

# SILENCE IS GOLDEN: LITURGY BEYOND THE EDGE OF LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper attention is given to society's need for silence amidst growing noise pollution. An attempt is made to define silence, as well as certain misconceptions in this regard. The characteristics of the phenomenon of silence are described, in contrast to its counterpart, namely cliché. In conclusion some preliminary liturgical implications of the phenomenon of silence are taken into consideration, inter alia the need for silence in Reformed liturgies, the need for liturgists being formed ethically and aesthetically by silence, the need for a new, contextual word being created out of silence, and the necessity of understanding liturgy holistically, as verbal and non-verbal event.*

## **1. SILENCE, PLEASE!**

The German poet and preacher Ernst Eggimann has written a telling little poem on the copious use of words in our worship services. It goes like this:

*liebe gemeinde*

*jeden Sonntag hört ihr blabla*

*auch ich selbst höre blabla*

*was ich auch sage blabla*

*lasset uns diesen Sonntag nun*

*schweigen (1965: 28)*

Loosely translated: Dear congregation, every Sunday you hear blabla. I myself also hear blabla, which is what I (as preacher) am also saying, blabla. Let us this Sunday now be silent.

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Eggimann's longing for silence in liturgy is perhaps a striking reflection of a global society's growing suffering from noise pollution. It is widely accepted that human-created noise has become harmful to health and welfare on a global scale. Transportation vehicles are the worst offenders, with aircraft, railroad stock, trucks, buses, automobiles, and motorcycles all producing excessive noise. Construction equipment like jackhammers and bulldozers assault our ears and ultimately our sense of peace. A visit to some shopping malls, especially over the holiday seasons, overcharges our senses, to say the least. But perhaps the worst of the worst offenders when it comes to noise pollution are the words we use, spilling them out, spelling them out, and spewing them out, in a never-ending cacophony of blablabla's...

*Silence, please!* That is the cry of many, in the hope of reclaiming at least something of the lost art of silence. In some European countries, for instance, the furniture company IKEA has started to build so-called "centers for silence" in their malls, creating spaces for customers to breath, to recuperate - perhaps for a new spell of shopping (!), but at least taking cognizance of our anthropological need for silence. In some countries certain parks are declared to be "silent spaces", with offenders even facing possible fines (Cf. Peeters 2001: 155-161).

Since the 1980's there has been a move in the Netherlands towards constructing new building complexes with a deliberate effort to create "zones of silence". At present there exist networks of hundreds of such centers for silence – a sort of border crossing between specific religious, generally religious and profane/religious traditions (Post/ Schmid, 2001: 162).

It is clear: society is suffering from a scarcity of silence...

## **2. SILENCE? WHAT SILENCE?**

Silence could of course be understood in many ways, in addition to the architectural and geographical (spatial) examples quoted above. It may mean different things to different people. We know that there are different kinds of silence. The silence of sitting on the porch and watching as the setting sun winks her last light at you. The indescribable silence when moving from the house in which you stayed for thirty years, and you walk through the empty rooms for a last time, and the walls whisper the sum total of experiences that you had in this space and you know, deeper than words can express: there is a time to come, and a time

to go. Or the strange silence that you experience in a graveyard, when the cooing of the doves in the trees deepens the silence and you know: our years pass by like a fleeting thought...

Willard differentiates between solitude - "being out of human contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy periods of time"- and silence (1998: 357). He concludes: "Silence means to escape from sounds, noises, other than the gentle ones of nature. But it also means not talking, and the effects of not talking on our soul are different from those of simple quietness." (1998: 357)

Although silence is part and parcel of our genetical make-up (cf. further on), it is apparently also something that needs to be learned, a lost art that must be retrieved. The fact of the matter is that we normally react on an "epidermal" (skin-deep) level, automatically, following the usual stimuli of life. But in and through silence we escape the *patterns of epidermal responses*, with their consequences. This is however something that we find particularly hard to do. For us, the very idea of doing nothing could be absolutely terrifying – especially in our achievement-driven society. Indeed, it seems as if one of the greatest of spiritual attainments of humanity could be the capacity to do nothing. Because we do so much, we have so little of real value. Pascal was right when he stated: "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from the single fact that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room." (As quoted by Popkin 1989: 214)

