

In the discussion group on Friday – the sessions of which are self-standing, so if you want to come along please don't think you've missed something – and you do have your own wisdom which will enrich the group's discussion and learning – we began by considering what it means to remember. Not surprising given that the chapter of Michael Marshall's book we were considering is entitled *A Night to Remember!* And that is the title of this address too, so I will start with some thoughts about what it means to remember.

In fact, for most of human history, remembering has been seen as being very much more than just recalling facts or the details of events. Before the availability of photography, and even more so before the spread of literacy, remembering was much more like 're – membering': a reconstruction of an event for people to experience and go through again – a re-living of something significant from the past which would have significance again, and maybe a new meaning, in the present.

It is this sort of 're-membering' that takes place in the eucharist, in Holy Communion, in the liturgies of Holy Week and indeed the rest of the Christian year, and it was the same sort of re-membering that Jesus had carried out together with his close friends immediately prior to the events of his passion, when they shared the Passover meal.

This sort of re-membering has one major difference from the common process of recalling something. When we recall something, the picture we have of it depends on our individual memory, which, as we know, can play tricks – and not just in old age. A memory can be altered by us, just as it can change our lives and our attitudes. A re-membering, however, involves something which stays

the same every time it is present for us; it may change us, but we cannot change it.

We can – as Michael Marshall does, and as we found ourselves doing on Friday evening – imagine what the main players in the passion narrative were like: what they felt; even what their faces were like at various points in the story. We can imagine what we might have felt or did; but it has happened, and we cannot change it. We are the ultimate in silent witnesses. Like the pathological evidence that forms the backbone of the series *Silent Witness* we have no power to alter the circumstances.

Which is why I am moved to spend part of this address returning to the theme of silence – so important in the history of the spiritual life, and so essential because in those parts of our spiritual and sacramental observance which entail re-membering, we can only do such a thing effectively if we have learned to be silent, to allow the people and the circumstances to speak for themselves without attempting to intervene and turn them into part of our story, rather than we being part of theirs.

I'm encouraged to do this at least in part because I took some time aside this week to go to Mount Saint Bernard, the only Cistercian community in England, in order to find some uninhibited space for prayer. The Cistercian tradition takes an austere reading of the Rule of Saint Benedict in order to remove from life as much as possible those things that inhibit the impulse to pray – to have at the forefront of our being the relationship God has with us. For this reason their church buildings and the whole monastic complex are designed to minimise distraction, to have a simple beauty. Ugliness which offends the eye is in itself a distraction, so the aim is to avoid fussiness and complex design while having an

elegance of line which draws us to the function and purpose of the structure, rather than the structure itself.

The silence which goes along with this, where the monks take seriously the requirement to speak only when it is necessary – this silence is also part of the constant creation of space where nothing else intrudes on the immediate presence of God in Christ, and where in work, study and formal prayer the monk's priority is that relationship.

Of course, there is an interior discipline that has to go along with this exterior environment. When we listened two years ago to various people's experience of engaging with the Rule of Saint Benedict, we learned of the stark reality that hell can be the other people we are compelled to share our divine quest with. To be musical and have a place in the choir seven times a day alongside someone who is tone-deaf; to have a sensitive nose and to have to work alongside someone whose personal hygiene is nothing special – these penances are a way of learning over a period of years, indeed a lifetime, how to switch oneself off from needless distractions, and how to focus on the one thing that is necessary.

*'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'* (Lk 10.41b-42)

It goes without saying that this is a difficult challenge to undertake, yet I have spent time in a Cistercian community and it is at least initially very easy to fall into the habit of only speaking when it is necessary. I guess the fact that I live alone is a help in that (though when I did this I was not alone: I was part of a community that probably talked too much!), yet it seems perfectly possible to be a silent witness if the need arises, to enter into that Night to Remember

uninhibited by other distractions, so that we can be fully open to the experience and allow it to change us for the better.

