

Meeting God in Silence



When approaching Uluru by road, you reach a point where you think you have caught your first sight of 'The Rock', but you have not. It is a smaller rock. You must continue further, go deeper, and not be side-tracked. Presently, Uluru appears. It draws you towards it. It asks you to be silent and look. You park your vehicle and walk towards it. As you do, you see less and less of the whole as it begins to encompass you and you become part of its world. You stop, and sit down close to the rock, in its shadow, in silence.

Uluru is located near the centre of our continent. It is an image of the silent centre of life. It is a rock that can crush but also a rock that can support, protect, and hold. It is an image of the rock that is Christ, the source of living water.

For Australians, such an image fits with our vast land and its often challenging climate. Most of us choose to cling to the coastal fringe, seemingly reluctant to fully leave the countries from which we, or our forebears, came. Can we dare to enter the desert centre where God meets us?

In the 19th century, the French poet, Charles Peguy, wrote about the companionable silence a peasant might experience when he stopped on his way home after a day's work in the fields. His poem, perhaps reflecting the 'domesticated' French countryside, offers a gentle and caressing image of a silent place where we can meet with God. He wrote (*English translation*):

*Look at the piece of earth, all gathered and all quiet,
Where silence, shadow, and the ghostly reign,
Where the eternal presence comes again,
And soul finds that retreat where it is itself once more.*

We may find such a place in our garden or nearby bushland. But life is not always so peaceful. Even Peguy's silence must be able to cope with the clamouring contending noises around us and within us.

Trying to embrace or be embraced by silence is not easy. It can become a wrestling with the outer demands invading our space, our inner constant chatter and our deep fears.

We do not always welcome silence—it can allow terrifying anxieties to rise up within us. We try to avoid it by reaching for our phone, or perhaps turning on the television, hoping to engage our sight as well as our hearing and blot out everything else. We are afraid of meeting our demons instead of, or even with, God.

On Maundy Thursday night, when he might have escaped, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. He left his friends and walked on further, alone. There he threw himself on the ground. Supported by earth, Jesus faced and anguished over his doubts, fears, dread of possible capture, torture and a violent death. Eventually, Jesus found peace, and an inner silence in God (Luke 22:39-46).

In Genesis 32:22-31, before meeting Esau his brother whom he had deceived, Jacob stayed alone all night near the Jabbok river wrestling with God, an angel—or his guilt and demons? This encounter changed him. Jacob became lame, knew he needed God's help, and was blessed by God.

When we wrestle with our inner demons and fears and do not give up, are we

being held by the effort, by Christ, or even by the conflict itself? We are wounded and cannot win the struggle, but in the end we find silence, not necessarily outside of us, but more importantly, inside of us.

In John 8:1-11, we read about Jesus' silence in decision making. A woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees for condemnation. Jesus refused to agree or disagree that she be punished by stoning. Saying nothing, he bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. After repeated demands for a reply, Jesus raised his head and said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." After this Jesus returned to his writing. In the silence the accusers, one by one, faced the truth about themselves, and left.

When we dare to make a silent space for God to meet us, others, their needs and our relationships with them, crowd in as well.

Silence is also found when in wonder and awe, we completely forget ourselves in an experience of great beauty or love. Surely this is a meeting with God's presence!

Sometimes, unexpectedly, we find ourselves alone, perhaps waiting for someone or something to happen. Instead of immediately trying to fill this space/time, can it be an opportunity for us to stop, be quiet, and open ourselves to God's loving being?

At the base of Uluru, is a permanent pool of refreshing water. In our struggles for silence, God/Christ meets, holds, embraces and sustains us with love, compassion, and living water.

Sister Helen CSC
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