The *advantages* of being silent, however, seem to be boundless. To name but a few: Moments of silence "break the pell-mell rush through life and create a kind of inner space that permits people to become aware of what they are doing and what they are *about* to do." (Willard 1998: 358) In silence you "discover incredibly good things. One is that you have soul. Another, that God is near and the universe brimming with goodness. Another, that others aren't as bad as you often think...The cure for too-much-to-do is solitude and silence, for there you will find that you are safely more than what you do. And the cure of loneliness is solitude and silence, for there you discover in how many ways you are never alone." (Willard 1998: 359). And so on.

Silence is however also often misunderstood. For some, silence (meditation, contemplation) is exclusively linked to the East, and specifically Eastern religions. I had the privilege of recently reading the classic work of Max Picard, titled *The World of silence*. It offers breathtaking insights into the phenomenon of silence. Ironically, in the edition that I consulted, a student, displaying his/her stereotypical lack of insight and

obviously missing the whole point, has added in pencil under the title ... *or a funny kind of Buddhism*.

Indeed, for many the world of silence remains exactly that: a funny kind of Buddhism.

Some erroneously think that silence equals a complete absence of the struggles that comes with life.

Theologically speaking at least, this is not true. Noordmans poignantly reminds us that, for instance, the silence of Psalm 62 does not mean absence of suffering or stress or noise. That is of course the type of silence we would prefer – a sort of “quiet time” with the Lord, having a peaceful discussion over a cup of tea, never reaching a level higher than the tea table. But God is not like that. He is not confined to a book, even to or within the Bible: He enters our world, suffers with us, granting us silence (peace) amidst suffering (1949: 106-109).

Whilst accepting its value, the popular conception of silence to a large extent is still that it is a sort of *cover-up of the truth*. Perhaps this is best epitomized in the well-known lyrics of Brian Poole and the Tremeloes (1960), in the lingering song *Silence is Golden*,<sup>2</sup> in which a young man (lover?) laments the fact that he has to keep silent, while it is all too obvious that another young man is misleading the young lady of his admiration:

*Oh, don't it hurt deep inside*

*To see someone do something to her*

*Oh, don't it pain to see someone cry*

*Oh, especially when someone is her*

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<sup>2</sup> Speech is silver, Silence is golden - "The value placed upon saying less, rather than more, as reflected in this proverb can be traced as far back as the early Egyptians, who recorded one such saying: 'Silence is more profitable than abundance of speech.' The current proverb was rendered for the first time in the Judaic Biblical commentaries called the 'Midrash' (c. 600), which gave the proverb as 'If speech is silver, then silence is golden.' The poet Thomas Carlyle quoted this version in German in 'Sartor Resartus' (1831), and soon after, the American poet James Russell Lowell quoted the exact wording of the modern version in the 'The Bigelow Papers' (1848). Perhaps more familiar in the shortened version 'Silence is golden,' the saying has been quoted in print frequently during the twentieth century. One witty adaptation in Brian Aldiss's 'The Primal Urge' (1961) seems particularly appropriate to modern times: "Speech is silver; silence is golden; print is dynamite.'" From "Wise Words and Wives' Tales: The Origins, Meanings and Time-Honored Wisdom of Proverbs and Folk Sayings Olde and New" by Stuart Flexner and Doris Flexner (Avon Books, New York, 1993).

*Silence is golden, but my eyes still see*

*Silence is golden, golden*

*But my eyes still see*

*Talking is cheap, people follow like sheep*

*Even though there is nowhere to go*

*How could she tell, he deceived her so well*

*Pity, she'll be the last one to know*

*Silence is golden, but my eyes still see*

*Silence is golden, golden*

*But my eyes still see*

*How many times will she fall for his line*

*Should I tell her or should I keep cool*

*And if I tried, I know she'll say I lied*

*Mind your business, don't hurt her, you fool*

*Silence is golden, but my eyes still see*

*Silence is golden, golden*

*But my eyes still see*

*But my eyes still see*

*But my eyes still see*

But of course, as we shall see, silence is no cover-up (for the “sake of peace” or whatever), but in fact it does the exact opposite: it uncovers and creates.

