

# Giving a Talk on Merton

Mary Pearson

Over the years I have been asked to give several talks on Merton by a local retreat centre. I am only too pleased as I am always surprised by the number of people who have never heard of Merton, the usual question being 'Paul?' 'Er, no'.

The date is fixed usually a few months ahead but inexorably the weeks fly by and I suddenly realise that I am giving my talk in only a fortnight and what am I going to do? Part of me thinks that's fine, I'll

speak on such and such an aspect, i.e. Merton and his relationship with... the list is endless: other religions, nature, peace studies, even photography—now that would be a good one. It then dawns that by skimming off one aspect of the man the depth of his life is neglected.

Endeavouring to create order out of chaos I make a list, start at the beginning and catalogue his progress. This is all very well but it can have a sterility about it—however at least it provides a spine and a

sense of direction. The challenge is to place Merton in time and space and open the door to his genius.

The day dawns... the group assembles... a small select group... my mouth dries up. I realise that I am facing some who have never heard of Merton; a friend who has turned up who is an ex-Catholic and is 'the last person' you would expect to see there being indifferent to religion; another friend who is a Buddhist; a local teacher; one solitary person from the Merton Society and a few I have never seen before.

As I kick off I find that straight away I need to abandon my 'script'. It seems to have no life in it. So I wing it and all goes well, until I get to the bit about Merton leaving Cambridge for America and the circumstances surrounding that episode. My friend the Buddhist asks whether any provision was made for the child. 'Yes,' I reply, 'as far as we know.' However this does not satisfy. I can see the experience seems rather akin to the supposition that Merton only entered Gethsemani to escape the draft; he went to the States to escape the situation he had created. Only months later did a suitable response come to me, that it is thanks to the grace and mercy of God that we are saved. And also the memory of a talk at the closing Mass at the Merton Society some years ago, I think to do with Judas, that the speaker said: 'Imagine, if we are forever remembered by the worst thing we do.' However neither of these insights

manifest while I am facing the audience, so leaving the Buddhist behind I soldier on.

In short, there are several factors to consider if you are considering putting yourself on the line. You will certainly have a mixed audience and it is your challenge to integrate the learned and the novice. At the conclusion of my talk the teacher presented me with a book he had produced on Merton—'Now he tells me!' My friend was very moved by the introduction to Merton, telling me she found it very sad. My Buddhist friend had hit the off switch, but was complimentary saying, 'I was very brave.' Another lady eyed me saying thoughtfully, 'I've never been quite sure about Merton....' She did not conclude her statement.

Practical matters... do you give them a coffee break? Risky, but needs thinking about as it could provide a welcome pause for you or it could break the continuity. I recommend beginning and ending with a short silence. I read aloud the prayer of Merton. 'My Lord God, I do not know where I am going'. On reflection it always seems apt!

**Mary Pearson**, after a career in the prison service, is now a volunteer Tai Chi teacher. She has been reading Merton for many years.