

SILENCE

'I Am'

EXODUS 3.14, 15

God said to Moses, 'I Am who I Am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'

Moses has had a life full of incident. Saved from slaughter as an infant by the ingenuity of his mother, he is adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and spent his childhood and youth enjoying the consequent privileges. But he remains a Hebrew at heart, and in an overflow of righteous anger kills one of those who sought to harm his people. When news of this action reaches Pharaoh, Moses flees for his life. His time of wealth and ease is over and in his new life as a shepherd Moses settles down into obscurity. But God's people groan under the power of the Egyptians and God 'took notice of them' (Exodus 2.25). Moses is chosen by God to bring his people out of Egypt but he hesitates, seeking further instructions – why should the Hebrew people follow him, a mere shepherd, a murderer, an outlaw? So God tells Moses under whose authority he will act – that of God himself. 'I Am has sent me to you.' The Hebrew word is YHWH. It has no vowels; it is but a breath, the merest expiration, no more than a sigh. But it is the breath that gives us life that sustains us, without which we would perish. From that first breath of God over the chaos of the universe, when the spirit of God 'swept over the face of the waters' (Genesis 1.2), we have been sustained and supported by the breath of creation, of love, the sighing of YHWH who murmurs 'I Am' into our troubled turbulent lives, breathing peace and calm, reminding us of his presence, his love.

Just as God takes ‘notice’ of the groaning of his people under the weight of their slavery in Egypt, so too does his eye fall upon us, and he takes notice. No care or difficulty is too small for him, no injury or anxiety escapes his mindful eye, for God notices and into them he breathes his spirit, healing and redeeming. But the relationship is not one-sided, for although God takes notice and acts, he chooses to do so through the agency of one of his people, who must join with him in the act of noticing. The work of rescue is a partnership, a covenant between God and Moses. The burning bush is placed as a sign for Moses, but he must turn aside from the daily tasks and investigate this phenomenon. He must not allow himself to be so caught up in the necessary busyness of physical survival that he fails to notice the task of his soul. Once he has his attention, God speaks to Moses and invites him into partnership with him for the freedom of his people, but Moses feels unworthy, afraid ‘who am I that I should go?’ God must remind him that he is not alone, that the task is not solely his but the work of God himself. Further reassurance is given in the authority of God’s name – the creative, redemptive breath that gives life to a suffocating world.

EXERCISE

You will probably at some time today discover that you are feeling busy, anxious, or even stressed. It would be wonderful if you didn’t and, if this is the case, give thanks that you don’t need to do this exercise! However, the majority of us will feel under pressure at some time or another and, like the people of Israel, will ‘groan’ under our burden of care and worry. When this happens, take a short breathing space; it need be no more than three minutes.

Find a comfortable place to sit or lie – if this is not possible, find somewhere you can stand undisturbed for a short time. Make sure you feel supported and balanced in your

body, relaxed but alert. Close your eyes if this helps. Take some time to take 'notice' of what is happening in your mind right now. You don't need to comment on it or judge or decide on any action, simply be aware of the thoughts and worries that are churning about. Do not allow yourself to become engaged with them; just observe them.

Now move your attention to your breath, feeling it enter and leave your body, filling your body with life. Focus on the breath as it moves in and out. If your mind wanders, do not become anxious or concerned, simply take notice and return to the breath, in and out.

On your out breath you might like to breathe the word YHWH, allowing it to become part of your exhalation. Let the breath become your prayer, your answering call to the reassurance and love of the breath of God as it fills your whole body; 'This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations' (Exodus 3.15).

Restoring the soul

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff –

they comfort me.

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

This psalm is probably the best known and most loved part of the Bible, second only to the Lord's Prayer for its familiarity even for those who know no other portions. It is a triumph of peace and certainty amid disturbing and uncertain times. It contains a calmness and confidence in the love of the good shepherd, who leads his sheep to the places where they can best find shelter and rest. He encourages his flock to 'lie down' – not to spend too much time rushing around aimlessly in a panic, but instead to put down the burdens and anxieties of life and take proper rest. The sheep are led beside 'still waters' so that they can be completely nourished in both body and soul, refreshed with cool water and encouraged by the beauty of the landscape that surrounds them.

