

## **Silence in Church; a First Sunday Explanation**

Individuals and communities vary greatly in their affinity for silence. Some people cannot pray at all when there is noise or chatter. Others are made self-conscious by silence, distracted by the fear that they will make a noise with their shoes or their kneeler. However, the sense that in silence, both external and internal, we can hear the voice of God is evident throughout human culture and human history. We all remember that wonderful scene in the Hebrew Scriptures where Elijah has taken refuge in a far cave after fleeing from certain death. Violent natural phenomena strike awe in the prophet, but he did not find God in earthquake or wind or fire. Instead, he found God in the 'still small voice.' (I Kings 19:12) A more contemporary translation calls it 'the sound of sheer silence'. When we become very still and let our minds and bodies rest in quiet, then are we most likely to make that ineffable connection with the divine. Silence speaks to us of recollection and awe, of the reality that we do not have words to describe all of our relationship with God.

Silence is a blessing in a very noisy world in which we are continually bombarded by stimuli of all sorts, demands for our immediate attention from all quarters. In holy places we seek and protect the silence in which we may hear and feel God's love. Christian tradition includes monastic orders who spend almost all their time in silence, the better to pray. Many individual Christians have spent time in silent retreat, for a day, or a weekend, or an entire month. This fasting from conversation and entertainment has cleared the hearts and minds and ears of countless people over the centuries.

So it has become traditional in many churches, including those of our tradition, to keep a time of quiet before worship. There may or may not be peaceful music during this time, but in a parish with a tradition of pre-worship silence this music will be of a sort that encourages interior quiet. For some churches the culture of greeting and community connection overrides this tradition of quiet, so that the time before worship is filled with conversation, both in the worship space and in the entrance area. These are genuinely different ways to approach worship, each of which can unnerve those used to the other.

Within our worship services there are moments when quiet is expected by the rubrics, such as before the Prayers of the People, before the Confession, and after the Breaking of the Bread. At each of these moments, we are given some moments of silence in which to recollect ourselves, to be ready to pray, to confess, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

One important role of places of worship is to provide places in which people can find the silence they need for prayer and contemplation. In almost all churches, it is possible to spend time in the sanctuary outside normal worship times to find a quiet respite. People come to light candles, to read, to think, to pray, to listen for God's whisper. This same desire for quiet in which to reflect is met in places such as our Memorial Garden and its Labyrinth. This is an outdoor space where people come to find quiet, to listen, to pray.