

Be Still and Know

From recent conversations with friends, I have a sense that many of us are looking for ways to cope, in our inner life, with the tempestuous nature of political and international circumstances that are filling The News at the moment. It can be a struggle, at least in my experience, to become centred in the stillness, light and love of God, while at the same time wrestling with indignation, even anger, over the blatant power-games, falsehoods and violence that we hear about at many levels. Add to that our awareness of the desperate plight of millions of ordinary people around the world, plus our own weaknesses and capacity for selfish or unkind behaviour, and despair can easily creep in, making it even harder to pray and hang on to trust in God.

So it was fortuitous for me that this week I came across a letter from an old friend and mentor, Sister Mary Anne, an Anglican nun, that she had written to me in 1977. Vincent and I were living in Swaziland (now Eswatini) at the time, and I had written to her about how I was struggling to get my head around the insidious regime of apartheid in South Africa, which we often visited on church business. In particular I was finding it hard to pray when my head was full of frustration and judgemental thoughts towards those who perpetrated constant injustices and humiliations on black people at that time.

In her reply, Sister Mary Anne wrote this: 'I think our calling is about trying to reach God in stillness at the point of encounter between good and evil – even if there doesn't appear to be any sense of reconciliation at that point. It's being able to affirm God in the conflict that is, itself, part of the deepest reconciliation.' (The underlinings are my own, as these words helped me in particular).

Sr Mary Anne is pointing to something that defies logic but is profoundly real: God's presence, in Jesus, in the heart of all our pain and injustice, redeeming it from the inside. And this takes me straight to the Cross, and also that moment in the Passion of Jesus where he stands, bound and flogged, helpless – it seems - before Pilate, and reaches the point where he is simply silent (Mark 15:5; Matthew 27:12-14). No words suffice, as the evil forces of our human sin meet the sheer goodness of Jesus. He is simply there, at that point of encounter. So maybe our prayer, when we are troubled by the destructive actions of world leaders and others, is simply to stand with Jesus there, in the silence: '**at the point of encounter between good and evil**'.

I'm also reminded of familiar words in Psalm 46, verse 10: 'Be Still and know that I am God.' The context is helpful: an earlier verse in the Psalm talks about 'the nations' making 'tumult and uproar'; and then we are told that God 'makes wars to cease in all the world; he shatters the bow and breaks the spear, burning the chariots in the fire.' So it's immediately after all that that we have the wonderful invitation to 'be still and know' that God is God.

There's a final gift, in two of the Hebrew words here. 'Be still' is from the Hebrew verb *raphah*, which literally means 'let go', or 'relax your hold on something'. In Ezekiel's vision in his Chapter 1, huge living creatures around the throne of heaven *let their wings drop* – and it's the same verb, *raphah*. This makes me think of becoming aware of physical tension when we pray, especially relaxing any tight muscles around our neck and shoulders as we come before God with our bodies as well as our minds.

Finally, the other interesting word in this verse is 'know' (*yatha* in Hebrew) which means far more than just 'having information about' something. It conveys deep and intimate relationship. So, for us, 'knowing' God in stillness is about entering the close and loving communion with God that Jesus brings.

So, now, we're invited to 'be still and know,' and enter the place of silence, deeper than all our human noise and tempestuous thoughts, where God in Christ is present, with us, in the middle of it all.

And to end the silence (based on a prayer by Soren Kierkegaard:)

Dear God, calm the waters of our hearts, make still the storm, and grant us rest in your peace – the peace that the whole world cannot wash away. Amen.