**Chapter 6: Restraint of Speech**

January 24, May 25, September 24

*Let us follow the Prophet’s counsel: “I said, I have resolved to keep watch over my ways that I never sin with my tongue. I have put a guard on my mouth. I was silent and was humbled, and I refrained even from good words” (Ps. 38[39]:2-3). Here the Prophet indicates that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. For all the more reason, then, should evil speech be curbed so that punishment for sin may be avoided. Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk, because it is written: “In a flood of words you will not avoid sin” (Prov. 10:19); and elsewhere, “The tongue holds the key to life and death” (Prov. 18:21). Speaking and teaching are the master’s task; the disciple is to be silent and listen.*

*Therefore, any requests to a superior should be made with all humility and respectful submission. We absolutely condemn in all places any vulgarity and gossip and talk leading to laughter, and we do not permit a disciple to engage in words of that kind.*

Too much talk gets in the way of silence. This may seem a puzzling statement to those who value words over silence, who have perhaps lost touch with the value of silence as gift. Benedict points out here that how we value silence is in direct proportion to the amount of talking we do or do not do. For the contemplative, words serve silence; words are not used to cover silence nor to repress our awareness of it.

It was Rumi, the Sufi poet and mystic of the thirteenth century, who wrote: ‘Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation.’ Silence is the human encounter of God par excellence. It is before human language. Words will always poorly translate silence. Any one of us who seek the divine life will be invited to grow in its language. Risking the translation of silence into words is best done reverently, sparingly, and by those mature enough in silence.

In the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal said: ‘All of man’s [sic] unhappiness is caused by his inability to stay quietly in a room by himself.’ Many of us find it difficult to be quietly ourselves. To do so can reveal the ‘inner tongue’, our thoughts as words. An attempt at this silence can also cause us to experience what the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the early church called our passions, what we might call today our inner woundedness.

Benedict is concerned here with what motivates the use of words: is it esteem for silence or might it be a wounded heart? We can refrain from saying much, doing our bit to preserve silence as a way into God, and so experience what this is like for us. We can also use words as a kind of defence against what might be revealed in silence, and so not discover (in our own experience) what is motivating us to avoid silence. This use of speech as defence and distraction is not motivated by an esteem for silence. Often what is at play here are our inner wounds, and a motivation (however hidden and well intended) to avoid the experience of them.

We all have hurts, painful experiences of life that remain repressed, far away from consciousness. Silence risks this pain being felt in the heart. At the first inkling of this hurt maybe there is a motivation to say something funny. What this attempt at humour could be doing is distracting from what the grace of silence is making room for: the healing of the heart and the integration of personality. A lack of discretion can be a sign that we are resisting attending to something within that is stirring and asking for healing.

Silence is the fruit of our passions being healed. This healing is the heart being purified; our consciousness is being clarified. Silence is also the fruit of leaving thoughts and words behind, of having attention grow in the heart. This two-way dynamic – attention into the heart, and what is in the heart being healed – this is what happens as we meditate. Attention on the mantra provides space and time for healing we might otherwise avoid.

A contemplative community of any kind esteems and experiences silence as a loving crucible of salvation and self-knowledge. Meditating as a community helps us to let go and cooperate with what the divine life in silence is wanting to do with us: heal us into more and more loving people of fewer and fewer words.

Anyone who claims to be religious without keeping a tight rein on the tongue is practicing self-deception; that person’s religion is worthless. Pure, unspoilt religion in the eyes of God our Father, is this: looking after orphans and widows in their hardships, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world. (James 1:26-27, RNJB).