

FINDING THE SILENCE FOR LISTENING TO GOD

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In a world more and more obsessed with communication and information, one connection that is often missing, even for Christians, is communication with God. And what communication we have with God often tends to be fairly one sided as we approach the throne of grace with our list of people, situations and needs that require God's attention. There is often little time for listening to God, hearing what the divine Father would like to say to us, his restless children. The reason is all too clear. The 'still, small voice' can be heard only in the quiet, and in our lives there is not enough silence. Our daily schedule allows for neither silence nor stillness.

There is a growing awareness in churches across the religious spectrum of the need for silence, for what is often called a 'spiritual retreat'. The idea of religious retreats has existed since the beginning of church history but it has waxed and waned with the centuries.

It is an awareness that seems to be coming back into vogue. Practitioners of meditation, contemplation and reflection, ranging from new age to old eastern, confront us in magazines and on billboards. Many religious believers are turning to such systems because they feel a lack in their lives that the modern churches do not seem to be meeting.

The Centre for Christian Spirituality in Cape Town is one of many groups that encourage spiritual retreats. The Centre, in existence since the 1980s, is led by representatives of different denominations and cultures. One of the programs the Centre offers is individual guided retreats that focus on silence, solitude and scripture to deepen our relationship with God. Although we have moved to more user-friendly terms of "A Vacation With the Lord" or "A Time of Silence with God", even that may sound daunting to church groups for whom this concept is not familiar. It really only consists of meeting with the retreat leader on a daily basis, someone who asks what your deepest spiritual desire is and suggests scriptures or devotional readings that may help you to move toward that goal during the weekend.

The directors for these retreats are Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Anglican, NGK, Catholic or, usually, some combination thereof. In the Western Cape we make use of several different retreat centres, places where there is space and stillness to walk in nature, to sit quietly, reflect and pray.

In Jeremiah the Lord says to his people:

"If with all your heart you truly seek me, you will find me." And then, to emphasize it, God adds: "For I will be found by you, if you seek me with all your heart." When we are feeling the lack of divine presence, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our life, it isn't God's fault. There is no lack of God speaking, only of our listening. In silent retreat there is the invitation and the assistance to hear.