the reality of things and to understand what is right and what is not – not because it has been written down in an ancient scripture but because it is written on our hearts. This holds before us the dizzy spectre of ultimate freedom, and also ultimate responsibility. Free flight and the sound of sheer silence.

Mind the gap – between the God of our imagining and the God that imagines us: imagines us into existence in the image and likeness of God (and not the other way round). Mind the gap also between the image we have of ourselves fed by the legion of voices outside and within with their demands and expectations of who we (and others) think we should be and the image that God has of us reflected in the still waters of our own hearts.

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