

The power of silence

One of the things I remember from childhood is looking out of my bedroom window on snowy nights. The snow silenced the normal sounds of the world; the whiteness overwhelmed the darkness and together they filled me with the sense of peace.

Silence has an important role in the religious practice of many, perhaps most well known is the silent meeting of the Quakers. Sitting in silence waiting for the Holy Spirit to speak to them and then sharing that inspiration with others.

The Catholic Church, of which I am a member, teaches that silence is an essential part of liturgy and the dialogue with God that is prayer. A time of silence to prepare oneself to participate fully; silence in which to meditate on what one has heard, seeking understanding and prepare a response.

Silence needs to be active to be of benefit. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in a reflection on the Book of Numbers (in Hebrew *Bamidbar* 'In the Desert'), wrote that reason the word of God was given to the Jews in the desert was because it is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. He went on to write, 'The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard.'

This season of Lent I suggest we 'give up' some of our noisy activities, watching TV, listening to the radio, chatting with friends. Let us instead devote some of that time to active listening, for believers for the voice of God. for others for the voice of your conscience. In this way we can reflect on what we have heard about the needs of others and be inspired to help them in whatever ways we can.