

It is quite rare that the magazine Der Spiegel and the Bible are in agreement. But at the beginning of July Der Spiegel carried the title: “Sei doch mal still” – just be quiet. The article describes the way in which the world as we know it has changed considerably in the last decade or so. Above all the rise of the smartphone.

An average teenager receives 3417 text messages a month – that’s about 8 an hour. 20 years ago if you were ringing your wife or she was ringing you 15 times a day you’d be advised to go into therapy. Nowadays this seems absolutely normal. And then there is the rise of nomophobia (the fear of being without your mobile phone – no mo!) – 66% of British people suffer from it according to the report in Der Spiegel. If you’re waiting for a train just look at the other people on the platform – or look at yourself. Large number of passengers have their smart phones out, as if they’d have a panic attack if they spent five or ten minutes doing nothing.

Another important aspect is that none of us can get away from the side effects of these changes. We’re becoming daily more transparent through the wealth of information stored in the internet. We get e-mails telling us which books we would like, which clothes we would wear and which gadgets would further enrich our lives. With every order you reveal more details about yourself. A certain company seems to know more about what I might want than I do. “Your smartphone knows more about you than you do yourself” claims the article. This line sounded somewhat familiar, and I was reminded of Psalm 139. A lot of what is attributed to God in the psalm fits just as well for our smartphones.

“O smartphone, you know when I sit and when I rise,
You perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
You are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my display, you know it completely, O text messenger.
Your knowledge is too wonderful for me, too much for me to attain.

Where can I go from your presence? If I rise on the wings of the dawn and settle on the far side of the sea, you are still there, for I am always available, your transmitters extend to the ends of the earth.

How vast is the sum of your thoughts. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.”

The similarities are almost frightening. In the 60s there was an uproar when someone said the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Now phones are taking the place of God, but it seems of little concern.

It should be obvious that all is not OK, as this radical change in communication has already got many casualties. The communications that we receive in ever greater rapidity make us feel we have to respond. E-Mails and text messages have to be answered, and every answer brings with lightning speed a new question. There is little time to sit and think or “Stand and stare” as a well-known poem has it.

Also the age of people suffering from burn-out symptoms is getting younger and younger. Just in the last few weeks I have heard three stories of young people from our circle of acquaintances who have suffered massive burn-outs, or attacks of depression as it used to be called. The author Tim Parks in his mid-thirties already suffered considerably from stress-related illness. Over a period of time the awareness dawned upon him that the answer lay in the simple sentence “Sit down and be quiet.” He looked not to the Christian but to the Buddhist tradition to find help, and wrote down his experiences in the book “Teach us to sit still.” And this is not just a problem for us as individuals – an increasing number of economists and politicians have the impression that we’re on the verge of a collective burn-out – that due to the ever-growing speed of communication it becomes more likely that not just our economic but also our network of communication is on the verge of collapse.

Now I am not recommending return to ‘good old days’ where everything was simpler. Modern technology in communication has brought massive advantages. The question is rather how does it affect our behavior or the life of the soul? Is it a healthy development or is it time to reflect and ask where we are going? (Not just phones, but computers and TV)

Der Spiegel has good advice: “Sei doch mal still.” Be quiet for a change - go on a digital diet. Regulate and reduce your use of communication technology. And the book of Lamentations has similar good advice – especially for young people: “It is good for a man to bear the yoke when he is young. Let him sit alone in silence.” If you have teenagers at home I don’t rate your chances very highly of being understood if you quote this verse at them. But we shall see there is a lot of wisdom in it.

The words of the Lamentations were written after a civilization had collapsed and the people of Israel had been taken into exile. Today these words are equally important to **prevent** us from experiencing a collapse.

Why sit alone in silence? The passage gives us three good reasons.

1) Silence opens the doors of our perception.

V23 “His compassions or mercies are new every morning”.

This is one of my favourite Bible verses, because it reminds me that life is not just a meaningless repetition in slightly different form of all that has gone before. It might seem like that when I’ve been working at the same office for the last twenty years, when I’ve been living with the same person for the last forty years!

If we take time each day to be silent (say for 15 minutes) it can open up a different perspective on everyday life. There are so many things to be thankful for, so many things we do not see because we busily rush by. One of the exercises in the Ignatian exercises can be of great practical help here. It is called a review of consciousness. We take a few minutes at the end of the day to be quiet and reflect on the various things we have experienced in the last fourteen hours or so. What did we have for breakfast, how did we feel going off to work, which conversations or encounters did we have? And the background to all these questions – was there a moment or two today when I felt something like joy? Was there a moment when I felt something like God’s presence near me?

You’ll be amazed. Once you’ve done this exercise a few days’ running, you begin to go into each new day with a different attitude, with much more awareness that God’s mercies really are new every morning.

2) Silence helps us to see the broader picture.

V26: “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

V31: “We are not cast off by the Lord forever.”

In the middle of a crisis situation it is very difficult to perceive anything else other than the misery of our suffering, the fear of what is going to come or the anger at what somebody has done to us. Our suffering is increased by the fact that we are blind to anything but our own situation.

Part of my work over the years has been counseling people in times of crisis. Free-church pastors in the midst of a conflict with their church elders, people experiencing the frustration and helplessness of bringing up teenagers, or indeed people suffering from burn-out. One of the great secrets of finding a path to healing lies in the ability – even if it’s only minimal – to step outside (perhaps with one foot) and begin to see that this is only a part of the story. Life goes on, there are other viewpoints, there are other areas of my life where things are OK. In five years I’ll be pastor of another church and the memories of this conflict will have long since faded. In ten years (or perhaps longer) my teenage children will have grown up to be responsible adults!

In the film “The best exotic marigold hotel” the lovable but chaotic young Indian who runs the hotel has a favourite maxim when things are not looking good. “Everything will be all right in the end. And if it’s not all right, then it’s not the end.” I find this is a very good modern translation of the biblical language “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

3) Silence helps us to see where we have gone wrong and can change our direction

V40 “Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.”

This is closely connected with the second point. When we have the ability for a short while to step outside the box we have built for ourselves, we start to notice more clearly the areas where things have gone wrong or got out of balance. It is like when you fast for a week and

as a result change your eating habits afterwards (at least for a few days!).

Silence sharpens our awareness. What routines have we got into in our lives? Are they helpful or have we got into a rut? How do we use our time, our money? With all my occupation with external things how is my inward life developing – the life of my soul which is so important to my wellbeing? Is there something in my life that needs to be changed?

The thing that needs to be changed might in fact be very small – like finding a few minutes each day to sit down and be quiet. And perhaps you'd like to start right now.

Time of silence.