### **3. THE PHENOMENON OF SILENCE**

It is no easy task to describe the phenomenon of silence. What follows should be seen as preliminary considerations, specifically also in view of its liturgical relevance (to be discussed further on).

*Firstly*, it should be stated that there is something like *anthropology of silence* (cf. Peeters 2001: 157).

Silence is genetically ordained. In human communication words and answers are linked through silences – there is a time to speak and a time to listen (Proverbs 3:7b). In theological perspective, God speaks to us, and we answer. But God speaks out of silence, and his words create silence, before it calls forth an answer. In the relationship between God and humans, silence on the part of both contributes towards true dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

*Secondly*, silence has a life of its own. Silence is more than a negative renunciation of language – it is an *autonomous, basic phenomenon* – it cannot be replaced by or exchanged with anything else. It is a positive entity, a complete world in itself. Silence extends to the farthest regions, yet is as close to us as our bodies; it is intangible, yet we can feel it as if it were our shirt or dress. Max Picard formulates strikingly: “Silence is the only phenomenon today that is ‘useless’. It does not fit into the world of profit and utility; it simply *is*. It seems to have no other purpose; it cannot be exploited... It gives something of its own holy uselessness, for that is what silence itself is: holy uselessness.” (1948: 18, 19) On the other hand and simultaneously, so holy useful, that we cannot do without it...

The brilliant Swedish film by Kay Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*, seems to make, inter alia, exactly this point.

When the famous musician and composer Daniel Daréus (played by Michael Nyqvist) returns to his hometown because of ill health, and is asked at a certain stage why he does not make a more direct,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the prayer by Sören Kierkegaard:

*Father in heaven! You speak to humans in many ways: You, to whom all wisdom and intellect belongs, You wish to make Yourself conceivable to us anew. Oh, and also when You remain silent, then You still indeed speak to us; because also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to give his students the opportunity to have their say; also He that speaks sometimes remains silent to test his beloveds; also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to make the moment of understanding so much more profound when it comes. Father in heaven, is this not so? Oh, the time of silence, when a person stands alone and deserted, because we do not hear Your voice, then we feel that the separation will be forever. Oh, the time of silence, when a person thirsts in the desert, because we do not hear Your voice, and it seems as though we have been entirely forgotten! Father in heaven, then it is but a short pause in the coherence of the dialogue between You and us. So allow this also to be blessed, this silence of Yours, like every word of Yours to us. Do not let us forget that You also then speak, when You are silent; give us this consolation: that you remain silent out of love, just as You also speak out of love, so that now, whether You are silent and whether You speak, You are still the same Father, who acts with the same Fatherliness, whether you now lead us through Your voice, and whether You now teach us with Your silence (1949:210).*

professional input in training the church choir, he simply answers something to the following effect: “I have come here to listen... Music exists before we create it. It is all around us, reverberating through everything and everyone. We must just hear, discover and record it... It has always been my dream to make music that opens up people’s hearts.” The implication is clear: in order to hear, discover and record the music, you need to be silent (in contrast to the Lutheran pastor in the film, who seems to know exactly how things should be, also from a religious viewpoint, and does not hesitate to voice it!).

*Thirdly*, although silence is autonomous, it is closely *linked to sound*, and specifically: words. As a matter of fact, one could hardly agree more with the inscription on an altar in Maria-Culm: *Lingua fundamentum sancti silentii* (The foundation of language is holy silence).

Words that are worth their weight are born in silence. Speech comes from silence, and silence is again there after speech – therefore we become silent when words that were born in silence address us. “One can hear silence sounding through speech. Real speech is in fact nothing but the resonance of silence...Language and silence belong together: language has knowledge of silence as silence has knowledge of language”, Picard reminds us (1948: 15, 27). And also: “The word has supremacy over silence. But language becomes emaciated if it loses its connection with silence....” (1948: 16)

It would seem as if though we are surrounded by myriads of emaciated words. They limp about, wounded by their lack of silence, and wounding others as far as they go. Words that only come from other words are lonely, but also hard and aggressive. Words not coming from silence are automatic, obstinate, and desperate – and could be called orphans. “The tongue we speak today is no longer a mother-tongue but rather an orphaned tongue.” (Picard 1948: 41) Indeed, we are surrounded *by sounds severed from silence, as opposed to sounds saturated with silence.*

It is clear that musicians (like Daniel Daréus in Kay Pollak’s film) know about the intrinsic connection between silence and sound (music).<sup>4</sup> Empty bars or parts of bars occur in virtually every musical piece.

