

**Stillness**

Psalm 107:23 – 32, Mk 1:35 – 39

It is hard to hear the gentle whisper of the Spirit amid the noise of Christendom.  
Shane Claiborne

Shane Claiborne is a Christian activist and author. He is a social activist, promoting nonviolence and service to the poor. He has written several books including this one: *Common Prayer – a liturgy for ordinary radicals*.

He is a founding member of the intentional community called the Simple Way, in Philadelphia, and a leading figure in the New Monasticism movement.

What is new monasticism all about?

Mark's Gospel is the shortest, punchiest, most active gospel of the four. Jesus is always coming and going, healing, preaching, teaching, always doing. It's almost like a blokes' version of the gospel – no mucking around, get into it Jesus!

The book begins with a brief intro from John the Baptist. Jesus' baptism and temptation are covered in 3 short paragraphs. The disciples are called. Then it is all go, go, go. Chapter ends with two episodes of multiple healings and always crowds following, pushing, shoving, demanding Jesus' attention and ministry.

In the middle of those healing stories are some short sentences. The heading given for those short sentences in my Bible is 'Jesus preaches in Galilee'. Our pew Bible doesn't even separate those sentences from the first healing stories.

But these few brief sentences are super, super important. And the most important sentence of all is verse 35:

Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.

The whole of Jesus ministry hinges around these times of stillness that Jesus carved out of his busy work schedule to be alone with his Dad. The language indicates this was not a hurried, reluctant prayer of duty. Jesus got up before the sun was shining. He made the effort to go into the stillness where no-one else could distract him. He wanted to be with his Father. Probably he was away for hours. He was still praying when Simon found him.

There is no way Jesus could have ministered the way he did, if he didn't leave everyone else behind and go to be rejuvenated and refreshed with his Father's presence.

Jesus establishes this wonderful pattern of action and reflection.

It is important to notice that Jesus' times alone with his Dad were not self-indulgent times of personal blessing. Rather they were times of instruction and enabling for the work to be done.

After his prayer time he tells Simon and the others:

We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came.

His purpose was to share the good news of the gospel; to grow God's Kingdom. But that wasn't to be a random, haphazard task. Jesus would do it his Dad's way and not the way the people wanted.

Even though Jesus was 'riding a wave of popular support'<sup>1</sup> he didn't care about how the crowds viewed him. He learned very early on how fickle they could be. Jesus was only interested doing what the Father wanted and he knew what his Dad wanted because he spent time with him – times of stillness.

What about us? Do we spend time in stillness with our loving heavenly Father?

Back in 2012 Christianity Today revealed research<sup>2</sup> that said that only 19% of churchgoers read the Bible each day. A quarter read the Bible a few times a week, 14% once a week and another 22 % once a Month or a few times a month.

Okay, reading the Bible is only one way we communicate with the Lord and he with us. The statistics around prayer are much more positive. In the United States, which is more Christianised than most of the Western world, 55% of the population say they pray every day and 21% say they pray weekly or monthly.<sup>3</sup> Even people who have no religious affiliation pray – apparently about 20% of them do.

I wondered if those statistics were about people praying for stuff they or others needed. I shouldn't be so cynical though because 2014 statistics showed that 45% of Americans – and a majority of Christians (55%) – say they rely a lot on prayer and personal religious reflection when making major life decisions. Not all of those life decisions would have been just about them. It is encouraging to see so many people asking the Lord what is the right thing to do.

The same survey found that 63% of Christians in the U.S. say praying regularly is an essential part of their Christian identity. That is even more encouraging.

So where do we fit in those statistics? Jesus said "I do nothing on my own but say only what the Father taught me." How do we learn from the Father? What does stillness, reflection time, prayer time look like for us?

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, King's Cross, 27

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/september/new-research-less-than-20-of-churchgoers-read-bible-daily.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/04/5-facts-about-prayer/>

Last week I said that when everything goes wrong then we sometimes feel like the Lord isn't there. But the Psalmist though cries out to God whether he feels God's presence or not. When things go wrong he yells out to the Lord. Some of you will know the saying "There are no atheists in foxholes."

Who knows what that saying means?

Let's have a wee look at our Psalm for today. It is the same one we read on Seafarers' Sunday. Those who spend time at sea are exposed to all kinds of weather. When storms come, they are often helpless, reeling and staggering like drunk men.

"Help us Lord" they cry out. There is nothing wrong with asking the Lord to help us when we need it. He delights to help his people actually. Those arrow prayers for help are perfectly normal and perfectly acceptable to our Lord.

The Psalm says in verses 28 - 30:

...he saved them from their distress.  
He calmed the storm to a whisper  
and stilled the waves.  
What a blessing was that stillness  
as he brought them safely into harbour!

What waves do you need the Lord to still in your life? What is crashing around you, threatening to swamp you? If you were to sit quietly somewhere with the Lord right now, what reassuring or healing words would you most like to hear?

The psalmist goes on to indicate that we need to give thanks when the Lord answers our prayers. Verse 31

Let them praise the Lord for his great love  
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.

That is common sense really isn't it. The writer goes on to say that those thanks ought not only to be a private matter. Verse 32

Let them exalt him publicly before the congregation  
and before the leaders of the nation.

Now that sounds a bit scary doesn't it? Praise the Lord publicly in front of two groups of people: church folk in a service of worship  
And leaders of the nation

You could only do that if you'd spent time with the Lord, drawing strength from him. And most of us won't get the opportunity to thank the Lord before our politicians – though some might. Certainly we can all give thanks to the Lord in church – if the thought of standing up the front doing that freaks you out, you could write something for the newsletter or share in your small group. Find a way to let others know the good things our God is doing for you. It will help others praise him also.

But we are talking about stillness today. The writer of Psalm 116 puts it like this in verse 7:

Let my soul be at rest again,  
for the Lord has been good to me.

So according to the Psalms and to Jesus, we are to have times of rest and stillness with the Lord, whether we find ourselves in turbulent times or in times of blessing.

So how do we do that?

The traditional suggestions are prayer and Bible reading. Many people use some kind of devotional notes to help. Many people suggest morning is best because it sets the tone for the day – invites God into the centre of our being before getting distracted by anything else.

But that doesn't work for everyone.

What is the best time and place for you to be with the Lord? Many people suggest having a regular place as well as a regular time. It might be a favourite armchair. It might be somewhere outside. Whenever and wherever you choose be disciplined about it. Set aside the same time and place as far as possible.

Okay, now what. You are seated in the spot. Immediately all kinds of random thoughts come in and distract you. What do you do with those distractions? The first thing is not to get upset or beat yourself up when they come. This is normal. I keep a notebook or my phone beside me. Then I can write down when I need to contact someone or do some other task.

Then I hand that person or task over to the Lord and return to my reading or prayer. Actually for me a morning walk while listening to the Bible is proving very fruitful. I listen to a few chapters (dealing with the frequent random thoughts as they come along) and then turn off the recording for the latter part of my walk. I use that time to reflect on what I've heard.

What does the Lord want me to take to heart from his word? What might I need to confess? What positive statements might I need to declare over my life or others? How and where can I expect to see the Lord at work in my day? What might he want to change in my planned schedule?

Every one of us will find a different place of stillness; a different way of being with the Lord. I have noticed that when I begin the day with him, I want to be with him more often. I deliberately seek out a few moments of stillness here and there and that enables me to be much more effective in ministry and life.

So what is the Lord saying to you this morning? When and how does he want you to seek your own stillness with him?