

WORDS FOR SILENCE

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A Year of Contemplative Meditations

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Preface by Archbishop Desmond Tutu



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Words for Silence: A Year of Contemplative Meditations

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PREFACE
by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

THE OBLATES AND ASSOCIATES of the Order of Julian of Norwich are richly blessed, for we receive copies of the chapter talks that Father Gregory, the Guardian of the Order, delivers to the Members Regular, the nuns and monks of the Order. How privileged we are to share these addresses with their array of pearls of wisdom as we sit at the feet of someone so profound yet so accessible.

The fact that talks primarily meant for monks and nuns are shared with us who are “in the world” speaks eloquently of the fact that the life of prayer, the contemplative life, is really for all, not just for a select few, an elite ensconced in a monastery. The exhortation that people pray without ceasing is meant not just for an elite but is addressed to all of us who claim to be followers of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are meant to emulate him, who was so conscious of the divine presence and his unity with the divine source of all that he could in the fourth Gospel declare, “the Father and I are one.” We too should know we are always in the presence of this God, even though we may not always be aware of it because of our frenetic busyness; and we have to pause, reassemble our scattered faculties, become recollected as we savor the sanctity of the present moment, to be still, for only so can we apprehend the one who said, “Be still and know that I am God.” This One who is to be found most frequently, not in the spectacular but in the mundane, the ordinary; not in the wind, not in the fire and the earthquake, but in the still, small voice; in a little child lying in a manger, in

broken bread and a shared cup of wine. Every bit of ground we trample is actually holy ground.

Father Gregory in one set of talks encourages his audience to pay attention to the rhythms of their breathing. In that series he draws attention to how even our mealtimes might be occasion for growing in sanctity and in gratitude for God's provision by thinking, say, of the potato on one's plate, so bringing to mind the soil in which it was planted and nourished, the water, the air, the sunlight, the God who gives the increase, so we would not just gobble unmindfully, but be reflective and slow, which would be good for our digestion, too. In these ways we would be like Brother Lawrence, who found the clatter of the pots and pans in the kitchen as good in inducing holy thoughts as the liturgical acts in the sanctuary at the celebration of the Eucharist. Our real home is God, our natural environment is the divine—Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu*—so that should be as natural for us as water for the fish and air for the bird, theophanic: the sacred could erupt anywhere at any time, every bush being potentially a burning bush. One of my confessors and spiritual counselors used to say, "Nothing is secular except sin."



We who lead so-called active lives in contrast to the contemplative (as if it could ever be just passive) have our work cut out to balance the Mary (the contemplative, still side) and the Martha aspects (the active, doing side).

I know that I would never have survived in our struggle against apartheid without the fairly substantial portions of my

daily regimen devoted to the so-called spiritual—times of quiet, of meditation, praying the offices, celebrating the Eucharist, quiet days and retreats. Without these to nurture and sustain me I would have just collapsed. And there was ultimately no real dichotomy—it was the God one encountered in the quiet moments who demanded that we demonstrate our love for this God by our acts of love for neighbor, for how could we say we loved God whom we had not seen when we hated our brother/sister whom we had seen? “In as much as ye have done it to the least of these my sisters or brothers, ye have done it to me.” The pattern had been established with our Lord after his baptism.

He did not luxuriate in the afterglow of that spiritual experience; no, the Spirit cast him into the fray with the devil. He had shown the pattern of engagement and disengagement, setting off alone to pray in the hills especially before some major item on his agenda, as for instance the call of the disciples, or going for replenishment after some demanding public work, as after the feeding of the five thousand.

And there were times when it seemed a divine pressure impelled me to do something totally unpremeditated, and yet once it happened it turned out to be so right. I was in retreat before my ordination as bishop when I thought God wanted me to write a letter to Prime Minister Vorster to warn him that black patience was running out. The letter virtually wrote itself. I sent it in May 1976. Mr. Vorster was disdainful. On June 16, 1976, the Soweto uprising happened. In 1989 black people demonstrated against the whites-only election, and in retaliation many of our people were killed. I broke down in my chapel in the Archbishop’s residence in Cape Town after being

told the latest casualties, and I emerged to say we must march. In September 1989 the largest march under apartheid happened when 30,000 people turned up—and that was the beginning of the end of apartheid.

We are always in God's presence. We are being urged to be more conscious of this and to be those who are still because we know that God is God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Desmond M. Tutu". The signature is written in a cursive style and is followed by several horizontal, overlapping scribbles that extend to the right.

+ Desmond M. Tutu
Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town

INTRODUCTION

IN THE BENEDICTINE MONASTIC TRADITION it is customary for a chapter from the Rule of Saint Benedict to be read to the community each day. The abbot may then elect to give an explanation of the passage, guiding the community in its practice. This occasional address by the abbot, touching on the core meaning and practices of the monastery, has traditionally been called a “chapter talk.”

My religious order, the Order of Julian of Norwich, is an Anglican order of contemplative monks and nuns in the Episcopal Church. While not strictly a Benedictine community, we have adopted a great deal from the Benedictine tradition, including weekly chapter talks by the superior aimed at providing consistent, long-term spiritual formation for the monks and nuns of the Order.

