

GOD SILENCES MAN, Watchman Nee

Scripture Reading: Luke 9:33-35; Matthew 17:24-27; Acts 10:44-48

Luke 9:33-35 ³³And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. ³⁵And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear Him.

Matthew 17:24-27 ²⁴And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute? ²⁵He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers? ²⁶Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free. ²⁷Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.

Acts 10:44-48 ⁴⁴While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. ⁴⁵And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. ⁴⁶For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, ⁴⁷Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? ⁴⁸And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.

Our God is a God Who expresses Himself in speech. In many passages of the Bible He speaks directly to man; in many other passages, though He does not speak directly, the Bible records His indirect utterances also as "the word of God." Some men are great speakers; but no man can compare with God in the matter of speech.

God is a marvelous Speaker. But a more arresting thing is this: God is a marvelous Listener. He has an amazing ability to listen. It often happens that while men are busily talking, God is quietly listening. The Old Testament book which above all others records men's speeches is the book of Job. Over thirty out of the forty-two chapters in that book record nothing but the discourses of several men. Throughout twenty-nine whole chapters Job and his three friends held forth; and all the while God silently listened. There was another listener too, a man called Elihu. He was a God-fearing man, and he exercised unusual restraint while the three tried to talk Job into silence and while Job in turn tried to silence the three. At length Elihu could restrain himself no longer, and he broke out in an eloquent discourse that fills six whole chapters of the Bible. He was a good listener, but his patience was limited. God alone could listen with unlimited patience, and He listened silently to all Job had to say, to all the three friends had to say and to all Elihu had to say as well. On and on they talked, and on and on God listened until all four had exhausted themselves.

There is no book in the New Testament that corresponds to the book of Job in the Old; but in the New Testament we meet a man who was always swift to voice his ideas, and we see how God dealt with him. We are all familiar with this man -- our brother Peter. Whenever there was an opportunity to speak, Peter was on the spot. At times he could not wait for an opportunity and just blurted out whatever occurred to him at the moment. Though God is a long-suffering Listener, He records in His Word how, on three different occasions, He could not listen to Peter's talk. The first of those occasions was on the Mount of Transfiguration, when God the Father silenced him after he had passed only a few remarks. The second occasion was when the Lord called in question his utterance of a mere word when they were in Capernaum. The third occasion was when the Holy Spirit silenced him just as he had begun preaching to the Gentiles who were gathered in the house of Cornelius.

ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

Luke tells us that Jesus "took with him Peter and John and James, and went up into the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became white and dazzling." Though the three were true disciples who had followed Jesus closely, His self-emptying in becoming Man made it difficult for them to recognize who He really was; but on the Mount "they saw his glory" which His humanity had hitherto hidden from their sight. The veil was withdrawn for a brief space and it was granted them to catch a glimpse of His real nature. They had known the Man, Jesus of Nazareth; on the Mount they looked on "the Christ, the Son of the living God."

But they did not see Him alone. Moses was there and Elijah was there too -- Moses the law-giver and Elijah the prophet. In those two men "the law and the prophets" -- i.e. that which characterized the Old Testament dispensation -- was set forth. Christ, on the other hand, set forth that which characterized the New Testament dispensation. The law and the prophets were the shadow of which Christ was the substance. The shadow was passing; only the substance was permanent.

Peter was thrilled to see Moses and Elijah as well as Christ, and he exclaimed: "Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He had only gotten as far as that with his comments when he was interrupted by God. "A voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my chosen: hear ye him." This divine intervention was virtually refuting the thought that Moses and Elijah were on the same plane as Christ. Peter certainly wanted Christ; but he wanted Moses and Elijah as well, despite the fact that the Lord had previously said: "The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom is preached" (Luke 16:16). The law and the prophets were set over against the Kingdom, for not until they were superseded by Christ could the Kingdom be ushered in. Moses and Elijah have their place; but Christ stands alone. Christ is unique; and comparison with Him is impertinent. Peter, of course, would have given Christ first place and would have relegated Moses and Elijah to second and third; but God repudiated the conception that even a Moses and an Elijah, who occupied a prominent place in the Old Testament, had any place in the New. In the New Testament "Christ is All and in all." Christianity is Christ; not Christ plus.

It was essential that Peter's impulsive remarks on so vital a matter should be challenged, so God broke in from heaven and effectually silenced him with these words: "Hear ye him." God was saying in effect: This is no time for you to be talking; it is time for you to be listening; anything you may say is totally irrelevant. You think of preparing a place for three persons; but there is only One Who is qualified to speak here. God did not say, Hear ye THEM; He said, HEAR HIM.