The pace of the psalm is slow and measured; enjoyment and ease in the whole body – as well as the soul – flows throughout the first few verses. But then a change occurs, because although we, the flock of the good shepherd, are led in the 'right paths', these paths seem to take us through the 'darkest valley[s]'. Surely this was not what we signed up for when we became Christians? We looked for peace, for love, for forgiveness, for hope, for light – certainly not for dark valleys. And yet there are occasions in our lives when we seem to be surrounded by darkness, and then we are confused and frightened. Too often the temptation is to act just like sheep in a panic, skittering here and there aimlessly, achieving nothing but becoming dangerously upset, to the detriment of the entire community

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in which we live. But sometimes, in order to reach new, safer places, where there is more nourishment, where perhaps the lush grass of the meadows has not all been eaten but new, fresh grazing places are to be found to sustain us, we must be led through dark valleys. Just as in the landscape, fertile valleys are separated from one another by narrow passes that are difficult to navigate, so to move from one stage of life to another, one level of understanding to a deeper one, may bring about difficulties and disturbance.

There may be times when it seems as if God is far away, as if we have been led into dark places and there abandoned, but this psalm echoes the loving reassurance with which the whole of the Bible is filled – God will never leave us, he always has a purpose for us, and that purpose is always good, although we may not always understand it. We need not be afraid, for the good shepherd is always with us, protecting us and caring for us and, because of that, we may be sure that we will be surrounded by goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

EXERCISE

The body scan can be used to focus our minds away from the relentless activity that they produce, endlessly constructing possible scenarios or trying out different strategies, playing out future events in numerous different ways, often based on past experiences that colour present emotions and prevent us from seeing our situation clearly, compassionately but objectively. By focusing on our bodies, we can anchor ourselves in the present moment, giving us a breathing space in which to take stock of our thoughts and feelings and see them for what they are, rather than becoming overwhelmed by them and accepting them as a reality that is often far different. We can connect once more with our physical selves, becoming aware of the ways in which our bodies react to emotional disturbance.

We can put a stop to a spiral of negative thoughts and detach ourselves from them, separating them from reality in a loving way that allows us to see them for what they are. We can give ourselves time to remember the loving kindness of the good shepherd, and restore our faith in his leadership and confidence in his care for us, restoring our own faith in our ability to deal with our situation realistically and calmly.

Find a quiet space where you can be still and comfortable. This can be sitting or lying, but it should be somewhere you can be still for a sustained period of time. Settle yourself so that you will remain alert and aware, and slow your breathing, gradually becoming aware of your physical surroundings – where your body touches your chair, or the surface on which you are lying, how you feel within your clothes.

Beginning with your toes, try to discern any sensation or feeling in them. Don't worry if you feel nothing, sometimes this comes with continued practice of the body scan. If you feel discomfort in your toes, notice this. Try not to become involved in analysing the sensation or worrying about it, simply notice it without judging, allowing it to be what it is. Deepen your breathing, becoming aware of your breath flowing throughout your entire body, filling every blood cell with oxygen, sustaining life.

Gradually move your attention from your toes to your feet, then to the lower and upper parts of your legs. Steadily and slowly, focus on each part of your body in turn, resting your attention on it for ten or twenty seconds, without deliberately counting the time, simply pausing long enough to register the sensations that you feel. If you experience tension or pain, breathe into them, exploring the feeling, allowing your mind to register the feeling without judging it, simply noticing it, before moving on.

Don't worry if your mind wanders – it probably will. When it does, simply bring it back to the task in hand, the task of the present, and continue your journey round your body.

After you have scanned your whole body, continue breathing in silence, aware of your body as a whole, loved by God, part of the unique individual that he formed for his loving purpose. You may want to pray Psalm 23, breathing the first half of each verse on the in breath and the second part on the out.

