

Talking and Silence on the way to Emmaus

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Last year, Philippe Lernoud, yesterday Judith Henderson-Smith and today me (and, who knows, maybe tomorrow, Gerda!), we are talking a lot about these walkers to Emmaus as we consider non-verbal communication. Besides, lack of specificity is always a danger in this form of communication, and having mis-read the messages I received, I thought that Judith was going to talk to us about the healing of Jairus' daughter.

Joking apart, this passage has made a deep impression upon me in recent times since it richly informed my thinking in two areas which I am often asked to talk about in lectures or at conferences: the ethics of, on the one hand, looking after people with Alzheimer's disease and on the other, responding in a caring way to people asking for assisted suicide. I won't analyse the passage in as much detail as my predecessors but I want to draw out three over-riding thoughts. Firstly, the idea that our life stories have a rhythm and pace that we need to know how to discover and to respect. Secondly, I want to suggest that silence can be a place where the unexpected emerges. Finally, the fact that words themselves can often say more than was originally intended by their expression.

1. The pace of the story to discover and to respect

The first thing to consider is the story as a whole: neither the words nor the actions taken in isolation, but the two fused together to give us the account. This story has a pace of its own, sometimes quicker, sometimes slower, moments where one could get the impression that nothing is happening and other moments of great intensity.

To meet another is to encounter his or her personal story, with their rhythms peculiar to them, rhythms which may well be different to ours. To communicate is therefore to know how to synchronise, at least partially, our faster and our slower progress through life.

Respecting the pace of another human being makes me think of the story of Monsieur Paul, a super old chap with a gentle face adorned by a magnificent white moustache. He suffered from a form of mixed dementia, very slowly progressive, and he had had to enter a care home. One month after his admission to this care home the team looking after him, his wife and him met together with me. At the beginning of the meeting I attempted to find out how he was: '*Monsieur Paul, I'd like to ask you how you are today, how are you feeling?*' His answer: '*well...I.....*' Both I and all the others thought that that was the only thing this poor man would be able to say. What an idea, asking questions of a person with dementia, who by definition, suffering as he does from aphasia and agnosia, can't understand or reply. So, we waited a bit...just in case.....and then, unable to remain silent any longer, everyone started talking to explain how Monsieur Paul was. As for him, sat at the end of the table, half taken aback, half amused, he looked at us, mouth half open, until by chance, silence fell, as though, as we say, an angel had passed over.

And then....he started to talk! And he answered my question : '*How do I feel...well, I am not ill...but it's my head, ideas come....and then in order to do anything....it is so slow, it.....it.....*' and he waved his finger in the air in a circle next to his head. The

nurse said with a little sympathetic smile: *'the wheels spin'* He replied *'Yes, that's it! The wheels spin'* and he laughed. Everyone in the group suddenly felt emotional. Without that silence of a passing angel we would have missed this, we would never have heard what was going on inside his head, because we were so sure that he was no longer capable of thought.

Pace is so important; the rapid advances and the set-backs, the pauses, the times when we grind to a halt. We need them all in our stories. Some will feel more comfortable than others. Are you like me, scared of empty spaces, frightened of silence? I find it one of the most difficult things to do: staying quiet and resisting that overwhelming urge to break the silence. It is then, in those pauses in the flow of our interaction, that we can see the unexpected emerge.

Coming back to our bible reading: in the first part there is pace and energy. People are moving, talking, chatting as they walk, exchanging news, interpreting scripture...and then in the end everything stops. Jesus is there and they don't recognise him; their hearts are burning as they interact with him yet they do nothing. And it's only when they have stopped, when they have fallen silent, when they are exhausted by their walking and their talking, that the unexpected happens. An angel passes...and Jesus is there.

It's not a question of choosing between words and silence, but of paying attention to the pace of the interaction. It was necessary for them to travel, but they also needed to stop. They needed to talk but they also needed to fall silent. Words are necessary, but there is more to every encounter than what is said. Monsieur Paul amazed me not so much by what he said, but by the way he spoke so unexpectedly and by his interaction with the nurse; she found the words *'the wheels spin'* for him and it made him laugh.

Our encounters are just like this. We need to weave motion into them but also pauses, conversation but also silence. It's a question of balance. Sometimes the silence weighs heavily and it's important to know how to speak, at other times the chatter becomes febrile and it's important to know how to fall silent.

2. Chancing silence

There are two reasons why we sometimes feel uncomfortable with silence: we associate it with emptiness, or we are afraid of what could come of it.

