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VELVET, VISIBLE SILENCE

Did you ever realise that the largest part of Jesus' life was hidden because for up to 30 of his 33 years Jesus lived with his parents in Nazareth under their authority and there increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people ? When we think about Jesus we mostly think about his words and miracles, his passion, death, and resurrection, but we should never forget that before all of that Jesus lived a simple, hidden life in a small town, far away from all the great people, great cities, and great events. Jesus' hidden life is a very important model for our own spiritual journeys because if we want to follow Jesus by words and deeds in the service of his Kingdom, we must first of all follow Jesus in his simple, unspectacular, and very ordinary hidden life.

Hiddenness is an essential quality of a truly spiritual life. Solitude, silence, ordinary tasks, being with people without great agendas, sleeping, eating, working, playing with them, all of that without being different from others, that is the life that Jesus lived and the life he asks us to live. It is in hiddenness that we, like Jesus, can increase in that same wisdom, stature, and favour with God and with people as Luke 2:52 records. It is in hiddenness that we can find a true intimacy with God and a true love for people. Even during his active ministry, Jesus continued to turn to hidden places to be alone with God. If we don't have a hidden life with God, our public life for God cannot bear fruit.

One of the reasons that hiddenness is such an important aspect of the spiritual life is that it keeps us focused on God for there is no-one else. In hiddenness we do not hear human acclamation, admiration, support, or encouragement rather we go to God with our sorrows and joys and trust that God will give us what we need. Society is inclined to avoid being hidden because we want to be seen and acknowledged. We want to be useful to others and influence the course of events but as we become visible and popular, we grow dependent on people and are guided by their responses and so we all too easily lose touch with God, the true source of our being and direction. Hiddenness is the place of purification and where we discover our true selves.

How then do we practice and protect this hiddenness in a life that is full of people ? The most important way is in solitude which allows us to be alone with God and it is there that we soon realise that we do not belong to people, not even to those who love us and care for us, but to God and to Him alone. We discover our own poverty, weaknesses, limitations and need for support and this helps us to love others for whom life has brought no success, fame or power. It is precisely in that discovery that both we and they find God's love present.

When we enter into solitude to be alone with God, we quickly discover that without the many distractions of our daily lives that fill our silence, we feel anxious and tense. When nobody speaks to us, calls on us, or needs our help, we start feeling like nobodies. Then we begin wondering whether we are useful, valuable, or significant at all. Our tendency is to leave this fearful solitude

quickly and get busy again to reassure ourselves that we are "somebodies." However, that is a temptation because what makes us valuable and valued is not other people's responses to us but God's eternal love for us.

How then can we stay in solitude when we feel that deep urge to be distracted by people and events? The most simple way to practice being alone with God and allow His silence to descend upon us and quieten our minds and hearts. You may find that writing a to-do note for every distraction that demands your attention will allow your mind to relax knowing that its thoughts are not being neglected. It might take a few minutes, less with practice but even the most unruly daydreamer among us can bring his or her restless minds to silence and then receive Christ's gentle divine presence. This doesn't happen overnight but when you dedicate time every day to just being with God, your endless distractions will gradually disappear and that velvet, almost visible silence so prized by men of old that they would rise before dawn to recapture it, will be yours.

Adapted from Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey.

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