



Good Friday 2021

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

A few years ago I read an account of medics working on the border between Cambodia and Thailand in the midst of dreadful warfare. With bombs falling uncomfortably near, two doctors, one older, the other younger, attended to wounded refugees. Their first patient was a young woman. She was barely alive, her body almost severed in two by a mortar fragment. The older doctor made a quick diagnosis: *'I thought there was nothing to be done, he said, 'and went to another victim. When he looked back, the other younger doctor had knelt down. He was cradling the woman's head and caressing her hair. In the older doctor's words, 'He was helping her to die. He did it very naturally. There was no public, no cameras, no one looking. The bombing continued, and he did this as if he was all alone in his humanity.'*

Certain events render us speechless. They may or may not be overly dramatic or especially tragic. But some experiences are literally beyond words. There is nothing that can be said to make any sense. There is no difference to be made by talking. The only possible response to some situations is to be present to them: a compassionate presence, a loving presence, a silent presence.

The Christian tradition identifies the foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus' passion in the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Servant Songs of the prophet Isaiah. What is said there of Israel is applied to Christ. He is the servant who suffers willingly for his people. Isaiah's imagery is stark. The suffering servant is loaded with the people's sins. Like a lamb he is led to the slaughter. Like a sheep before its shearers, he never opens his mouth. He is dumb. He is silent.

There is no contradiction here with St John's retelling of the passion. In the account of his arrest and trial, the Lord Jesus does speak and answer questions. He commends St John and Our Lady to each other, as a son to his mother and a mother to her son. The Lord Jesus screams in agony. He thirsts. And then he accomplishes. All this dialogue, all the speaking and shouting, lead to the moment when Christ bows his head and becomes a silent presence to the world. The Word becomes wordless. When everything that needed to be said has been said, we are left with the paramount silence of Jesus. We kneel before the noiselessness of his rest in death. The Carthusian motto recalls: *'The cross stands still while the world is changing.'* Today, now, while the world is noisy, the cross stands silent.

But the silence of the Lord Jesus is a potent silence. *'At the moment of his supreme humiliation,'* said St John of the Cross, the Lord Jesus *'saved the world.'* When his human life is distilled to nothing, everything is achieved and deliverance from sin is won. The prayer offered by the Son, aloud and in silent tears, is heard by the Father. Through obedient suffering, having been made perfect, our Lord becomes *'the source of eternal salvation.'*

It is a mistake to equate silence with weakness, with futility, or with hopelessness. Our society, and each of us, can be guilty of this in our attitude to those with no voice or standing, no platform from which to speak. Whenever the voiceless are mistreated through injustice and oppression, Christ is re-crucified.

Today's silence before the cross is not about absence, but presence: a radical transforming presence, a world and heart renewing presence. For St Ignatius of Antioch, what the Lord Jesus *'did in silence is worthy of the Father,'* such that anyone *'who really possesses Jesus' word can also understand his silence.'* As Christ became a silent presence to the world, so we in turn must become a silent presence to him, to our Saviour as he hangs on the tree:

And now that the last words

fall mute in the great silence

of time which does not pass,

You are my silence,

You the eternal word

which does not die.

(From Bruno Forte in *The Silence of St Thomas*)

The Hope Within You

Homilies, Reflections, Pastoral Letters, Messages and Articles on the Catholic Faith and Christian Life – Archbishop John Wilson