

And Finally

When Jenny and I got married, we spent a year living in rented student accommodation and then, as soon as I got a job as a school teacher and we could afford to buy a home, we moved to the village of Comberton, where we still live, some six miles from Cambridge. We started to worship at the C of E village church, St Mary's, and soon got actively involved in parish life.

In those days I was fitter than I am now and used to go running several times a week. When Comberton decided to have a village fun run, I therefore entered. Such events require a surprising amount of organisation. In due course a route through and round the village was devised and marshals were assembled and trained to make sure that the runners kept to the route and didn't lose their way.

The weather on the day of the race was beautiful; I think it was a May Bank Holiday. Part of the course went through St Mary's churchyard. St Mary's sits a little outside the main part of the village and is approached by a mediaeval causeway, constructed of cobbles.

As I reached the top of the causeway and entered the churchyard itself, I happened to be in the lead. A woman, one of the marshals, was standing there and said, in a clear voice "Please don't run through the churchyard".

I ignored her and continued on my way as rapidly as I could. I never found out if she repeated her injunction to subsequent runners or was rendered speechless by my actions. In any event, I spent the rest of the run musing on what had happened and why.

For a start, I had never seen this woman before (nor have I ever seen her since). She was evidently not a worshipper at St Mary's and I didn't recognise her as someone who attended either the Baptist Chapel in the village, with whom we occasionally had joint services, or the Roman Catholic services that were then held, I think once a month, in St Mary's. Yet, whether she had a Christian faith or not, she clearly had a notion as to what was and was not appropriate behaviour in a churchyard. I think of Philip Larkin's *Church Going*: "Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence".

And what of my behaviour? I don't usually ignore people, perhaps particularly when they have given of their time to volunteer for something. What does the incident say of me? Was I too focused on the possibility of winning? "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Should I have stopped to discuss with her issues to do with sacred spaces and the presence of God in all places?

Some thirty years later, Comberton has not had another village fun run.

MICHAEL J REISS
President of the International Society for Science and Religion