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<sup>4</sup> In musical theory, silence is not always referred to as the point where musical sounds actually cease to exist. Moments of silence are experienced during sustained *fermates*, extreme *pianissimo*'s, or when a complex harmony dissipates into a sparing use of the tone material. One becomes aware of silence in music that 'sound from afar', usually indicated by the instruction 'come da lontano'. A great amount of music by Russian composer Alfred Schnittke opens and closes with scarcely audible sounds. His music resides between the not-yet-audible and the no-longer-audible. It seems as though his music is already there before the listener can hear it and continues to resound long after the listener has registered the last tones. Through this 'non-ceasing' music, which resounds beyond the limits of its audibility, silence acquires a different form of musical *Dasein* (cf. Thomas Clifton's essay 'The Poetics of Musical Silence'. (The Musical

Rests are an inseparable part of any composition. On a more modest and subtle level, silences mark the transition from one musical sentence to the next by way of *caesura*. Silence demarcates the beginning and the end of a piece of music. “To focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first, until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of 'dense' growth or 'sparse' vegetation. In other words, silence is not nothing. It is not the null set. Silence is experienced both as meaningful and as *adhering* to the sounding position of the musical object.” (Clifton 1976:163).

It would seem as if we no longer see the (liturgical) wood, for the trees... *Fourthly*, silence is linked to possibility; it represents a *birth-place*. This birth-place could be described in many ways, for example as the space where we struggle with the most basic questions of our lives; as the primordial quest for meaning; or as our most profound experiences of inner peace. It could also be described in theological terms, as the centre, the core, where we have an encounter with God. It could be said that there is nothing behind or before it, but the Creator Himself. In silence we can return to the origins, to the possibility of recreation. Picard concludes: “The mark of the Divine in things is preserved by their connection with the world of silence.” (1948: 20)

In silence we grapple with the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God, posing our existential questions, and waiting for the answers in silence. Actually, we pose only one, fundamental question: Who is God? When we say “God,” this is a question, the most profound question of our lives: Who are You, O God, what is Your Name, where are You to be found? Miskotte (1976:200) wrote a moving, homiletical paragraph about this most profound question:

*The preacher stands there and the people are waiting for him. An awesome moment! To sink through the floor. Because he may not give a lecture, nor a speech, nor tell a story. The people lift their faces and with their silent attention, pose their question. The people say – and they are quite right -: now you must understand that this is a meeting, not of only people, but of God with us. Now you also wish to hear God speak, you yourself have created the expectation, therefore you bring our most profound question to attention, the question that elsewhere is kept strictly secret,*

*although it always worries us: the question about God, about the living God. Woe to the preacher who should ask this one question. And also: happy is the preacher who does this, because he senses the terrible and wonderful pressure of the impossible, he feels that but one thing remains: to become an instrument, a droning and comforting organ, played by God (freely translated).*

Out of the silence comes God's Word. In Christ, the silence was, and continuously is, being split open: "The Word that appeared two thousand years ago was on the way to man from the beginning of time, and therefore from the very beginning there was a breach between silence and speech. The event of two thousand years ago was so miraculous that all silence from time immemorial was torn open by speech. Silence trembled in advance of the event and broke in two." (Picard 1948: 30).

Trembling, torn open silence – that is the space where we should be waiting for the advent of the Word...

#### **4. SILENCE CONTRA CLICHÉ.**

It is difficult to describe silence, or the weight of words that are born in silence. Perhaps it is easier to describe their counterparts, namely cliché. As we all know, *cliché* (derived from the French language) is a phrase, expression, or idea that has been overused to the point of losing its intended force or novelty, especially when at some time it was considered distinctively forceful or novel. It denotes language that have lost its edge, words that no longer carry any weight.