Abide in me

JOHN 15.1–11

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'

This passage contains one of the great 'I Am' sayings of Jesus, using the rich language of metaphor to help his listeners understand not only who he is, but how our relationship with him should be seen. We are encouraged to see ourselves as sheep, cared for by a loving shepherd and, even more deeply, as the branches of the vine who gain support and sustenance from the strong central trunk. And we need this reassurance, we need this strength to hold on to in our daily lives, as we struggle to retain awareness of the peace of Christ that lies in the depths of our souls. For there is peace, and great love, at the heart of our relationship with God in Christ, if we allow ourselves to be transformed by him, if we let him enter our lives and show us new ways to live, new ways to think and speak and act. This is not easy work, as our former way of life can seem entrancingly simple and engagingly easy, with the necessity only to conform to the ways of the world, rather than the more demanding way of love which is Christ's message to us. We must learn to be still, to seek to abide in Christ, rather than to seek continually for the next new thrill, the next challenge, the next possession dangled in front of us by the shrill materialism of the secular world. We must look to root ourselves securely into the heart of the vine, taking nourishment from a love so deep that it can never be plumbed, so all-encompassing that it can never be extinguished, so forgiving that the ends of its mercy will never be reached. Henry Francis Lyte's famous hymn 'Abide with me', based on Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-35), contains the line 'come not to sojourn but abide with me'. Christ's invitation to us is simply to allow ourselves to experience his love, and to find within it all that we need, abiding in him as he abides in us.

EXERCISE

Find a place to be still and quiet. Make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying, with your eyes open or closed, as you prefer. Still your mind and body, using the three-minute

breathing exercise. Then simply picture yourself resting in God's arms. You can imagine yourself as a small child or as the fully grown person you are now. Imagine the sensations of being held by God; the warmth and comfort of his arms, the security of his grasp. Imagine his great love for you surrounding and enveloping you in its forgiving warmth and understanding. Pray for yourself, that you may remain aware of God's great love for you, and his peace that is always available to you. Try to set aside your concerns about yourself and what you do, who you are, and instead simply enjoy being in God's presence. You could pray on an in breath: 'May I find peace', or 'May I be happy' or simply 'God is with me'. Try not to let your mind dwell on your actions or words, simply on the fact of being a child of God, God's creation. When you are ready, focus again on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body.

God's children now

1 JOHN 3.1-3

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

'We are God's children now', writes John. We do not have to wait for God's love, or earn the right to be called his children; all this is ours already. Our task is simply to rejoice in that love and share it so that our full potential as children of God can be realized. Ours is not to fret about the future, but instead to

celebrate the miracle of the incarnate God, the miracle of God's compassionate awareness and loving acceptance poured into each moment, enfolding us in a love that will hold us securely – as it always has done and as it will continue to do, into eternity.

In the focused discipline of bringing God's presence to mind continually throughout the day there will be found the joyful rewards of taking whatever opportunity we can to dedicate our actions to God. We will experience a changed attitude to the world and to ourselves as we appreciate the gift of love that is in God, in the immediate moment.

One of the most significant changes that will occur will be that of our relationship with other people. The first letter of John is full of admonitions and exhortations to love one another. John knows that the task of loving an invisible God, whose actions can sometimes only be intuited and whose behaviour is often misunderstood and directions unclear, is a challenging one. But he knows that even more demanding is the obligation made upon each one of us not just to love God, but to love those who share our daily lives – people whose presence is sometimes only too obvious, whose behaviour is often deeply unhelpful and whose company can be challenging and uncomfortable. None the less, these are the people whom we have been given to love, whom it is a duty and a joy to care for, who will grow in Christ with us. Always, together with the injunction to love God, is coupled the command to love one another, as we love ourselves, thus giving us a twofold duty towards our own selves and the members of our family and wider community.

