

# THE SOUND OF SILENCE<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh  
AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins  
on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity (Ninth Sunday after  
Pentecost), 21 July 2024**

Yesterday upon the stair  
I met a man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today  
Oh, how I wish he'd go away ... <sup>2</sup>

You will, I hope, forgive this way of introducing the concept of the invisible God.

The John Templeton Foundation<sup>3</sup> recently published two papers on the invisibility of God by Joshua Moritz<sup>4</sup> of the Graduate Theological Union in California.

Moritz's first paper<sup>5</sup> considers the frequent experience of believers that God is absent. He refers to the Psalms and Job with their complaints that God's face is hidden.<sup>6</sup> Saint Paul agrees.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing on the work of Karl Barth, Moritz argues that the very concept of God's hiddenness presupposes that God is also revealed in some other way. That is, the concept of hidden makes sense only when there is not hidden.

I trust that this is not too heavy a start to your Sunday morning, given the endurance required for the rest of today, let alone this week. That God is hidden, that we may not see the face of God, that God is silent, is a serious question; one that, for many people, leads to a loss of faith, not its confirmation.

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: 1 Kings 19: 8-12; Psalm 19; John 1:14-18

<sup>2</sup> William Hughes Mearns (1875-1965) *Antigonish*, 1899 [Antigonish \(poem\) - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Home - John Templeton Foundation](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Dr. Joshua M Moritz | Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences \(ctns.org\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Waiting on the Invisible God - John Templeton Foundation](#)

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 13:1, Job 13:24

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:7, Romans 11:13

Moritz deals with this issue by quoting Søren Kierkegaard:

Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe,<sup>8</sup>

Here Kierkegaard makes a fundamental distinction between *knowing* in the objective sense, like propositions in science, and *believing* in a subjective way that leads to a personal relationship.

In his second paper,<sup>9</sup> Moritz argues that the solution to the question of divine hiddenness is a personal relationship. That God is hidden is only a problem if we think that God is interested in us. If we thought God to be an ethereal watchmaker who made the world, wound it up and set it working, what does it matter that the maker is unseen? We just hope that the watch doesn't wind down.

Why am I discussing this question this morning? I was attracted to it because our new organ is to be dedicated in just over an hour and a half from now. That the prophet Elijah experienced God in the silence, that is, in God's apparent absence, became linked in my mind with a quotation from Arvo Pärt used by the Australian Chamber Orchestra in its advertising for an upcoming concert series.

The silence must be longer. The music is about the silence. The sounds are there to surround the silence.<sup>10</sup>

Pärt explains what he means in this way:

Silence for a composer is like a clean canvas for a painter or a clean white sheet of paper for a poet. *Tabula rasa*.

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<sup>8</sup> [Kierkegaard critiques the Objective Approach – Coffee with Kierkegaard \(home.blog\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Divine Hiddenness is an Interpersonal Problem - John Templeton Foundation](#)

<sup>10</sup> [https://scontent.fsyd7-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t39.30808-6/450353924\\_1006128780884732\\_4914617641237065199\\_n.jpg?\\_nc\\_cat=101&ccb=1-7&\\_nc\\_sid=127cfc&\\_nc\\_ohc=R\\_XVwccVpIEQ7kNvgHaJJjD&\\_nc\\_ht=scontent.fsyd7-1.fna&oh=00\\_AYcJ\\_S4S6BYcfDrMekkbWfQdO5m0K7yaJ5P9BHv4\\_fHSlw&oe=669549EA](https://scontent.fsyd7-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t39.30808-6/450353924_1006128780884732_4914617641237065199_n.jpg?_nc_cat=101&ccb=1-7&_nc_sid=127cfc&_nc_ohc=R_XVwccVpIEQ7kNvgHaJJjD&_nc_ht=scontent.fsyd7-1.fna&oh=00_AYcJ_S4S6BYcfDrMekkbWfQdO5m0K7yaJ5P9BHv4_fHSlw&oe=669549EA)

On the one hand, silence is like fertile soil, which, as it were, awaits our creative act, our seed. But on the other hand, silence must be approached with a feeling of awe.

