

7Journey Into Silence

Fr Nicholas meditates on the relationship between silence and prayer in Orthodox tradition.

For many people, silence is a strange and alien environment which seems, to a society dominated by ceaseless noise and instant communication, a hostile and frightening world. This fear even enters our religious life. Many more parishes now have regular adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and groups fostering meditation and contemplative prayer, yet it is still nevertheless true that for many Western Christians prayer consist almost entirely of spoken words. While we certainly must use words of praise, intercession and intimate conversation when we pray to our Heavenly Father, our prayer is incomplete unless we also practice the prayer of silence.

The first word of the Benedictine Rule is 'Listen' and we cannot listen to anyone unless we are silent. This means not just trying to find outward silence but also, which is much more difficult, try to silence the constant whirrings of our thoughts. Over the last few years I have been studying the theology of the Orthodox Church.

The most important lesson has been the study of 'Apaphatic Theology'. It is very difficult to summarise such a profound school in a few sentences. It helps if we think of the meaning of two very important words used in the theology of monastic prayer. The first is **apatheia**. It means freedom from passion. It was used by the great theologian of early monasticism Evagrius Ponticus, born 345. His important work (*The Praktikos*) is really concerned with how this state of freedom from passions can be achieved. It was Evagrius who formulated the list of passions to be overcome which has come into the West, through Pope Gregory the Great, as the famous Seven Deadly Sins.

We can perhaps use an image to define what we mean by apatheia. In the high mountains we often come across small lakes or tarns. Because they are very often sheltered by the peaks, the surface is perfectly still. The sunlight can

penetrate the depths. In other lakes there can be terrible storms which make the surface of the lake very rough, so light cannot reach the depths. The stormy lake is our life that is torn apart by passion-- anger, lust, pride and the rest. Because we are storm-tossed, the uncreated light of God cannot penetrate the depths of our souls. For in the teaching of Evagrius, and later monastic theologians, the achieving of apatheia is only the first stage. By prayer, fasting and ascetic practices we overcome the passions so that our souls can be calm and deeply still. Then, like ground that is properly tilled, we can be ready to receive the divine gift of light or rain.

The other key word takes us further on our quest as to why we need to journey inwards and enter the stillness of God which is deep within our souls. This second word is **hesychia**, which is the Greek word for stillness. Hesychasm is a major school of Orthodox teaching on prayer associated with Saint John Climacus, Saint Gregory Palamas and many others. There is a clear similarity between hesychia and apatheia. The school of Hesychasm shows us one practical way of trying to achieve this state of deep inner stillness needed to receive the uncreated light of God. It is this.

Sit in an upright chair. Do not cross your legs. Place your hands face down on your knees. Head slightly forward with eyes looking down to the heart. Close your eyes take several deep breaths, then start slowly reciting the words '*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner*'.

This is a very ancient prayer whose power lies in the power of the Holy Name.

When distractions come into the mind always go back to the prayers. Gradually, by using the prayer you will enter more fully into silence and will be able to listen clearly to the voice of God. The most important lesson is that we must seek to calm our passions and make of our lives a calm lake. We must turn away from endless words and seek, by entering into the deep inner silence, to be able to truly listen to the Word of the Father who will recreate us and bring us into the eternal light of the everlasting Divine Glory.