

Material covered this week

This week has been an introduction, to make us think about what silent prayer might be:

- a free holiday in a place of peace any time we want
- probably stranger, possibly scarier than we think
- something countercultural, hard to find in our noisy world

The key to it is simply to listen. And there is something at the heart of silent prayer that is about letting go.

Questions for reflection

- If you were offered the superpower that you could travel to any spot on the Earth instantly, any time you chose, and remain there for up to half an hour at a time, but you had to pick just one destination – where would you opt to have as your place of retreat?
- If you were told you had to spend 20 minutes in a silent room with no books or pictures or phone or computer, nothing but a comfortable armchair, would you be filled with delight or dread, or something in between?
- Are there thoughts or feelings you try to blot out with noise of one kind or another?
- How hard or easy do you find it, when listening to someone, to listen without thinking what you will say next?
- What would (or do) you miss most if you were to lose (or have lost) the power of hearing?
- What distracts you?

Further prompts for discussion

- What has been your experience of silent prayer up to now?
- What surprised you about your times of silence this week?
- Who finds being silent for two minutes easy, and who finds it hard?
- Did two minutes of silence seem longer or shorter than you expected?

Before silence: “pre-flight checks”

- Remember that this week we’re just experiencing what silence is, not analysing it or making it anything special.
- All we have to do is not say anything.
- Bonus for listening as intently as we can to... whatever we can hear.
- Doubtless in future weeks there will be more to focus on, more challenges to go deeper, but for now we’re just going to be silent without any agenda.

Time	Activity / Notes
7.45	Arrivals
8.00	Opening prayer
8.05	Check in
8.15	Reading
8.45	Reflecting on silence
9.00	Anything else?
9.10	Silence and concluding prayer

Material covered this week

This week we got into the nuts and bolts of how we are going to sit and breathe when we enter into silent prayer. We are probably going to sit – though some may choose to stand. If we sit we are going to get the chair right so our weight is evenly distributed. We are going to sit up with good posture, in balance, alert but not anxious, using core strength. We are going to breathe into the bottom of the lungs, fully aware of the breath.

Questions for reflection

- Think of what you did last week – was there anything you didn't intend to do, but which you were tricked or lured into doing by a business or other organization?
- Do you sense that your body is part of the whole of who you are, or do you make a distinction between 'me' and 'my body'?
- Is there a difference in how it feels to sit when you have arranged your furniture so you can plant your feet flat on the floor and your thighs flat on the chair?
- How does it feel different to sit up in full awareness of the working of the muscles in your core?
- When did you last think about breathing?
- Does it feel strange or familiar, to breathe into the bottom of your lungs? Could you do it all the time?

Further prompts for discussion

- What did we think of the suggestions about how to sit and breathe?
- Have we been able to follow them?
- Any experiences to share?
- Are we getting the hang of the breathing? It might be worth sharing our experiences of breathing in this way, just to be sure we're all learning the same thing...
- Likewise sitting – can we help each other get it right?

Before silence: "pre-flight checks"

As we enter into silence this evening let's be really conscious of breathing and sitting well:

- Sit alert but not tense, balanced, grounded
- Make sure there are no pressure points, feet flat on ground
- Forearms on thighs, hands loosely together
- Breathe in: fill the lungs from the bottom, the belly a dome, chest out, then ribs out
- Breathe out from the bottom of the lungs, like rolling up an air bed

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Material covered this week

This week we focused on two aspects of silent prayer. First we finished up what we had been doing last week – getting the physical, material aspects of silent prayer right. First, how we sit and breathe, and then where we sit, when we do our silent prayer and whether we have our eyes open or shut.

These are all things you can control and decide about and do.

But then we got into the heart of the mystery of silent prayer that is not something you *do*. If you *doing* silent prayer it is not silent prayer. It is a letting go, a going beyond. You have to push yourself off from the edge of the swimming pool without touching the edge of the swimming pool. Thus there is a paradox at its heart. If you can “not think of a polar bear” you are there – but the moment you start not thinking of a polar bear, you are thinking of a polar bear!