And when we speak about silence, we must keep in mind that it has two different wings, so to speak – silence can be both that which is outside of us and that which is inside a person. The silence of our soul, which isn't even affected by external distractions, is actually more crucial but more difficult to achieve.<sup>11</sup>

In his commentary on Pärt, Paul Hillier says:

All music emerges from silence, to which sooner or later it must return. At its simplest we may conceive of music as the relationship between sounds and the silence that surrounds them. Yet silence is an imaginary state in which all sounds are absent, akin perhaps to the infinity of time and space that surrounds us. We cannot ever hear utter silence, nor can we fully imagine such concepts as infinity and eternity. When we create music, we express life. But the source of music is silence, which is the ground of our musical being, the fundamental note of life. ... how we make music depends on our relationship with silence.<sup>12</sup>

In response to a question, Pärt responded that music has brought him closer to God. It has “so much divine power and beauty ... whoever has ears, let them hear”.<sup>13</sup>

It may seem strange to us that the sounds we hear from our new organ, and from our choir are there to surround the silence, but just think for a few seconds. Elijah was surrounded by the “sheer silence” of God; he lived within it. Although we know where our music comes from, it seems to fill the space around us, as does the silence. We are surrounded by both the silence and the sound of our music; we live within them. In

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<sup>11</sup> [The Silence And Awe Of Arvo Pärt – Arvo Pärt Centre \(arvopart.ee\)](http://arvopart.ee)

<sup>12</sup> [Reflections on music and silence – Cantica sacra](#) and [Arvo Pärt: Magister Ludi on JSTOR](#)

<sup>13</sup> It is Pärt's use of silence that creates the most rapturous and chilling moments during live performances of his work, juxtaposing the thought of Eastern religion that regards silence as a mystical and spiritual tradition—a connection with oneself, the environment, and a higher power—and the Western anxiety that perceives silence as indicative of isolation, loneliness, and death. [Solace and Silence: The Music of Arvo Pärt - The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](#)

that sense we experience what Kierkegaard suggested. We are brought to belief because we find ourselves surrounded both by silence and by music. Or, as Simon Reynolds said, when commenting on Choral Evensong, we can find ourselves

immersed in the glory of the God who created us out of love to reflect that same glory.<sup>14</sup>

Yesterday upon the stair  
I met a man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today  
It's quite OK for him to stay ...

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<sup>14</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Lighten Our Darkness: Discovering and celebrating Choral Evensong*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd 2021, Chapter 1

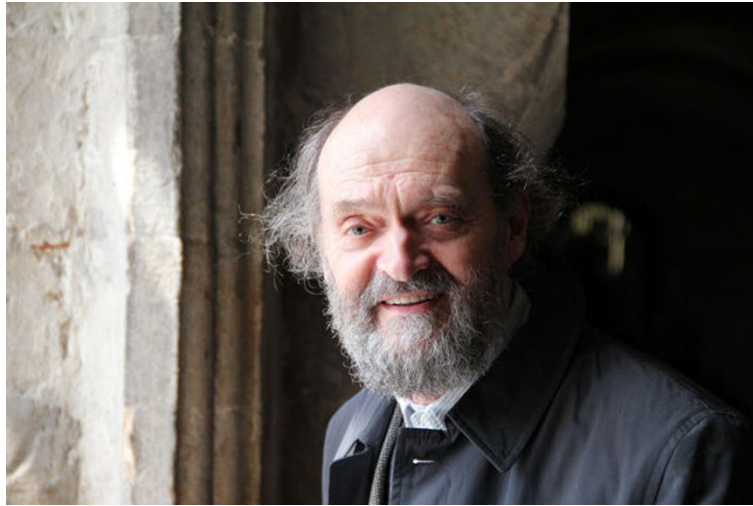


Elijah



Unfinished sketch of Kierkegaard by his cousin Niels Christian Kierkegaard, c. 1840





Arvo Pärt © Universal Edition/Eric Marinitsch