Contrary to what one might think, silence is not empty. Paradoxically, it is full of unspoken communication, and full of things that the spoken word can end up concealing. Speech is directed one way only, and is often dictatorial. One person talks to the other. The mind of the other is busy listening, reasoning, looking for information or preparing their reply. Maybe we need silence so that what has been said is really heard. And it's at that moment, as Jesus' followers reminisced, that the words took on meaning: *'didn't our hearts burn within us?...'* In silence we are linked to the past that we share with each other, the silence gives us space so that what has happened can take its rightful place between us. When we stop speaking, we come back to that which we have in common. In the silence, Monsieur Paul became again the inventive cabinetmaker, the one who loved his profession, the person who his wife

could recognise. We, his carers were even able to share a little in his past. In that silence at the table in Emmaus, a particular way of doing and being suddenly reminded them of the past and also reminds us of the basic truth that the past forms part of the present. What we are living through at the moment rests on the foundations of what has already happened in the past. It is there in our memories, but also in the memory of God. Keeping silent, is it not to invite Him to be with you, is it not to live in that unchanging memory of He who never forgets because He has us graven on the palms of his hands (Isaiah 49:16).

So silence is full and not empty, silence is full of riches and the potential for producing the unexpected. Speech is often that which describes, explains, masters, puts in context : *'they said to themselves...what are you saying?.....don't you know?....he explained to them....'* Falling silent, is it not to leave a space for that which we cannot master, that which we cannot predict? You never know what is going to arise out of silence : deadly boredom, overflowing emotion, aggression, but maybe also a smile, a kind touch, a moment of happiness or an unexpected proposition that sets the story going again. To dare to be silent, isn't it so that we can see what will come of it? Isn't it what Jesus did when they reached the village. He finished his exposition, he said nothing more, he just made as if to travel further....to see what they would do. It was then that they uttered three words without truly knowing the significance of what they were saying: *'Stay with us!'*

3. 'Stay with us!' Those things that we say without thinking.

Let us marvel at that *'Stay with us!'*. When we speak, there is more to our communication than the mere words, a form of non-verbal communication that overflows from the words we are saying. On first inspection, the disciples are just conforming to the mores of their culture. You don't let the stranger wander out into the night, you offer them hospitality. They probably didn't really think, they said *'Stay with us!'* like we would say *'No please, after you'*.

And yet, the whole story hangs on those words. Nothing would have happened if they had said : *'Oh well, good-bye, good night,!'* Submerged in the emotion of grief for their absent friend, who was in fact there with them, they couldn't see that it was he, and yet they said *'Stay with us!'*. The person who is central to the story is there, without whom we can do nothing (John 15:5). So suddenly, that *'Stay with us!'* takes on an existential meaning. You, our brother, friend, true man, the companion on all our journeys here on earth, our link to the Father *'Stay with us!'*. That is what they were saying without realising it.

With the eye of faith one could also suppose that those words said at the right moment didn't just happen by chance, but they were prompted by grace, or the breath of the Holy Spirit, that breath that we can only hear when we listen to our inner silence.

We come back to all those people that we didn't know how to recognise. Maybe we do need to go via those slightly formal forms of social politeness that can yet lead to so many other opportunities. You, the person with dementia, the person contemplating suicide, the stranger heading towards the night: *'Stay with us!'*, stay and eat with us and we will lay a place for you at the table. You who are determined to die because you think that life is not worth living any more *'Stay with us!'*, we still

have things to do together, time to fill because even if we don't talk as much, even if there are times of silence, it isn't wasted time but maybe the time for a real encounter, a time of grateful recognition of each other.

'Stay with us!' is not just a suggestion, but it is also a demand made of another. In the sense of *'You must stay with us!'*. It would have been rude to let the stranger go out into the night but it would have been just as rude for him to say *'No thank-you, I'm not interested in your invitation'*. He had to stay. And though one would often hesitate to assert it, there should also be a corresponding duty for those who want to go away, who want to die or sink into silence, to put off their decision and to answer the request to *'Stay with us'*.

So, these are some thoughts that came to me while reading this great bible passage; an exploratory journey, passing via several stages, arriving finally at the sight of the resurrected Lord because conversation and words didn't occupy the whole journey. We considered this mystery of our encounters which only become real when we give up trying to be in charge and allow ourselves to be taken by surprise (in the sense of letting go), returning as did Mary Magdalene to the garden on Easter morning. She too wept, she talked, she searched on all sides, she asked the angels, she asked the gardener and finally, possibly in despair, she fell silent. And it was then that the unexpected happened; the unspoken word, the word that explains nothing but which says it all, one word, dare I say it, more important to her than all the preceding conversation: her name *'Mary!'*, one word said by a loved one to another, one word that created that link between the two of them. Death, silence and despair and yet something happened.....and her eyes were opened as well.

I wish you good day!