The starting point to going deeper into this is simply to be here, now. Easy to say. For most of us it takes a long time to start becoming a reality. But that really is all there is to it.

Questions for reflection

- What do you see when you close your eyes?
- How much or how little regularity is there in your day, how do you feel about that, and how much control do you have over this in practical terms?
- Where do you feel most at peace?
- Can you not think of a polar bear?
- When your attention wanders from the immediate present, does it tend to wander to past or to future?
- Think back to day 1 – what has changed in your outlook on silent prayer?

Further prompts for discussion

- Who would like to share something about their set up for silent prayer – how, where and when are you sitting and breathing – what are you finding helpful at this early stage?
- What do we think of this fundamental paradox in silent prayer – that if we are doing it, we are not doing it? Does this make sense? Does it seem like a profound mystery? Or is it not a big deal?
- If it doesn't seem mysterious, should we perhaps reflect on it a little and see if the mystery becomes more present to us?

Before silence: “pre-flight checks”

- All the things we did last week
- Sit well, relaxed but not lolling, using core strength to maintain an alert posture, weight well distributed
- Breathe into the bottom of the lungs, conscious of the muscles working, open the chest and the ribs, breathe out from the bottom
- Be here now
- Don't try, don't be anxious
- Don't try not to try, don't be anxious about not being anxious
- Be here now

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Week 4 (chapters 19-24)



Material covered this week

This week we tried do the undoable.

We saw last week how paradoxical silent prayer is. If you are doing silent prayer you are not doing it. We have to let go, but the active purposeful letting go that we know how to do is really a form of taking hold. The more we try to be silent, the more noise there is.

This week we tried a few kinds of doing that are more likely than other kinds of doing to let us slide slowly and gracefully into simple being. First we tried the body scan: noticing and being aware of the whole body is quite a good way to approach simply being here now. Then we thought of some simple words, probably scripture, which we could become so familiar with that they might come to us unbidden and call us back to silence.

Then we looked at the experience of silent listening from different angles. The mysterious moments of balance after a prolonged period of non-silent effort, when we may, just, find ourselves effortlessly in silence. The value of going over the same ground again and again so that it becomes instinctual. The need to wait out with loving patience any distractions that arise.

Questions for reflection

- What if anything has changed in your sense of your body, and the body's integration with the whole person, since we learnt to sit and breathe?
- What do you find helps you to be grounded and still?
- Are there words or phrases so familiar to you that they come to mind without conscious thought, and are they good words?
- How long can you pause your thoughts before they start again?
- What simple, practical things can you do that will make it easier for you to enter into silent prayer?
- Can you think of other things that you can't get by chasing or grasping them?

Further prompts for discussion

- Have you had any moments in which you have not been striving to be here now but have actually been here, now?
- What is it like?
- Can one actually say what it is like? Or does saying what it's like stop it being what it is?
- How are you liking the body scan – are you able to be in it, or does it feel like a distraction?

Before silence: “pre-flight checks”

- All the usual things: sit, breathe, listen, here, now
- This time let's do a body scan
- Work upward from feet to scalp
- Pay attention to each segment in turn whilst you breathe in and out a few times
- Just be aware of what is there – don't judge or assess
- At the end, listen and wait

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Week 5 (chapters 25-30)



Material covered this week

This week we thought about whether we should do this with other people present, and about learning to say the psalms together to create moments of deep listening silence – a kind of listening that we might then turn upward and outward, listening to God.

Then we talked about some ways of taking silent prayer out onto the streets. This is the free holiday we were offered at the start of the book: when we learn to be silent, listening, attentive, at peace in any situation we find ourselves in. We thought about Niksen, low-stakes just doing nothing; and we considered whether smiling intentionally might not bring peace and focus.