Silence bestows form and meaning upon language. But instead, according to Killinger: "... the crisis of language concerns the overuse, the overextension, of language, the constant barrage of verbiage from newspapers, magazines, television, government, school, church. The world has fallen into cliché. Cliché is the opposite of silence. It is language from which all silence has been removed." (2005: 130) When silence is gone, words fail; when no encounter takes place with the *Deus absconditus*, cliché is inevitable.

What are the characteristics of cliché? Perhaps the following sounds all too familiar, and painfully reminds us of some of our worship services! (cf. also Bohren 1980: 418-422)

- Clichés often reveal themselves as *meaningless repetitions* – in a fruitless attempt to achieve "effect". The word alone (born in silence) is not trusted; therefore words must be repeated endlessly. But, as the Chinese proverb goes - "He/she, who knows nothing, often repeats it."

- Clichés *struggle to find fitting images/metaphors/parables* – or simply string them together, not understanding the power of a single, strong metaphor. Thus it creates subtexts, distracting from the (simple) word/Word. It intends to create effect through a multitude of images, but in effect ends up by pulling the senses apart.
- Clichés love to use diminutives (“Dear congregation, we are gathered here for a *little* prayer time...”) or superlatives (life is always, *absolutely* “wonderful”), which inevitably leads to *loss of true contextualization* – reality is simply not like that.
- Clichés always *oversimplify life*, glossing over paradoxes – and therefore also flatten out the hard edges of scripture, trivializing and domesticating it (cf Brueggemann 1989:7). In the process it becomes untrue and unfaithful to life, handing out recipes, how-to-do-it’s, instead of wisdom and discernment.
- Clichés are the hallmarks of *sensationalism and entertainment*. It speaks the language of the fashionable, using the jargon of the masses to full effect.
- Clichés do not understand the connection between the Word/word and (the fullness of) time, and therefore between true and false prophecy. It says the “right” word at the wrong time or the “wrong” word at the right time. Clichés are always untimely, always missing the *kairos*. Karl Barth (1958:413 translated) calls people who use such language fools: “*Foolish people are always either too early or too late. They sleep when they should be awake, and are awake when they should sleep. They remain silent when they should speak and speak when it would be better to remain silent. They laugh when they should cry and cry when they should be comforted and could have laughed. They work when they must pray and pray when only work could make the difference. They consider everything at the wrong time; say everything to the wrong people; do everything in the wrong direction; always choose the complicated but irrelevant things, while the simple but crucial are required. Herein lies the brilliance of foolishness.*”

## **5. SILENCE IS GOLDEN – ALSO IN LITURGY**

What are the liturgical implications of the phenomenon of silence? I restrict myself to the following four comments:

*Firstly*, I am of the opinion that we are in *dire need of silence in our liturgies*, specifically also in the Protestant tradition, which often seems to equate Word-centeredness with being driven by words. With silence in our liturgies I do not only mean that there should be explicit moments for meditation, or pockets of silence, or *caesuras* where we can catch our breath, but also that our words, when we use them, should carry the aura of silence, of the gravity of an encounter with God. Our words should be weighed, and carry weight.<sup>5</sup> It should not be uttered as emaciated orphans.

Liturgists are in constant danger and temptation of becoming institutionalized speakers, producing automatic, clerical speech. But, even if our liturgies are seemingly faultless, and our clerical procedures in order, we still are people of unclean lips, and we dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips (cf. Isaiah 6: 5). We tend to churn out epidermal, skin-deep jargon. Therefore we do not need more liturgical techniques or know-how that guarantees flamboyant success – like television evangelists, pouring out religious and pious words – we need silence. We surely do not need jackhammer services that drill and bang the truth into our fibers – we need silence. Indeed, we are so driven, but by what, by whom? We are driven, but wherefrom and whereto? Truly, we need to be re-educated in the holy uselessness of silence. We need to be

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<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of the legend, according to which the renowned humorist, Mark Twain, after attending a church service, said to the minister: “*I have heard this sermon of yours before. In fact, I have already heard it several times.*” The minister immediately started to defend himself by saying: “*Impossible. All my sermons are original. During the past week I personally wrote this sermon with great difficulty, and delivered it for the first time today. You definitely have not heard it before.*” “*We shall see,*” Mark Twain replied with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, and left.

