

Silence and Solitude



The bell above is silent. Being one bell on its own, it can symbolise not only silence, but also solitude, while being able to connect with all who ring it or hear it.

Silence and solitude, I believe, are important in our lives, in both positive and negative ways. Among other things, they can influence our relationships with God, other people and nature. (Of course, God is present in all our relationships human and nature, whether we realise it or not.)

When we are praying alone to God, silence can allow our relationship with God to deepen. In the Gospels, we are told that from time to time, Jesus withdrew from others to pray to God. It could be to go to a desert place, up a mountain, or into the Garden of Gethsemane at the base of the Mount of Olives.

We first read about Jesus in a desert at the beginning of his ministry after his baptism by John the Baptist, when he was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, and then waited on by the angels (Mark 1:12-13). If he had hoped for silence and solitude, it did not happen.

A later time of withdrawal *did* happen, after Jesus struggled to achieve it. This was when Jesus was told about the death of John the Baptist. He tried to withdraw by himself but the crowds followed him. After curing the sick and feeding 5,000 people, Jesus sent his disciples off in a boat, dismissed the

crowds, and finally, in Matthew 14:22-23, “went up the mountain by himself to pray”. (Also told in Mark 6:46 and John 6:15.) He desired a time alone, relating with his Father, which was important for him, as it can be for us.

When we are praying alone to God, we can speak or be silent. Instead of always praying using words, we can relax, rest in God’s love, and then open ourselves to God. We do not always know what is best for those we pray for, but instead of telling God what to do, we can in our silence and love for God and those we care about, allow God (the Spirit) to pray through us. As Paul writes in Romans 8:26-27, the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words”, and “... according to the will of God”.

Silence and solitude can be thrust on us when we live alone and are unable to speak or listen to others whenever we feel like it. We may try to overcome this silence by turning on the television. Instead, perhaps we can pray for or write to others, and so connect with them.

In our public worship of God in a Church, we relate to others by praying or singing together, or by speaking or listening to one another. However, there are some places in “A Prayer Book for Australia”, where a time for silence is suggested. For example, on p.120, in the Service of Holy Communion, Second Order, after an introduction to confession, we are told, “*Silence may be kept*”. Again, after the Sermon, on p.122, we read, “*Silence may follow*”. Being silent with others can be a unifying, restful, and spiritual time. It can also be an anxious or fearful time.

Sometimes when we are talking with others, silence becomes important. We may find ourselves judging what is being said and wanting to criticise it. However, it may be more helpful for us to be silent with our voices *and* in our minds, and to listen carefully, and accept sympathetically what is said. When what is told us involves the speaker’s suffering, we may find ourselves sharing in their pain with our tears.

In situations when we are criticised or hurt by the words or actions of others, silence and love rather than violence in any form seems the way God’s love responds. It is worth noting that when Jesus was arrested and tormented by the crowds, he was mostly silent. Suffering may also be transformed by God into something good, during silence.

Finally, silence and solitude can also play a part in our relationship with nature - animals, plants, the soil, sea and air, etc.. We cannot live without the world around us. It is God's loved creation which not only feeds us and keeps us warm, etc., but of which we are a part, with a responsibility for its well-being.

I have found it important in later life when I am alone, to often stop, be still and silent, while I look at the leaves of a tree being gently moved by the wind, notice small cobwebs in branches of trees lit up by a rising sun, admire a beautiful flower, or look at clouds in the sky. I also appreciate listening to the song of a Butcherbird, or relating with a Noisy Miner that pauses on our veranda to look at me. Always I enjoy picking up one of my hens and holding her gently in my arms! In a sense, we are never really solitary as members of God's creation, but are united to all, human and non-human, through God's loving presence in all of creation. As Richard Rohr in "Silent Compassion", writes on page 47, "God is another word for the heart of everything and for everything precisely in its connectedness. When you say you love God, you are saying you love everything."

There are times when I can briefly focus on just what I am engaged with in nature and forget about everything else. These are treasured moments that are available and can link us to God's presence. Yes, there are times when nature seems to be opposing us in floods, earthquakes, storms and so on, but there are more times provided for us just to be silent, increasing our love for God and all others.

Summing up, silence has a negative side when connected to anger or the rejection of others, and solitude has a negative side when it leads us into depression and loneliness. On the other hand, both silence and solitude are environments that can allow us to share in the pain, grief and even joy of others, and enable us to experience something of God's love for us and all creation.

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July 2026*