THE ELOQUENT SILENCE OF CHRIST
Isaiah 53:7

Silence is golden when it guards and protects us from saying something needless, foolish or sinful. Silence is uncomfortable and awkward when it is the result of loss of memory or when it forces us to ask important, ultimate questions, that is, when it forces us to face our bare souls. Noise often helps us to hide from God, others and ourselves.

Silence can shout! Its voice can be louder than thunder, more piercing than a scream, and it can penetrate the heart more deeply than a curse.

Our Lord recognized the profound significance of silence in relationship to other people. Although it is often overlooked, one of the outstanding aspects of the suffering and crucifixion of our Lord is His deep silence during His trial and death on the cross. It is striking that Jesus had so little to say while He stood before His accusers and not much more when they hung Him to die. During the entire six hours on the cross Jesus spoke only seven times.

THE CURIOUS SILENCE

Now it is true that these seven words were very meaningful and have always attracted a great deal of interest. Legions of sermons have been preached on these last words of Jesus, and scores of books have analyzed them. But few people have stopped to carefully consider the matrix of the curious silence out of which those words were uttered.

The seven sayings from the cross constitute a total of just forty-one words in the Greek New Testament (58 words in English in the NIV translation). Altogether these words probably took a total of only a minute or so to say. So, for five hours and 59 minutes Jesus had absolutely nothing to say while He hung suspended between heaven and earth. His silence was not due to physical inability, for we know that He spoke with a loud voice just before He died as He cried out, "tetelstai" (Greek, meaning: "It is finished!").

The Bible itself makes clear that the silence that surrounded our Savior's suffering and death was not incidental but planned. It was not meaningless but purposeful. It was not empty; it spoke volumes. Isaiah, in the familiar messianic prophecy that finds its fulfillment in Christ, spoke distinctively of the silence of God's suffering servant:

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth" (Isa 53:7)

All four gospel writers note that Jesus remained remarkably silent during His trial as well as His crucifixion. On three occasions our Lord was silent before His enemies: before the Jewish rulers, before Pilate and before Herod. In each case His silence was more eloquent than any spoken word could possibly have been.
Matthew records that when Jesus was prejudicially and bitterly accused by the chief priests and elders as they brought their perjured witnesses, "He gave no answer" (Mt 27:12). Mark carefully points out that the high priest stood up before these religious leaders and false witnesses and asked Jesus why He would not respond to His accusers, "but Jesus remained silent and gave no answer" (Mk 14:61).

Then Pilate asked Him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against You? But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor" (Mt 27:13-14). Conscious of His own integrity, Jesus ignored both judge and accusers, to the discomfort of both. For various reasons Pilate obviously desired to release Jesus, but Jesus did nothing to make it easy for Pilate to do so. An unusual prisoner!

Later Jesus appeared before Herod, whom He had earlier called "that fox" (Lk 13:32), and Luke records that Herod "plied Him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer" (Lk 23:9).

Silence!

Jesus had counseled His disciples not to “cast pearls before swine,” to waste their nuggets of truth on those who would not appreciate them (Mt. 7:6), and He was practicing His own precept.

Herod was merely seeking entertainment as he hoped that Jesus would perform some miracle, but Jesus refused to gratify his vulgar desire. Such silence in the face of certain death was the hallmark of Jesus' inner strength.

Scripture tells us what followed Jesus' silent response to Pilate and Herod:

"The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing Him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked Him. Dressing Him in an elegant robe, they sent Him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies" (Lk 23:10-12).

Partners in crime!

WHY THE SILENCE?

Why the silence? Why did Jesus say so little during His suffering and crucifixion? Would not His trial have been the perfect pulpit for a strong statement of who He was and what He had come to do? Would not the cross have been a timely setting for another "Sermon on the Mount"? Prior to this time Jesus had spoken often about His death and had pointed to it as the purpose of His coming into the world. Why did He not explain its meaning now, when His death was so imminent?
Integrity

Integrity can afford silence. In rules of debate, debaters are told that when their arguments are weak in content, substance, to resort to rhetoric that will distract the attention away from the strength, the logic, of the argument of the opponent.

Silence then spoke to Jesus' integrity. His case stood on its own merit. There was no need for Jesus to mesmerize people with impressive, eloquent rhetoric! There was no need to pound the pulpit. No matter how great the provocation, Jesus never descended to abuse or retaliation. Even when struck in the face by a representative of the high priest simply because He had rightly suggested the propriety of calling witnesses to establish the Sanhedrin's (the equivalent of our Supreme Court) case, Jesus replied with dignity and restraint. He merely asserted His right to fair treatment in the ecclesiastical court (Jn 18:22-23). Restraint marked His reaction throughout. He maintained a dignified calmness and composure.

Judgment

Why the silence?

Jesus simply had nothing more to say to some people. In Matthew 10, for example, when Jesus sent His disciples on a field assignment, He warned them that they could meet persistent unbelief. In such cases, the disciples were to quit talking and start walking. As they left, they were to shake the dust off their feet in a silent symbol of judgment against determined, persistent, stubborn unbelief. In a real sense, Jesus by His silence was shaking the dust from His feet against the hardened hearts around the cross.

The silence of the cross was the end result of a love that was again and again ignored. The silence came only after Jesus had said,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Lk 13:34).

Christ's enemies around the cross still had a lot to say to Him, but He had nothing more to say to them. As He stated at His trial, "If I tell you [who I am], you will not believe Me" (Lk 22:67). Jesus knew that anything He had to say would be like casting pearls before swine.

Warning

Silence can scream in our relationships as well. It can speak more powerfully than words ever can. For this reason silence must be handled with extreme care. When we treat another human being to a cold dose of silence, we are rendering our judgment on that individual. We are saying
that this person is beyond hope, that we do not consider him or her worthy of any attempt at communication. We pour our utter contempt by our silence. Rarely are we justified in making such a judgment.

There comes a time in God's dealing with us as sinners when something more powerful than words will be necessary if we are to be converted. And that is usually His last witness to us. If the utter silence does not impress us, then there is nothing left for Him to do but to forsake us forever.

During His entire life, silence spoke powerfully of Jesus’ integrity and judgment. On the cross silence screamed as it spoke its last breath of judgment.

Woe to those today who ignore God's silence by persistently spurning the gospel!

Jesus did not use silence lightly. He understood its meaning well. Do we?

May we listen to His words of mercy and love and thus bypass His profound and eloquent silence.