

## An Island Retreat

by

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The Abbey Dore Merton Group gather about four times a year in the home of Tony and Christine Hemson overlooking the 13th century Cistercian Dore Abbey, in South Herefordshire. Under the guidance of Esther de Waal, who lives nearby, the group meets for days of silence and prayer, punctuated by a talk and tapes, devoted to the study of Thomas Merton. Each day ends with a walk over the fields for vespers in the choir of the abbey church.

In May 1998 the group became mobile. Eighteen of us crossed the sea from Tenby, in Pembrokeshire, for a three day retreat at the 20th century Cistercian Abbey on Caldey Island. Esther was our guide and inspiration.

As we landed the sun shone warmly from a blue sky inviting us to what seemed like an island paradise – a long empty beach of soft golden sand; trees the light green of early May; ducks and peacocks and bluebell woods; walks along cliffs and a lighthouse and the ruins of a 6th century priory; wild flowers and dry stone walls.

This was the setting in which our retreat unfolded; a setting hallowed by fourteen hundred years of monastic prayer. And it unfolded in silence – a silence which we kept each day from after Compline until after lunch, with one silent supper.

Silence was the theme of the first of Esther's meditations. She spoke of a silence which is deeper than the mere absence of noise, of the centrality of silence to the life of a Cistercian monk – the 'monos' or solitary. She asked us to "listen to the silence, to let it enfold us like a piece of music" and, quoting Ignatius of Antioch in the first century, of silence as the "murmur of living water within me saying 'Come to the Father.'"

Silence was maintained through lunch, each day, while Esther read about the lives of the early monks from Merton's History of the Cistercian Order.

Within this enfolding silence our retreat followed the framework of the Monastic Office in the Abbey Church. The, externally attractive, monastery buildings contained, for me, a disappointing interior. Uncomfortable benches in a shabby, green walled church spoke of a Cistercian poverty which I, at first, found depressing. Yet, as the white robed monks marked the times of day in their allotted places in choir, I was caught up in the rhythm, the rise and fall, of the psalms. And listening became prayer.

Listening, and especially listening to the psalms, was the theme of Esther's second meditation. She spoke of the importance of the psalms in the monastic rule and of the way in which they can become central to our own prayer life. Getting to know the psalms is like getting to know a friend, developing from first acquaintance to easy familiarity. They become like a mirror in which one can catch a glimpse of one's inner self at all levels, including the dark, the shadow side. The psalms were an essential part of Merton's Cistercian life. He wrote of:

Savouring and absorbing the meaning of the psalms in the depths of one's heart, repeating the words slowly, thoughtfully, prayerfully, in the deepest centre of one's being so that they gradually come to be as intimate and personal as one's own reflections and feelings. <sup>1</sup>

It is like planting a seed and nurturing its growth. Esther quoted a prayer/poem to Jesus - the True Gardener -

You who plant with the Word,  
Water with the Spirit  
And give increase with your power <sup>2</sup>

Many of us rose at 3 am and stumbled through the dark to join the monks for the 3-30 am Office. As the world sleeps, these men keep vigil for the world, praying with the psalms. We joined them again at 6-30 am for Lauds and Mass and, then, as each day of our visit progressed, some of us were there for Terce and Sext, for None and Vespers, and, finally, to complete the round, for Compline.

The 3 am rise had its own compensations. On the Saturday morning, we emerged from the church at 4-30 am to the light of a full moon. Three of us walked to the beach, and then along its full length towards the beginnings of the dawn in the Eastern sky. The sea, a shimmering silver from the moon in the West, was tinged with red from the first rays of the rising sun. It was a moment of pure magic. Pure magic experienced through total 'awareness', through 'seeing' rather than just looking. And it was an experience which prepared us for Esther's Sunday morning meditation.

She talked of an awareness of God through sight; of seeing and recognising without taking possession; the freshness in child-like eyes of wonder. A wonder evident in Merton's black and white photographs of simple, basic objects. Esther described Merton's often quoted 'conversion' experience with the Buddhas at Polonnaruwa -

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied, vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.<sup>3</sup>

She pointed to our need to find this inner clearness, this clarity, in our surroundings and suggested 'seeing' through slow, meditative 'awareness' walking. Using all five senses we can be aware of the light; the warmth of the sun; the touch of the air; the colours around us; the scent of growing things and of the earth itself. We can experience the texture of stone, twigs, leaves, held in the hand or felt beneath bare feet.

I 'saw' with this awareness as I meditated by the Guest House pond facing the bright morning sun; the calming sound of the waterfall; lily leaves floating on the surface; goldfish circling endlessly below; the feel of the breeze on my face.

We carried the silence and the awareness with us as we wandered over the island and felt the welcome and hospitality which seemed to be present in the very air. We found this hospitality especially in the Guest House and the excellent meals and the care of The Guest Master, Brother Senan, and his staff.

On the last afternoon the sunshine gave way to rain. Our Monday morning return crossing to Tenby, in an open boat, was wet and choppy. But we landed intact, refreshed and renewed.

Esther de Waal finishes her book, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, with words from Psalm 18 (19). In gratitude to her for pointing us towards these things, it seems fitting to use the same quotation to sum up our Island retreat.

The heavens proclaim the glory of God  
and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands.  
Day unto day takes up the story  
and night unto night makes known the message.

## Notes and References

1. *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* Page 53, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1960. quoted by Esther de Waal in *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* Page 16, published by Eagle (an imprint of IPS, Guildford, Surrey)
2. 'Jesus the True Gardener' by Guerric of Igny quoted by Esther de Waal in *The Way of Simplicity*, 1198, published by DLT, pp. 61/62.
3. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, NY 1968.

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