**Silence and solitude**

***Be still and aware of God within and all around…***

Today, Monday, is one year since the Middle East once more became a focus of war and unrest. Here are some reflections I’ve had leading up to today.

**Part one – written over a week ago.**

I have been realizing for some time that actually I really need silence and solitude more than I perhaps thought. Having had a lot of visitors over the summer and been in busy places, I found myself resentful of the noise and chatter and disturbance – people even talking over breakfast! There seems to be such an intrusion of anger and swift judgements everywhere; and diatribes on any topic great or small, whether one is interested or not. I mentioned before that I find lengthy meditative silences challenging but managing this angry noise like a bee buzzing round me was more challenging. How to manage it without being judgmental? How to have the resources for people who really did need a calm, listening ear? How not to be “wound up” by all the noise?

Richard Rohr last week put it like this with the heading *Protecting Silence and Solitude* – and it sounded familiar

*My immediate response is attachment, defensiveness, judgement, control, and analysis. … this seems to be the “first gaze” at almost everything.*

He suggests the only answer is to protect times of silence and solitude. Then, even the first gaze can be open and present, and with a contemplative and listening mind and heart.

How do I listen to those who need it, while making time for oneself, while also not getting dragged into the anger in society today?

Carving out time for silence and solitude has become essential – following the pattern of Jesus withdrawal as we read in Luke 5:  *and for a time he would withdraw to lonely places for prayer.*

John McQuiston in his book *Always We Begin Again* (a great title and book) writes:

*Remember the great value of silence.*

*Each day there must be time for silence,*

*Even in our prayers and meditation*

*There must be time within which we*

*Neither speak nor listen*

*But simply are.*

*Consider the value of silence in our community*

*Our ability to listen is our gift to those around us.*

**Part 2 – Written a week later:**

Listening to the news and the rapidly worsening situation in the Middle East and the ongoing Ukraine conflict – the my reflections last week seem rather self indulgent: to be considering my personal need of solitude, when others have their homes destroyed and are surrounded by the horrors and noise of war. No silence and solitude for them.

However, there is a thread – the huge amount of noise and anger in the world and the ready way in which it is shared and exacerbated – which leads to such horrors. When it seems too much for us to be able to do anything about it – perhaps what we can do, or have to do, is to cultivate silence and peace around us, and refuse to add to the noise, the judgements, the anger so quickly expressed.

The priest and poet RS Thomas writes movingly as he gets older of the essence of stilling and waiting, often linked to the idea of waves on the sea where he lived in Wales. His beautiful poetry takes us into silence and solitude with him, without as he puts it: “*the worn formulae of the churches in the belief that that was prayer.”*  One of his poems:

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean.
We launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?

**A prayer to take us into that stillness: (John McQuiston)**

*As the gift of another day comes to an end*

*We set aside our cares*

*We set aside our self concern, we still our hearts and minds.*

*We experience the eternal Presence.*

*We join in the mystery of our union with Eternity*

*And we abandon ourselves*

*And enter your peace.*

**Following silence: (Philip Newall)**

*Renew me this night in the image of your love*

*Renew me in the likeness of your mercy, O God.*

*May any refusal to forgive*

*That lingers with me from the day*

*Any bitterness of soul that hardens my heart*

*Be softened by your graces of the night.*

*Renew me in the image of your love, O God,*

*Renew me in the likeness of your mercy.*