I mean something similar when I talk about uninhibited prayer. It is impossible to abandon oneself to the silence alongside so many demands on time and person. While I hope and pray that people can come into this church and find time and space where God encounters them, there are so many things for the Vicar to do here – and it is so very true that my presence here has to be entirely devoted to the needs of the people who use this space – that I need to find silence elsewhere. The things we do for others, and the relationships we have with others – Christ teaches us that these are important, indeed essential; yet he too is recorded as being in need of silence and space where he can simply be with his Father and allow himself to be changed by that eternal relationship.

I have also, over a number of years, been intrigued by an even more austere form of silent life – that of the Carthusians. Their monasteries, known in English as Charterhouses, are more elaborate in design, for they live as a community of hermits. Each has a self-sufficient house (and garden) where they live out a strict daily timetable of work, study and prayer, and on strictly-controlled occasions, they pray together as a community. Most of the time their food is brought to the cell for them to eat alone; on particular occasions they eat in community, and every week or so they have a community outing where they go beyond the walls, walking in pairs, which are rotated at regular intervals so that each gets to speak to the other at some point. I have been reading an account of the Charterhouse set up by Saint Bruno (the founder of the Carthusians) in Calabria in southern Italy, written by an American priest who got permission to

experience community life there for several months. His description of these limited opportunities for verbal communication is amusing as well as instructive:

Discussions range from the sublime to the mundane. This is when I get a chance to ask questions about various aspects of life here. Matteo and I discuss spirituality, Carthusian lore, and Church affairs, while Marco seems more interested in my ideas for pizza recipes. I am amazed at the breadth of subjects that come up. Last week at recreation some of the monks chatted about Bob Marley, about whom they obviously knew more than I did.

I'm telling that story for no other reason than to emphasise that people who seek the silence where God may encounter them are not freaks, and they remain as human and indeed as interesting as anyone else. There is plenty of room in God's house for people like the Cistercians, or the Carthusians, or indeed enclosed female orders like the Poor Clares and Carmelites, who can hold that silent space on behalf of the rest of us and also help us learn how to have a silent space in our own lives too.

In a world where if anything significant happens there is a queue of people on social media needing to say something, I am here to tell you that it's OK not to say anything. In a world where we are expected to have an opinion on everything, I am here to tell you that it's OK not to be sure what you think, let alone what to say about it. But I'm also here to tell you that if you don't have that space in your life where you don't matter and only God does, you're missing out on something quite essential.

In a few weeks we will come to Holy Week, and the solemn re-membering of the events recounted in John's gospel with eyewitness detail, and if we have learned

to be silent witnesses, to take part in that re-membering with complete disregard to our own thoughts or reactions, we will find that in ways we again will not be able to describe, that re-membering will have changed our lives – for good; and for good!

I'll conclude with a story from another encounter, related by a visitor to a Charterhouse in Spain, followed by a prayer about silence I wrote for one of the Holy Week talks in 2021.

A Carthusian cemetery is placed right at the centre of the complex of cells where the fathers and brothers live, to emphasise the continuity between this world and the next.

[The visitor] noticed a recently filled-in plot. His guide said, 'Oh yes, that was Father X. He died last week. He was in his late nineties, the oldest member of the community. He had not been feeling well, and the prior had taken him into town to see a doctor.' The doctor ran some tests and told the old monk, 'Father, there is no easy way to tell you this, but your entire body is riddled with cancer, and there is absolutely nothing that can be done.' Father X thanked the doctor, and the two monks drove home. As they came over a small hill, the whole monastery lay before them. Father X said, 'Isn't it *beautiful!*' His brother monk agreed: 'Yes, Father, it certainly is.' Then he turned to look at the older man and saw that he had just died.

Father X saw in the same moment of time that silent space where God had come to encounter him, and also the God he had encountered there, now face-to-face.

*Dear God, after the noise of the day I am here.*

*Dear God, in the confusion of sin I am here.*

*Dear God, in the barrenness of my life I am here.*

*Whether you speak in the echo or embrace me in the vastness of emptiness  
I am here.*

*Do with me what you will and teach me ever more  
to be here for you as you are here for me.*

*Amen.*

**PC, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2024**