



5 February 2012
Septuagesima
Choral Evensong
Job 2 vv. 7–13
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Inspiring Words: Christ through Literature Shusaku Endo: The Silence of Waiting and Hoping

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Last week there was an article in the Guardian online about the controversial American Opera about the life of the Jewish man Klinghoffer. It explores historic religious tensions and extremist religious views. The opera was first performed in 1991 and due to ensuing controversy, in particular in America, there have been few performances since and after several years this opera is coming to a theatre in London this month.

Also last week the story of persecuted Christians in northern Nigeria made the headlines once again, when over 300,000 gathered in a church to mourn the loss of lives due to religious persecution. There can be no doubt about the significance of religious conflicts in today's society, which is often aided by the build-up of historic religious tensions throughout the world.

Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel entitled, *Silence* is based upon real events and people. The story occurs in 1638, shortly after the Shimabara Rebellion led by Christian rebels in Nagasaki in Japan, which resulted in the tighter enforcement of anti-Christian laws.

The story revolves around Sebastian Rodrigues, a Jesuit priest. Hearing that a former mentor of his who is now a missionary in Japan has apostatized (that is, renounced his faith under torture), Rodrigues 'the priest' is sent to Japan to find out more about his mentor Ferreira, who has apostatized and to encourage the hidden Christians there.

The novel begins with Rodrigues and his companion, Francisco Garrpe, accepting their mission and preparing to sail to Japan. In preparations they encounter Kichijiro, who becomes a Judas-like figure for Rodrigues. Although their early days are met with some success, even in hiding from the authorities, events soon become disturbing as the government takes the lives of its own people to find out the whereabouts of the hidden missionaries.

Finally Rodrigues himself is captured and apostatizes to save the lives of the seemingly innocent Japanese peasants. Finally Rodrigues hears the voice of God, telling him to go ahead and apostatise, that it was to share humanity's pain that Jesus Christ endured the cross.

What stands out as the main theme in the book is God's Silence in the face of suffering.

Echoing the memorable word of Jesus on the cross, 'My God my God why hast thou forsaken me'

Endo uses pristine imagery of the surrounding environment, the vivid description of the senses and the psychological battles within the characters to demonstrate the pain that accompanies martyrdom particularly when God seems to be absent. Throughout the trials of hiding, running and ultimately imprisonment, Rodrigues battles with his faith and questions why God is silent in all the trouble.

Rodrigues says (and I quote in part) "There was the sea that swallowed them up, the sea... that stretched out endlessly with unchanging expressions. And like the sea, God was Silent. His silence continued". Rodrigues questions time and again why God has given unto Christians such a burden.

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Much like Endo's *Silence*, the book of Job highlights the struggle of the human spirit to understand and find meaning in the suffering of good innocent people. The struggle to understand suffering in this context is conveyed in the actions of Job's three friends. Although the three come to console Job (in his loss and pain and isolation from God), after their silence, simple logic leads them to conclude that Job's suffering is indicative of the measure of his sin and guilt in the eyes of God, while Job, argues that he knows of nothing evil in his life. Those few like Job, whose godliness was genuine, whose moral character was upright and who had kept from great sin, nonetheless were made to suffer bitterly and God who the sufferer would turn to in moments of need, himself becomes the overwhelming enigma. Job and Rodrigues are left to search out their faith, seemingly alone.

Yet in the book Job, there is the introduction of a third party. We see that the relationship between God and humans is not exclusive. Satan's all-consuming purpose is to drive an irremovable wedge between God and humans, to effect an alienation that cannot be reconciled. To persuade and drive home that mankind's greatest temptation is to love the 'gifts', rather than the 'giver', to try to please God merely for the sake of his benefits; or to be "religious" and "good" only because it pays.

In the end Job passes the supreme test, namely to live by the wisdom God gave him, even while acknowledging the limits of human wisdom, evident of course in the approach of his three friends. However Job's acceptance of it came only after the long night of suffering, tossing and turning and grappling with his own faith.

Endo, himself a Christian, wrote this story partially as a response to his own grappling with the religious discrimination that he endured. Raised a Catholic in Buddhist Japan, many of his written works reflect the experience of being one of a minority, an outsider. In his prose he explores the contrast between East and West and the difficulty, even near-impossibility of the two cultures existing harmoniously, both as a Christian in Japan and as a Japanese in Europe.

In the end Endo's goal is not to criticise the Christian missionary effort in Japan, but to present a Jesus whose love encompasses the persecuted, the unrighteous, the criminals, the outcasts and even the apostates. When Rodrigues asks the question "Why has our Lord imposed this torture and persecution on poor Japanese peasants", most of us can relate to feelings of compassion and inadequacy which fill Rodrigues' mind. Yet in response to his question as to the whereabouts of God's intervening hand, God in his wisdom has chosen to offer himself, and in so doing, suffering with the peasants.

This carefully constructed and deeply thoughtful novel has inspired many. It has won a number of prizes and there have been discussions about the adaptation of the book to film. The novel was also the inspiration for the third symphony, subtitled *Silence* by the Scottish composer James Macmillan in 2002.

At the heart of this beautifully written book with biblical themes and christocentric imagery pulsating right through it, there is a liberating story. This journey through *Silence* and waiting is an encouragement for us to grapple with the difficult questions that life exposes, to dare to question God in our suffering and in the suffering of others. *Silence* inspires the reader to embark on an honest, if turbulent journey with God, held in the knowledge that ultimately the promise of a life spent with God, prevails.

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As a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus we have new understanding before God, as expressed and Paul in Romans, says that as a result of this we have life, peace and Hope. We are reminded that through the rough and tumble of life we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. That even in the rough and tumble, moments of true joy are to be found. Rodrigues reflecting on his time in hiding and hardship says, “Things are going well... the feeling of joy and happiness suddenly filled my breast, the feeling that my life was of value and that it was accomplishing something”. There are within this novel, amidst the depictions of hardship, moments that inspire and moments that offer true joy, that ignite in its characters Gods peace and hope. The Jesuit priest, St Ignatius said, ‘He who has heard the word of God, can bear his Silence.

Amen