The next day, a neatly wrapped parcel arrived at the minister’s door. Upon opening it, he found it to be a tome, a dictionary. Inside it, Twain had put a slip of paper upon which was written: *Words, just words, just words .....* Standing with the dictionary in his hands, the minister was speechless. He realized that Twain was right. Sermons do exist of words. Mostly fine words, important words, well-chosen words.

From a certain perspective, one could even say that sermons are nothing but a flood of discourse, a stream of words that leaves our mouths and rains down onto the heads and ears of the audience. In a sense, sermons could be nothing else: they *are* made up of words. Who ascends the pulpit, does so to speak, to address the audience with words.

But, is that all? Do sermons merely contain words, words, only words – or is there another dimension, a deeper mystery beyond the superficiality of words? The question is: How must the stream of words flow; how must the words be arranged to truly form a *sermon*? What truly makes our sermons rich in God’s Word? Of course, this is not a new question. It concerns the profound question: What is the relation between revelation and existence, and what are the liturgical implications thereof?

freed from our conviction that God can only be praised through and amidst an avalanche of words. *Tibi silentium laus* – Lord, to you silence is praise.

Society is calling out for silence. In the same way, liturgists are giving renewed attention to silence (cf. Peeters 2001: 155).<sup>6</sup> In the course of liturgical history, there has been an ongoing debate about the relationship between the verbal, non-verbal and ritual (including the visual). The Reformation seems at first glance to have created a schism between a verbal and non-verbal approach to liturgy, but since the fifties of the previous century, there has been a movement to integrate these factors. With it came a new focus on the active participation of all congregants in the liturgy, to such an extent that many worship services has deteriorated to a certain level of activism that has no understanding of silence any more (Peeters 2001: 59). This has exacerbated our need for liturgical silence.

*Secondly*, I am of the opinion that we are in *dire need of liturgists who have been formed and reformed ethically<sup>7</sup> and aesthetically by silence*. Being molded by silence is off course no stranger to the biblical account of people's encounter with God. The desert often acts as a space for silence, resulting in transformed lives, although the desert can be a terrible place, and the voices you hear there not necessarily those of God (Noordmans 1946: 96). Here Jesus learns how to fulfill his calling – which was not characterized by quick answers or rash actions, but by being orientated towards the Torah and the Prophets (Noordmans 1946: 99, 100). That is why Paul went into seclusion for three years before daring to speak. "Silence... shapes character. Only in silence, in the space between noise, speech, and activity, is there room for a person to become focused, to achieve gravity and centeredness... Only in silence, in brooding upon the fact that there is a world, that there is eternity, does one become endowed with true worldliness and true everlastingness." (Killinger 2005: 129). True relevance cannot be created through cliché or kitsch, but by lingering in, and coming from silence.

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<sup>6</sup> In South Africa, some work has been done in this regard. Willem Nicol has for instance popularized the concept of silence, but primarily on a personal and devotional level (cf. his *Gebed van die hart*, 2002). The *Centre for Christian Spirituality*, an ecumenical body constituted by Archbishop Desmond Tutu is doing sterling work in this regard, in development of ideas concerning meditation, mysticism, spiritual mentoring and contemplative worship. It seems as if serious theological reflection on this subject is however still at its early stages.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that classical authors like Henri Nouwen, when speaking about solitude, always stresses the ethical dimension thereof. Cf. his *Reaching out. The Three Movements of the Spiritual life*. Collins: Glasgow, 1986, in which he refers to the three movements of the spiritual life: First movement from suffocating loneliness to receptive solitude; second from hostility to hospitality; third from illusion to prayer.

People coming from silence carry with them a certain “substance”, a remarkable luminousness, an unmistakable aura – like Moses coming down the mountain, or Jesus, after spending a night in prayer. They no longer suffer from that harassing, hovering feeling of “having to perform”, which largely comes from the vacuum in our soul. For them, the muddy water has become clear, being let still for a while. Perhaps the aura surrounding such silenced people is primarily formed by the fact that they know what it is like to live by grace rather than just talk about it.