Why did God refuse to cede a place in the New Testament dispensation to Moses and Elijah? What is the law? Who are the prophets? Who is Christ?

What is the law? The law is a set of rules and regulations that tell people what is right and what is wrong. They indicate what people ought to do and what they ought not to do. Once you know what the law requires of you, you do not need to go and inquire of God. Provided you just do what you are told, you need not have any close relationship with Him. That was the state of things in the Old Testament dispensation.

But an entirely different state of things obtains in the New Testament dispensation. The New Testament replaces the law by Christ the Lord. When Peter suggested making three tabernacles he had not realized the unique nature of Christ; but later on he wrote of his experience on the Mount: "We were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory. This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased: and this voice we ourselves heard come out of heaven, when we were with him in the holy mount."

Have we seen the unique place Christ occupies in the New Testament? Does Christianity for us signify Christ alone, or does it signify Christ plus numerous externalities? Are we hearing Him and letting Him direct our way, or are we following the dead letter of the law? The question is not what the letter of the law has to say, but what the living Lord Who dwells within us has to say. Alas! the tendency of Christians is still to cleave to the law, because we can be quite correct in the matter of outward observances without the need to maintain an inward relationship with the Lord. We can gain much wisdom by observing the requirements of the law and yet ignore the New Testament requirement that we know Him Who is Himself is "the wisdom of God" (1_Corinthians 1:24). He Who is called "Wisdom" has said: "Blessed is the man that heareth me, Watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors" (Proverbs 8:34). We cannot live the Christian life apart from a close relationship with the living Christ. The law with its regulations of right and wrong cannot meet the demands of the New Testament.

What about the prophets? Where do they come in? They were brought in to supplement the law. The law could only indicate certain principles of conduct; it could not apply those principles to all the details of daily life. For instance, the law could point out, as in Leviticus 11, what food was clean and what was unclean, what should be eaten and what should not be eaten; but it could not tell you what you should eat today for your evening meal. Here the prophet comes in. He can apply the principles of the law to the practical details of everyday life. The law presents the divine requirements in particular. When the divine standard has been made known to God's people through the law, the prophet comes along and tells them how to conform to that standard in specific cases.

God would not countenance Peter's recognition of the law or the prophets in the presence of Christ, because He had promised that in the New Testament dispensation "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). This is the new covenant that He made with His people: "They shall not teach every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: For all shall know me, From the least to the greatest of them" (Hebrews 8:11).

A Christian once said to a fellow-Christian: "Please pray that God will show you what He wants me to do, and when you get light please let me know." That was a violation of the New Testament. The New Testament makes no provision for the law or the prophets alongside of Christ. We no longer look to men to tell us what we ought to do; the Lord Himself Who dwells within us teaches us His will.

In Acts 21 we are told that when Paul felt he ought to visit Jerusalem a number of people besought him not to go, because of serious trouble which was expected to befall him there; but he refused to reverse his decision. Why? Because in his own inner being he had assurance regarding the Lord's will. We dare not be governed by other people's opinions. The life of the Christian should be governed by Christ alone. In Old Testament times God's people might consult the prophets; but not so in New Testament times.

IN CAPERNAUM

On the second occasion when Peter was put to silence, the circumstances were very different from the first. On this occasion Peter was in Capernaum and the tax-collectors there asked him: "Doth not your master pay the half-shekel?" On the spur of the moment he answered, "Yea." He did not stop to think whether or not Jesus was under any obligation to pay the half-shekel; so when Peter entered the house Jesus immediately questioned him: "What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings of the earth, from whom do they receive toll or tribute? from their sons, or from strangers?" Peter promptly answered, "From strangers"; to which Jesus rejoined, "Therefore the sons are free." Jesus was saying in effect: Peter, the question is not, Do I pay this tax or not? It is, Should I pay this tax or not? The issue is no superficial one; it touches the fact of the incarnation which is basic to Christianity. It is not, Do I pay or do I not pay? but, Who am I? Am I or am I not the Son of God? If I am just a man like other men, then I should pay this tax.

When, shortly before this incident, Jesus asked His disciples, "Who say men that I am?" they answered, "Some say John the Baptist: some Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Yes, men say He is a great man among men; but merely to admit that leaves the fundamental question unanswered. So Jesus followed His first question with a second question pointedly addressed to His disciples -- "But who say ye that I am?" That is the crucial issue. "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." "And Jesus answered and said unto him, blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the rock foundation of the Church. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi was based on divine revelation; but now, in Capernaum, he has missed the issue.