EXERCISE

Find a place to be still and quiet. Make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying, with your eyes open or closed, as you prefer. Still your mind and body, using the three-minute breathing exercise. Then bring to mind a person with whom you share your life, and whom you love or care for. They do not have to be the person you are most fond of, or the

person you find most difficult to live alongside. Imagine this person in the shelter of God's loving arms, encircled by his love. Imagine the warmth and comfort of his arms, the security of his grasp. Imagine his great love for the person surrounding them and enveloping them in its forgiving warmth and understanding. Pray for them, that they may remain aware of God's great love for them, and his peace that is always available to them. Try to set aside what you know or think you know about the person, and allow them simply to rest in God's arms. Try not to focus on their characteristics or to bring to mind their words or actions, but simply hold them before God in your heart. If your mind becomes distracted, or wanders off, remembering incidents or conversations, do not worry about this. Simply acknowledge that your mind has wandered and become too focused on small details, and bring it back to the present moment, enjoying the company of God in the person you are focusing on. Do not worry if you do not feel particularly aware of God's presence or if your feelings about the person are ambivalent or unchanged; simply notice this and continue to focus, remembering that they, with you, are one of God's children now. You could pray on an in breath: 'May you find peace', or 'May you be happy' or simply 'God is with you'. When you are ready, focus again on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body.

Cherishing challenging people

REVELATION 8.1–4

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at

the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

The readers of John's book of Revelation have been amazed and disturbed by its contents for thousands of years. The colourful symbolism, the light touch the writer has concerning the matter of chronology, the disconcertingly rapid alterations of viewpoint, the highly dramatic events that unfold from between the pages of the book, all add to a sense of colourful turbulence that none the less contains enormous assurance as to the outcome of the challenges and battles that are being described. And the original readers of the book must have longed for that reassurance. Written, as we know, to the seven churches of Asia, the book was both a means of instruction in the ways of being a Christian community, and a source of comfort in the face of the incredible persecution the early Christians were experiencing at that time. Struggling to live in a new and profoundly challenging way, one that turned on its head all previous notions of the appropriate way to live and upset many of society's accepted norms and values, these fledgling communities were not even left in peace to wrestle with the issues of living together in Christ. Instead they faced determined and bitter opposition and persecution from religious and state authorities alike. How tiring it must have been to live in constant fear for one's life, not knowing whether the day will bring news of the imprisonment and torture of a friend or family member, or one's own capture. How they must have suffered times of doubt and unbelief, as their desperate prayers went unanswered and yet another Christian family was either slaughtered or forced to recant. Into the darkness of these days, the colourful imagery and action of Revelation shines out like a torch, with its message of hope illuminating

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the bleak landscape of despair. 'Do not give up' – the book positively sings its message. Undoubtedly the world is full of evil at the moment, and much adversity is being suffered by the followers of Christ. This is because Satan's attempt to overthrow God and take over the kingdom of heaven has already failed. Satan has already been defeated, but he is still trying to attack God, this time through the medium of God's people. But evil still stalks the earth, and the skirmishes that this provokes are real and bitter, the war itself is over, and God has triumphed. So Christians must face persecution and difficulty, but can do so in the knowledge that the kingdom of heaven is already present and that death has already been defeated. In the meantime, they must continue to work at the very real task of becoming truly Christian communities, keeping to the right path, continuing to share the gospel in love and peace, striving to live together in harmony. None of these are easy tasks, even for Christians living without threat of persecution, and there must have been times when they wondered whether their prayers were being heard at all, never mind actually answered. But Revelation provides reassurance for this as well – the vision of heaven in worship provides an idea of the place of the prayers of the people in the glory of God. All prayers are offered up before the throne with incense in silence. Dignity and weight are given to them, and we are left in no doubt that they will be heard.

EXERCISE

Most of us are fortunate enough not to experience undue suffering for the fact of being Christian. However, that does not liberate us from the many challenges of Christian living, particularly that of living in community with or alongside fellow human beings, many of whom we may find challenging or even unpleasant, their actions causing us unhappiness or harm. This exercise provides a way of holding people that we find difficult to be with, wishing them well without giving in to their demands, trying to

love them without allowing them to hurt us, pausing for a moment to step aside from our own relationship with them, and simply pray for their wellbeing.