Silence sharpens our senses.<sup>8</sup> It transforms our *aesthesis*. In the desert we learn to listen, and see – before we speak. Only in the silence of the desert, does Moses discern the burning bush. Indeed:

*Earth's crammed with heaven*

*And every common bush afire with God;*

*But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;*

*The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries*

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning in “Aurora Leigh”).

Woe to us, if “After twenty or thirty years spent in proliferating speech in the pulpit, we awaken with a dryness in our throats – maybe even in our souls – and realize we have been speaking without seeing and hearing.” (Killinger 2005: 127)

Thirdly, I am of the opinion that we are in *dire need of a new word, of new words, born from silence*. This speech-from-silence has the potential to create a sacred space at the centre of the world, to open up pockets of silence.... that in turn can lead to the formation of new words and new worlds. In silence we are brought into a space where reality can be discovered and uncovered, because we are connected “with the power of the primordial and uncreated that gives meaning to human utterance.” (Killinger 2005: 131). The church, with her liturgies, needs this above all else: meaningful utterances, contextual words that make sense.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> When children are asked to play a “game of silence”, they hear with new intensity: the clicking of the clock, the sound of birds, of footsteps on the playground, of their own breathing and those of others. When their names are then called softly, they hear as if for the first time. The sense of hearing, as a matter of fact, *all* the senses become acute through silence. Silence makes you receptive towards the otherwise ignored (cf. Peeters 2001: 156).

<sup>9</sup> Liturgy is of course not only constituted through words, but also ritual, which include non-verbal acts. In this paper, however, I am restricting myself to the relationship between silence and

The advent and event of meaningful words can however not be rushed. Existing before and after time, silence takes its time. We have to patiently struggle with the holy mysteries surrounding our existence, waiting in the void. Often in biblical history, we encounter stretches where it seems as if though the Word is absent, or at least dormant. The ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost could for instance be described as a curiously silent period in the Biblical history. Seemingly no great salvation act of God takes place. The church is at its smallest and thinnest – exemplified by eleven, not twelve apostles. Nothing seems to happen, except the external actions of electing a new apostle, creating a new structure. But in this silence, God is preparing his church for the coming of the Spirit, preparing the church *in nuce*. (cf. Noordmans 1949: 79-80)

Where can we find silence, or at least words that carry the aura of silence? Here the poets of all ages come to our aid. “It is only in the language of the poets that the real word, the word connected with silence, still sometime appears.” (Picard 1948: 41) We must read what the poets have written - not only the lines, but also between the lines; not only their words, but also the blank spaces on their pages; not only what they are saying, but also what they are not saying. Perhaps we may experience some silence lingering there.

And of course, we have to read the Word.<sup>10</sup> It has come to us out of silence. Silence trembles before the advent of the Word, and is torn apart. In the past God has spoken through the prophets, but in these last days through the Word made flesh (cf. Heb.1: 1, 2). In the Bible we hear stories of people who had encounters with God and then retold their experiences. It does not contain mere clinical comments or bare

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words.

<sup>10</sup> To spend time with the text, to re chew it, was, for instance, of vital importance for Luther. He latches onto the biblical metaphor of eating and ingesting the Word (cf e.g. Am 8:11; Ps 19:11; Rev 10:10; also Bohren 1981:75 ff) and calls the process of re chewing “the essence of true meditation.” Meditation is reading and rereading Scripture, to re chew the Word in one’s heart (*meditari proprie est ruminare in corde*). Thus the heart, as it were, becomes the stomach of the human spirit. In this act of meditation, the intellect and the emotion are joined to understand and digest the Word. Re chewing is not merely a cognitive issue, but also ingesting the Word with emotion (*cum affecto*). The repetition and re chewing of the Word, arouses a feeling for God. For Luther, this process naturally is also Christologically determined: Jesus’ whole life and suffering must be taken into the heart and be re chewed bit by bit day and night – almost like a sacramental act – so that one’s heart can be warmed and one can receive power and sustenance (sweetness). Thus, meditation is a coin with two sides: we enter the text, and the text enters us. Luther could express this in a practical way: in the evening, it is useful to carry a text into the night with you, to re chew it in your heart, so that you can receive it in the morning as an inheritance from the night, and can taste it in the light of a new day’s grace. Sometimes, it is necessary to ponder and re chew an entire psalm or a single verse of a psalm for a day or a week, until it has been absorbed in your fibres and thus become part of your existence. In short, if you do not eat the Word, then you cannot feed others with it (cf Cilliers 2004:88).

facts (*bruta facta*) about God, but rather offers examples of how one should be silent, and then speak when one hears God's Word coming out of silence. The words of the Word are weighed, and saturated by silence. It silences us – to speak.

