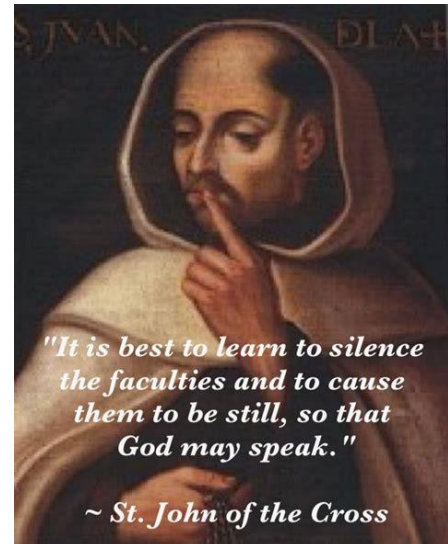


Silence, our greatest need

"Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God...for the only language he hears is the silent language of love"

These are words written by the great Spanish mystic and teacher of prayer St John of the Cross. John is one of the great cartographers of the spiritual life, but even he acknowledges that there is little guidance that we can be given other than trying to create the best environment possible within which silence can grow within us. This silence, for John, is about surrender. It is about an act of love, offering as much of ourselves as we can into the silence as an act of love. It is a giving ourselves away, if you like, as any act of love will involve.



But how challenging this is! Silence is a practice, and one that is encouraged by practising together with other pilgrims. But it is not about techniques, although what we are describing here is an art, the art of prayer.

All arts have basic principles, or skills, to be practised and perfected initially, and in the art of prayer, stillness and watchfulness are key.

Watchfulness is a grace gifted to us from a place of stillness. Like a sentry, our centre, our heart, is guarded by this watchfulness. Sometimes we can feel dispersed, "all over the place". We want to bring all the parts together, to settle them in their rightful place, like the particles settling in the jar. This vigilant watchfulness might be described as a struggle between thoughts that help and encourage, and thoughts that take us away from God.

Francisco de Osuna¹, a Franciscan friar, wrote an important book called *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* that is likely to have influenced the teachings of Teresa of Avila, and so John of the Cross too. He writes of the watchfulness of the spider...

If you wish to engage in spiritual [struggle], let that little animal, the spider, always be your example for stillness of the heart; otherwise you will not be as still in your intellect as you should be. The spider hunts small flies: but you will continually slay "the children of Babylon" (Ps 137:9) if during your struggle you are as still as the spider.

¹ 1492-1540

In the words of RS Thomas,

[Silence].is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?²

So as we settle into the still quiet that we share, let's pray for the gifts of stillness and watchfulness, bringing our attention back to our prayer word, phrase, prayer or mantra, whenever we notice our attention has been stolen.....

² RS Thomas, *AD* (Collected Later Poems p118)