Find a place to be still and quiet. Make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying, with your eyes open or closed, as you prefer. Still your mind and body, using the three-minute breathing exercise. Then bring to your attention a person whom you find difficult or challenging. They do not have to be the most unpleasant person you deal with or anyone whom you find too upsetting to contemplate, simply a person who causes you mild annoyance. Imagine them cradled in the hand of God, being held and supported by him, cared for by him out of his great love. Try to set aside your feelings about them and simply pray for them, that they may be happy and at peace. You could pray on an in breath, addressing them directly: 'May you find peace' or 'May you be happy' or simply 'God is with you'. Try not to let your mind dwell on the actions or words of the person, or your relationship with them – simply on the fact of their being a child of God, God's creation. When you are ready, leave them with God and focus again on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body.

A mindful walk

MARK 1.35–38

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.'

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If you were to look at a map of Galilee, with the journeyings of Jesus traced out upon it, you would find it criss-crossed with trail lines. If those that had been travelled more than once were coloured in a more vivid hue, some of those trail lines would be very bright indeed, for the ministry of Jesus – although it took place in one small area of the world – was full of movement. From the beginning, Jesus freed himself from the ties of property and place, enabling himself to move from town to village, healing and teaching where there was a need, rather than where he had been put under obligation by domestic necessity. He proclaims this lack of attachment to place eloquently: ‘Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’ (Luke 9.58). Even the wildest of creatures, the desert fox, shelters in a den, and the bird soaring into the skies returns to a nest each night, but this is not a possibility for the one whose purpose on earth is to free those who are held captive, and release those who are bound. Christ was driven by two things – the imperative to ‘proclaim the message’ to all who needed to hear it meant that he journeyed through settlements, villages and towns, visiting synagogues, sharing meals, holding open air meetings for anyone who would listen. However, in order to find the energy and discern the purpose behind his mission, he had also to journey away from the presence of people, into the wild and deserted places, to meet God and to listen to him. It was in the wilderness that Christ encountered God and found the strength to fulfil his purpose. For him this was a primary duty, more than a duty, a nourishing, sustaining activity without which no secondary activity would be effective. Again and again in the Gospels, we find references to Jesus going away to pray, finding a quiet place to be with God, stepping aside from the pressures of teaching and healing to find strength in prayer and a renewal of relationship with his Father. He climbed hills, walked along shorelines, took boats across lakes, seeking silent places where he could find the space to remember and reinforce his purpose, reclaiming it for himself, and ensuring that he was

not distracted by the agendas and aims of others but remained true to himself and to God.

So too we can find in purposeful, mindful movement a reassurance and reaffirmation of ourselves and our place in this world, a reminder of our place within the order of created things and a celebration of our earthly existence.

EXERCISE

If at all possible, take a mindful journey somewhere today to a quiet place. Ideally this would be a walk in silence to an isolated and peaceful spot where you can be alone, but if this is not possible, you could travel on your own to an unfamiliar place where you will not be recognized and distracted by the necessity of conversation or social interaction with others. Take a bus or train journey, travelling courteously but with a distance between you and your fellow travellers, wrapping yourself in silence. Find a quiet spot – churches and chapels are the ideal places, as every effort is made in even the most popular of cathedrals to set aside a place for private prayer. Walk slowly and purposefully to your chosen place, aware of every movement that your body makes, celebrating in its ability to make such actions. Try and focus your attention on different parts of your body as you walk, concentrating first on your feet and the sensation of walking on the ground, the type of surface, and the feeling of this underfoot. Move your attention slowly upwards, feeling your calf and thigh muscles stretch and contract as you take each step, the action of your chest as it draws breath, your arms by your side or gently swinging in time with each pace. If any part of your body registers discomfort or pain, notice this, and stay with it briefly, inhabiting that part of the body without concerning yourself overmuch; simply registering the feeling. On your arrival at your destination, spend some time in silence, in a posture that is comfortable

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and relaxed, feeling the sensation of fabric, wood, stone, against parts of your body, allowing your mind the space simply to be a child of God, loved by God, in all your bodily form, with all its personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies. You might want to use your breathing prayer (see page 6), or even a whole body scan (page 8), during your time in silence.

When you have spent as long as you need or are able, return home slowly and mindfully once more, focusing on the feelings of movement and acknowledging your place in the environment you travel through.