*Fourthly*, I am of the opinion that we are in dire need of *holistic liturgies*, especially in the Reformed tradition, that take both the verbal and non-verbal components of religious experience into account (cf. also Cilliers 2007: 160). Perhaps I should stress here in the light of all of the abovementioned: I am not against words. I am not saying that we should enforce mechanically planned or obviously awkward gaps of silence into our worship services. I am not campaigning for hiatuses in our hallelujahs. I do not advocate that we become word-shy, or stutter our way from vatum to benediction, or mumble inaudibly through our sermons. What I am advocating is a marriage between *presentative and discursive symbolism*. *I am of the opinion that both these forms of symbolism, or imagination, are important for communication in liturgy, that the one must be embedded in the other.*

*Discursive symbolism* primarily employs language to allow units of meaning to follow each other logically. On the other hand, the *condensation of the meaning* of a symbol, of a simultaneous and total observation is typical of *presentative symbolism* (Lukken 1990:31-32). One image – whether a visual portrayal or a metaphor, i.e. a portrayal-in-words – can evoke a whole series of memories or emotions in a flash. For example, if you discover a photograph of an important event or period in your life, long ago, then you “see” things that cannot necessarily be expressed in a logical sequence of words. Perhaps your whole life is condensed and presented in that photograph. It possibly addresses all your senses: the aroma in Mother's kitchen with the AGA stove, the texture of Father's cap, the memory of the sound of your brother's footsteps in the long passage of your parental home...

Silence as such forms part of representational or representative symbolism (Peeters 2001: 160). In representative symbolism, *condensation of, and reference to meaning* take place. In liturgy, silence - being representative symbolism - always is a (ful)filled silence. Fulfilled silence creates, from words and ritual, moments of *intensification* of understanding, prayer, experience and praise, but is also always *referential*: pointing towards that what is bigger than and different to what can be expressed in words or acted out in ritual. Perhaps this is best illustrated by a visit to the art gallery.

Steph Tout, an Australian artist, has created a striking self-portrait (photograph), titled *Silence*. It is a picture full of condensed experience and hopeful expectation. The table functions as a sort of spotlight, contrasting to the dark window and wine in the glass. Is the darkness from outside trying to conquer the pool of light inside? The overall feeling is one of, yes, what? Vulnerability, expectation, indecision, sadness? The picture conveys perhaps a retro-look, a feeling of vintage (cf. the Victoria Market poster), but above all an *experience of what has happened or what might have been, or what may still be*. Conspicuous is the empty chair, turned away from the artist. Was someone sitting there? Has he/she left, and why? Or is he/she still coming? Has the conversation been interrupted or is it still to take place? Expectation fills the air. The Other is (not) there, is gone and coming. The artist is engrossed in silent contemplation about/with the Other who is (not) there, who is gone and coming. The trajectory of her eyes points towards the absent/present Other. Is she looking at a picture/ text lying on the table? Is it saying something of the Other, reminding her of his absence/ presence? Does the plate of food before her, with the poured wine, carry Eucharistic undertones? The glass of water baptismal reference? The salt (and pepper) ecclesiastical significance? Whatever the case may be, she is silent, her mouth covered with her hand.

In her silence lies remembrance and hope. Words and actions are not necessary here, as a matter of fact, it would ruin the whole experience. *It is liturgy with a covered mouth.*



I have now, that is, up to the end of this sentence, used 5346 words to describe what is indescribable, namely silence. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the contemplation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight (Psalm 19:14).

Let it not be weighed as blablabla.

Let me now cover my mouth, and be silent...

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