Questions for reflection

- If your life depended on praying daily with a small group of like-minded people, what practical steps would you take to become part of such a group?
- How does it change your appreciation of the Psalms if you attend not only to the meaning but also to the rhythm?
 - Bearing in mind Augustine's teaching that if we have understood something then that is not God, what might it actually be like to hear God's voice?
 - What practical steps could you take to ensure that when a few spare minutes open up in your day, you remember to reflect and pray?
 - What would it mean for you to 'let go of the outcome' for five minutes?
 - When you have tried intentionally smiling more frequently, particularly in moments of repose, and also in moments of anxiety – what impact does it have on you and on others?

Further prompts for discussion

- How do we feel about sharing silence with others?
- Can you share some of your experience of listening to each other in the psalms? Is this something you would like to explore more?
- Should **we** get together regularly over the long term for listening silence, to keep each other honest, and to listen together in the psalms?
- Have we been taking a "holiday" from time to time this week?
- Would anyone like to share an experience, when you intentionally paused in the ordinary business of the day, to be in listening silence?
- Did it work? What was it like?

Before silence: "pre-flight checks"

- All the usual: sit, breathe, listen, here, now
- Let's keep doing the body scan
- This time also add a little light smile – perhaps a little more of a loving and forgiving smile when the mind wanders, but always smiling a little
- Let's also use our time of prayer together to focus on listening to each other – then when we come to our time of silence, send that focussed listening outward and upward
- As we speak the words of our prayers and psalms together, let's each of us try to hear the words spoken by others not by ourselves

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Week 6 (chapters 31-36 +end)



Material covered this week

This week we came to the end of the beginning. We have had the opportunity to learn and practice some simple but quite difficult habits that, if we carry on with them, may lead us somewhere deep. Much of this week we spent finishing up on how to take our silent prayer out into the streets. In addition to learning to smile when at rest, we thought about using peripheral vision to broaden and deepen our calm. Then we learnt how never to be bored again by simply looking anything “boring” as what it really is – an opportunity to practice, and to relish, deep, present listening.

All this finds a yet higher expression in the giving of our attention to others. For our silent prayer, though it brings deep joy, is not about *us*. It is only what it is if we direct it outward in love towards others. Listening can be a gift we give to others.

In the last four days of the book, which we may not already have read, we get finally into the theological and spiritual heart of it. For of course even beyond listening to others, the deepest, highest, most worthwhile listening is listening to God. It is as we listen to God – who, amazingly enough, also listens to us – that we enter into the life of God. For prayer is simply the inner life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in such loving communion that they are one being. Prayer is going on all the time – was going on before the creation of the universe and will outlast it. In true listening silence we can hope to be caught up in it. And thus we may hope, by losing ourselves completely, to find who we truly are.

Questions for reflection

- When you have tried a few times attending to peripheral vision when anxious or in some other negative state – do you notice any effect on your frame of mind?
- What is it, really, that you don’t like about ‘being bored’?
- What are the things in your life that really give you joy, and how did they become part of your life?
- When has someone else really listened to you?
- Think about the many different situations in which you will find yourself in the coming days – how many of them could become better and deeper and more joyful through listening?
- Are you going to keep on with this?
- Are you willing to be obedient to God?
- What do you want God to hear?
- What would it be like to enter into the eternal life of prayer that is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
- Who do you long to become?

Further prompts for discussion

- Have we been trying this thing of “listening beyond”? – as when we listen to someone else speak as we are saying the psalms together, is it possible, perhaps, for you to think and pray but “hear” God’s prayer? It’s hard to put into words what this would be like, for obvious reasons, but is it something we think possible and worthwhile?
- What do we think of the notion that the whole of the Christian life is a letting go – as in Mark 8, those who lose their lives will gain them, and those who cling onto their lives will lose them? Where else in our lives do we see this happening?

Before silence: “pre-flight checks”

- All the usual things: sit, breathe, listen, here, now, attentive to the body, gentle smile, peripheral vision (with eyes closed), gentle and forgiving with the mind wanders, ready for moments of balance...
- This time, listen beyond – let go of your own thoughts and prayers, be open to entering into the mind and prayer of God, always aware that we don’t know quite what is going on here, but ready for it whatever it is

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