What follows is a selection of chapter talks from those I offered during the first four years of my term as guardian, or superior, of the community. These talks have ranged from the theological to the practical. Some have evoked the contemplative spirit, others have taught the theology behind a life of prayer, still others have offered instruction and encouragement in our daily practices. For this book, the talks have been arranged according to the seasons of the liturgical year. They can be read straight through or periodically. Each talk in *Words for Silence* has been substantially rewritten to apply to any person who is walking the contemplative path, who is seeking a more intimate union with God, or who is seeking to deepen her life of prayer.

Phrases such as “contemplative path” or “union with God” may be unclear to many who are first picking up this book. To others, such ideas may seem so exalted as to be beyond the reach of ordinary Christians. But this is not the case. Nothing is more ordinary, nothing is more natural, nothing more simple or humble than the authentic contemplative life that breathes in and out with God’s Spirit through the trials and joys of a very ordinary day. Reaching such a state of complete naturalness and open joy in God does not require specialized learning or exalted spiritual experiences or a life in a monastery. It requires only a willingness to walk into daily life with the intention of living surrendered to God. As we become aware of the misguided desires and fears that drive us away from this intention, we let go of such things until we are stripped down to the natural, bare essence of our being, already enfolded in God’s love.

Love is at the center of this process of becoming aware and letting go. The sense of being loved and cherished gives us the extraordinary freedom to see ourselves honestly, then to let go of the fears and delusions that usually shape our lives, and to greet the present moment as the place where we are already one with God. Unceasing prayer, long understood as the end of Christian and monastic life, is not an obsessive effort to pray a lot, but is an opening of our hearts and minds to the reality of God’s love for us. It is a way of life shaped by that love. Simple, present, attuned, and surrendered, the contemplative spirit brings the kingdom of God to this world.



It will be helpful for many readers if I introduce the spiritual mothers and fathers who have preceded me in the Christian spiritual tradition. These great women and men have given me the concepts and language that have allowed me to take hold of my own vocation as a contemplative monk and wrestle with its hold on me, and their spirit is everywhere in these meditations.

First, St. Benedict's Rule has already been mentioned. Written in the early sixth century, this Rule has proved to be a touchstone for almost all of Western monastic life since then. Noted for its balance between work and communal prayer and meditation on Scripture, the genius of St. Benedict's Rule is its legislation of a way of life that is tempered enough to be truly livable and yet which leads nuns or monks, almost in spite of themselves, to become transparent to God.

Second, Blessed John Cassian is mentioned in many places in the pages that follow. Living in the fourth and fifth centuries, John Cassian traveled widely in the monastic circles of his day, receiving teaching firsthand from the great monastic fathers and mothers of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts. His two books, commonly known as *The Institutes* and *The Conferences*, brought the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers to the monastic traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches.

Third, St. John of the Cross, a Carmelite friar and mystic of sixteenth-century Spain, has been formative in my own spiritual journey and appears often in my reflections. John of the Cross's most important insight was that the trials and temptations that we undergo in the spiritual life—inner aridity, disturbing thoughts, negative moods—are often a result not of

the absence of God, but of God's having drawn near. In one of John's favorite metaphors, the uncreated love of God, flowing into the soul, is like a flame kindled underneath a swampy log. Before the flame can consume the log and transform the wood into fire, it has to drive out of the log all that is unlike itself. Thus when God draws near to us, we are likely to experience not consolations or peace, but the driving up into conscious awareness all that seems most ungodly in us. We have to go backward to go forward, down to go up. A lifetime of wounds and suffering may come to the light of conscious awareness before they can be dispelled.

Finally, there is Blessed Julian of Norwich, whom I often call "Mother" Julian because she is the patron of my community and is my spiritual mother. She appears more often than any other writer in these meditations and has shaped my journey into God more than any other writer. Living in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Mother Julian is known only because of her book *The Revelations of Divine Love*. This remarkable book is a combination of authentic mystical experience and twenty-plus years of astute theological reflection. Central to Julian's experience is the love of God and God's joy in us. The core of *The Revelations* is that God yearns to share his life of loving bliss with us. Julian reminds us again and again that at the heart of who we are, we are already united to God; our challenge is that in ordinary life we live in ways opposed to this deep union. Redemption happens when grace brings our outward life back into harmony with what is our deepest reality. The humanity of Jesus, particularly his suffering on the cross, is the means of our healing through which we are able to enter into God's love and joy. Our job is to learn how to

cooperate with this working, and once again this is largely a matter of letting go.

Many other writers appear, but these four are my chief influences. If this book should serve as a stepping stone for readers to explore the Rule of St. Benedict, John Cassian, St. John of the Cross, or Blessed Julian of Norwich, I would be most pleased. I should note as well that all the scriptural passages in *Words for Silence* are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.



