

## **Moot Eucharist Homily | Presence by Gareth Powell**

Turn on the TV set and flick through the channels and no doubt you will find a talk TV show, Trisha, Jerry Springer and all the rest. As the show unfolds a whole raft of people will share some of their deepest secrets and desires, their hurts and feelings. Bobby left me for Alice, my husband beats me all day, my daughter hasn't spoken to me in 15 years, my dad isn't my dad but my uncle... I'm sure you could think of a few more too...

On the one level these shows point to a desire and need for many to be a celebrity, to have those 5 minutes on the TV screen, and the cult of celebrity is a powerful drive in today's society. However, there is also another side to the increase in the quantity of these programmes, and that is what I briefly want to talk about, and that is the question of being listened to and being able to listen.

When I scan through these talk TV shows I do see people who are desperate for their 5 minutes of fame, but I also see people who are desperate to be listened to, people who have many and various hurts but have no-one to share them with – or no one they think will really listen to them. Perhaps these programmes are cathartic – giving people a space to share and be heard. Perhaps these people leave with a deep sense of peace and joy having got something off their chest. But is this really the arena for this and is it really cathartic, is it really a healing space? Are these people really listened too or are they just entertainment?

It seems in society today there is a great desire to be heard, but whether in the political processes, or in the family home, a great many people do not feel listened to.

Perhaps you do not feel listened to, maybe you just feel that whenever you try to open up, or speak honestly about something you get the impression that the person or people you are trying to speak to are just waiting for you to finish so they can move on.

A current TV ad for Burger King shows a man about to launch into eating a big burger whilst his partner tries to share with him news about a possible career change and how it will affect their relationship. The ad ends with him suddenly realising she has said something important to him and that she was waiting for his reply. He blurts out 'terracotta' hoping that this stab in the dark might just prove to be right. It isn't.

I know in my life I can so easily not pay attention to what people are saying – a prime example is when I get home I usually jump straight onto my computer and it is at this time that Phillipa, quite reasonably, wants to share with me about her day. I of course pretend that it is quite possible to both listen to her and check my emails. And in one sense it is possible to do that, but am I really listening?

St Benedict, in the climax of his teaching about silence, says that 'the task of the disciple is to be silent and listen.' On the one hand, this is clearly about listening to God in the cell of our own heart or listening to the wisdom of the Abbot. But I think it could also be equally applied to our everyday relationships and encounters. To learn to be silent in our inner selves: that is to stop list making when someone is trying to speak, to stop thinking about how we are going to respond, or about where we have to go next, or about how we can sort out this problem quickly and move on.

To be silent in ourselves and to truly listen and be present to what the other person is saying is a hard task and one that requires discipline. The life of Jesus can offer us some insights. In the gospels Jesus often retreated to mountain tops or desert places in order to be still and quiet before God, and we heard earlier that before he started his ministry he retreated into the desert for 40 days to both be still and to wrestle with God and the devil. This established a pattern for his ministry, one of being present in the world and present to the world, where he knew how to stop and truly listen to people, but also one of withdrawal from the world to silent and still places.

The monastic tradition has a deep reverence for silence, and most monasteries have periods of silence each day. This silence has a threefold affect.

Firstly, it allows the monks to be attentive to God – for as they still the noises within themselves they can pay attention to the still small voice of God.

Secondly, the silence allows the monks to encounter their inner selves. Busyness and noise can often cover up how we are really feeling and where we are hurt, bitter or angry, being still and silent can allow these deep feelings to come out and express themselves. It can also offer an opportunity for us to be present to ourselves, to see ourselves for who we truly are. It especially allows us to see those bits of ourselves that we do not like, the sinful aspects of our character, using monastic language. And as these things come up we can offer them to God and pray that God might heal, renew and transform us.

Thirdly, in trying to create a stillness within ourselves we become better listeners to other people. Because we are still on the inside, we become stilled on the outside. I find that if I chat to someone who regularly spends time in silence they seem to really listen to me. They pause and wait for me to speak, they pause again, they don't rush a reply, and they seem present to me in that moment, they don't appear to want to rush away, and their eyes are focused on me not elsewhere. I remember chatting to a brother at Taizé over the course of a week when I was staying there. Even though he had many things to do, and many other people to see, each time I met with him he was attentive to me, and my story, and his replies were not quick and anecdotal but deep with meaning and appropriate for what I had shared.

Now I am not saying that if you are silent for 20 minutes each day you will suddenly become a saint, able to know who God truly is, who you truly are and able to attend to people's every need. But what I am trying to say is that to spend time in silence each day, will make you more aware of God, more aware of yourself, and slowly as you learn what it means to be still and attentive, it will make you more aware of others. But this is a life long journey, and cannot be achieved in just a few days, it takes patience and perseverance.

I truly believe that people of great wisdom do not just get that wisdom by reading many books or by just getting lots of qualifications, but by listening to God in the silence, and by listening to themselves, and by both knowing God and themselves can offer a listening heart and mind and perhaps wisdom to those who are searching.

The words of the desert fathers and other monks have echoed down through the centuries because they truly knew that which was important: to know and love God, to know and love yourself and to know and love your neighbour.

In a world that is aching to be heard our gift to others may not be answers but a quiet stillness, where we allow people to speak and truly be heard, and perhaps, as we journey with God and ourselves, offering wisdom that is life giving.