The tax of half a shekel had its origin away back in Old Testament times when every male Israelite who had reached maturity paid this amount as atonement money. The issue was this: Was Jesus just a male Israelite among other Israelites, or was He no less a One than the Son of God? The basic question for every Christian to answer is not, What does your Master do? but, Who is your Master?

In Capernaum, Jesus brought Peter face to face with Christianity's most fundamental question. Nevertheless, having made it clear to Peter that, since He was the Son of God, He was not subject to taxation, lest His refusal to pay the tax be misconstrued by others and cause them to stumble, He said to Peter: "Go thou to the sea and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a shekel: that take, and give unto them for me and thee." Here we are taught another principle: even when our privileged position sets us free from certain obligations, we may have to forego our privileges for the sake of others. Fear must never be our motive in foregoing spiritual privileges; but we have to forego them sometimes to avoid stumbling other people. In the case we have been considering, it was necessary for the Lord to arrest Peter because there was a fundamental principle at stake; but having made the issue clear to him, He proceeded to safeguard other lives.

IN THE HOUSE OF CORNELIUS

The third occasion on which Peter's speaking was cut short was in the house of Cornelius. Peter was a Christian, and Peter was a Jew. Now the Jews had no dealings with the Gentiles, and Peter had a decided prejudice against them. To deal with this prejudice, God caused him to see in a vision an object resembling a great sheet, caught together at all four corners, let down from heaven; and in the sheet were all sorts of birds and beasts and creeping things. While his eyes beheld this strange sight, his ears discerned the voice of the Lord commanding him to eat. But Peter protested strongly: "Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" Peter had become a Christian, but Peter still retained many of his old Jewish prejudices. He still discriminated between clean and unclean food, and he even discriminated between clean and unclean people. Through this vision the Lord was seeking to break down Peter's deep-rooted preconception regarding the Gentiles, and after showing him the vision, He sent him to the house of Cornelius. There Peter immediately began to preach the gospel, though in his mind the separating wall between Jew and Gentile remained. He still regarded himself as one of a specially privileged nation and could not take it in that the grace of God had become available to Jew and Gentile alike. He had seen the vision, and he had even confessed that God is no respecter of persons; but he failed to see the practical implications of this. So the Holy Spirit took matters out of Peter's charge and, as he himself later admitted, he had only just begun to speak when the Spirit fell upon his entire audience and they all commenced to speak in tongues. God used their speaking in tongues to stop Peter's speaking, and when Peter saw that God had given to the Gentiles the same gift of the Holy Spirit as He had given to the Jews, he exclaimed: "Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?"

On the Mount of Transfiguration, God showed what the content of Christianity is; in Capernaum He showed what the foundation of Christianity is; in the house of Cornelius he showed what the sphere of Christianity is. On the Mount the exclusiveness of Christianity was emphasized; but in the house of Cornelius it was the inclusiveness of Christianity that was stressed. In the house of Cornelius it was clearly demonstrated that Christianity is not merely for the privileged few; it embraces the whole world. We may think that all the riches of Christ are within the reach of certain select classes only, and that the less privileged must make certain changes here and certain adjustments there that they may become fit subjects for the blessings of Christianity. Praise God! No Gentile needs to become a Jew in order to partake of the wealth that is in Christ. And, praise God! no sinner needs to improve his condition in order to become a Christian; he can come to Christ just as he is. All have sinned, Jew and Gentile alike; and to all sinners, both Jew and Gentile, God's saving grace is freely offered. Whoever you are by nature, provided you receive the life of the Son of God, you become a member of God's family.

What a blessed thing it would be if we children of God saw our oneness in Christ! There is no oneness apart from Him. God has not required Christians to produce this oneness but only to preserve it, for it is already secured in Christ.

If, as we gather around the Lord's Table today, our horizon is bounded by our own company, we are not qualified to break Bread, for the possession of Christ's life has brought us into relationship with the whole Church, not merely with a section of it. Oh! we need to be enlarged so that our hearts embrace all the children of God; otherwise we shall eat this Bread unworthily. We proclaim here that all the children of God are brothers and sisters, therefore we dare not harbor any divisive thoughts. Let us remember that the same Holy Spirit Who has come upon us has also come upon them. May the Lord be gracious to us, lest by bringing into the church that which is of Adam and not of Christ, we hinder the building up of His Body.