Finally, none of us makes the journey to God alone. We all need a community to support us in our growth toward awareness and in our practice of ever-deepening surrender and discovery of our true selves in God. My journey has taken place in the context of a monastic community. Without this community of mutual friendship and care, of theological challenge, spiritual balance, and liturgical richness (and good manual labor!), I could never have taken even one step on the contemplative way. Fr. John-Julian Swanson founded the Order of Julian more than twenty-five years ago, inspired by Mother Julian in his vision of a contemplative monastic order that would retrieve the mystical and spiritual teachings of the Christian and especially the Anglican tradition. My debt to him and to all the members of the Order, who have shown me such forgiveness and love, is endless.

My community has also done a great deal of work to make this book possible. My thanks go out to them for the hours of work they have put into the manuscript, as well as to all those who have encouraged me to share these teachings more widely.

Without such urging, I never would have taken on the project. An oblate of the Order of Julian of Norwich, Brenda Weems, provided me with a first critical reading. Patricia Nakamura, an associate of the Order, provided much needed help in editing and shaping the manuscript. Jon Sweeney at Paraclete Press has also been amazingly helpful.

May these words lead you, my reader, into your own silence where you may be still and know that you, without any of the fuss and glamour of life, are already one with God. May these words remind you that you are part of a vast community, a cloud of witnesses, who has journeyed on this path before you and will journey after you. This great tradition is here to teach, console, challenge, and inspire you. May these words be words for the silence where earth and heaven meet, where God is present in creation, where you and everything else are knit together in love.



 ADVENT

IN THE MONASTERY, ADVENT is an intensely contemplative time of silence and waiting. The harvesting and freezing of garden crops has ended and with the first snowfall all work on the grounds comes to an end. Shredded leaves steam aromatically in the compost heap and icicles drip as they grow from the chapel gutters through the short days and long nights.

The Advent liturgy, with its vestments of dark purple and blue, is at once penitential and promising. The season begins with John the Baptist, warnings about the end of time, the dissolution of creation, and the nearing Day of Judgment. It ends with the stirring of divine life in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The festivities of Christmas do not make an entrance until the twenty-fourth day of December, when the monastery and chapel are decorated and the smell of pastries and cookies wafts from the kitchen.

The six meditations in the following section have been chosen for their contemplative tone, their call to interior presence and silence, and their evocation of mystery at the heart of our lives: our waiting upon the Word.

Advent
and the End of Time

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT MARKS THE START of a new liturgical year in Christ. It is a time of darkness, of hidden pregnancy, of waiting. The seed of the kingdom of God, the seed that will germinate at Christmas, sprout in Epiphany, grow through Lent, blossom at Easter, and bear its seven-fold fruit at Pentecost, is sown in the dark soil of Advent. The new life of God is already within us, even though we may see, feel, and understand nothing. Patience and faith are called for.

For the earliest Christians, Advent was an eschatological time, meaning a time when they awaited the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. They had a sense that everything was about to pass away: the earth and the heavens consumed by fire. We don't have to believe literally in an immanent second coming in order to enter completely into the spiritual reality of these images, and so into the spiritual heart of Advent as it was understood most anciently.

Julian of Norwich tells us that in every moment of this life the soul experiences itself at the very moment of its being taken by God! This is intense. She means that at some level, usually far under our chattering minds and undulating emotions, the soul is right there with God, and feels itself to be always at the very moment of union with God. This consciousness haunts all of human life, even the most worldly and self-confident. In the inmost depths of our being we are at the very edge, at the final moment before tipping over into union, into ecstasy.

For the contemplative spirit, Advent is thus a time at the very start of the liturgical year to enter into this place where we know ourselves as before God and about to fall into the full Mystery and Life and Beatitude of God. We don't force this or any kind of encounter—our job is rather that of letting everything else go, sitting quietly, attaching to nothing, until this divine truth, this seed of the kingdom in us, can germinate into our conscious awareness.

As Advent is just such a time of quiet attendance and awaiting, we might wish to take up a particular spiritual practice for the season that brings special calm or quiet. We might, for instance, reduce or eliminate our use of entertainment media such as TV, radio, random Web use, or movies. The time gained by such a media-fast can be used to learn how to meditate, or to rejuvenate a silent prayer practice. There are many books on Christian meditation or Centering Prayer, and they are widely available. Alternately, we may decide to spend a few extra minutes every morning keeping a journal, or keeping silence with a scriptural text, listening to its meanings echo through our lives. What would it look like for Christ to be born in our lives? If we have a spiritual friend or director, we might talk about keeping an Advent practice together. If we have a prayer corner in our homes, it can be a powerful symbolic action to remove almost all the books and icons and candles, just keeping one or two items as we wait with new simplicity for our Lord. We might also spend our free time each Advent reading the works of a new mystic or saint—Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Bernard of Clairvaux all come readily to mind. If we are at a loss when it comes to finding such a saint, we can

ask a spiritual friend or parish priest for advice. We could also read a book of collected sayings from the saints and mystics until we light on one with whom we feel strong resonance. Saints are important for our journey because they show us new possibilities for our own lives; they stir up our imaginations and open our hearts and minds to what is most real in us. Best of all, Advent is a time to quiet the clamoring anxieties and desires in us, to be silent and to wait as a cup or bowl to be filled with the gift of God's own life.