



10 Pentecost, Proper 14, August 9, 2020      Church of Our Redeemer      Aldie, VA

“A Sound of Sheer Silence”

[1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85, v.8; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33]

The British philosopher and spiritual teacher, John G. Bennett, was a devout Roman Catholic who also was a student of mystical Islam; in the quote he uses some Arabic terms that correlate with his own understanding of spiritual psychology, to speak of a familiar saint:

“You know the picture of George and the Dragon. One traditional treatment of the subject is that the lady, who represents the soul, is there, and that St. George is there, and he is just looking at the dragon, and the dragon, as long as his spear is just touching him, is obedient, and the lady is able to lead him. The dragon, of course, represents the *nafs al ammârah*, [roughly equivalent to the ego]. How can we master this dragon in ourselves?

“The dragon is a necessary part of the drama. Eternal vigilance is required; that is represented by St. George on his horse, with his Spear, just touching the dragon's neck. That is all that is required. *As long as the dragon knows that he is watched, he is quiet and peaceful.* Then the soul, the *ruh*, represented by the woman, can lead him on a silken thread. That is the state that we have to learn to establish in ourselves. So long as the dragon was in the cave, he was the threat. He could not be seen: what he would do next was unpredictable. When he was brought out of the cave and made visible, the whole of him visible to be seen, then this situation arose that St. George was able to control him. He was able to make him peaceful, make him quiet.

“How does this allegory apply to our own spiritual life? The ordinary state of man is one in which he is identified with his dragon. His dragon is 'I'. The desires of his dragon are his desires. That is the state when the dragon is in the cave. There is no possibility even of fighting with him. The dragon is inside us and we are the dragon, that is the *nafs al ammârah*. This dragon will obey no one. It takes over; everything is done by it, it has taken command; it has usurped the position of the rightful ruler.

How to see this; how to come to the point where one sees one's dragon as not oneself; how to arrive at having one's own St. George?

One answer to Bennett's question has relevance to today's scriptures. In this time of pandemic, we are hearing a lot of noise from a lot of "commanding selves," as *nafs al ammarah* is sometimes translated—our own Commanding Selves, and those of many others. One of the wisest things to do when one is surrounded by noise, when one feels that "all the waves and billows have gone over me," is to seek silence, and to listen.

- When Elijah sought God, he learned that the Lord was not in the wind nor the earthquake nor the fire. When the sound of sheer silence followed, then the sound of the voice of the Divine could be heard.
- The Psalmist listens in psalm 85, and hears God speaking peace to God's faithful people, and to those who turn their hearts to him.
- Paul promises that the Word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart. The understanding is that one takes the necessary time to be silent, and then to truly listen to the Word, as articulated in the Being of Jesus Christ.
- Jesus spends the day preaching and healing, and then dismisses the crowds and goes up the mountain to pray. Whenever he can, he seeks time alone to listen.

In the contemporary situation, people are listening to the ones with the loudest and most commanding voices, and not to the silence that today's scriptures make clear is necessary to hear the Divine.

If you wish, you can try an experiment for the time between now and next Sunday. Take time during the day to listen to the sound of sheer silence, rather than to the wrangling of competing ideologies on various media. Visualize St. George, keeping the dragon at bay. Visualize the once-commanding dragon, held captive. As long as the saint is watchful, the dragon is helpless. Visualize that the maiden is no longer threatened by the dragon, and so she may lead it on a silken thread. All of these images are contained within our own self, and all have their uses.

After you do your visualization, ask the Holy Spirit to be with you in the silence, sit quietly for five minutes, and see if there is a message for you in the unaccustomed sheer silence. If your mind wanders, remember the words, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Then return quietly to the silence.

We give too much time to the dragon. In the week to come, let us take some time to be quiet, and to allow the possibility of hearing a voice we need to hear, and allowing our saint to take the necessary action.

Peace be with you.

AMEN.