

Contemplative Pastor, Contemplative Church: Spirituality for a Dark Age

by
Melvyn Matthews

I am delighted to be asked to speak to members of the Thomas Merton Society on the 30th anniversary of his death, because without his example and influence, I would not be able to say the things I say either in these sort of talks, or in the pulpit of the parishes where I have been vicar, or in the pulpit of Wells Cathedral. I feel that the very existence of my ministry today and the books that I have written as part of that ministry, are in themselves a form of witness to Merton and his influence upon me. They are a form of thanksgiving to him personally. But also I do not wish to dishonour his memory by means of slavish imitation. Merton's views themselves changed and developed considerably during his lifetime. If he had lived, his views would have changed still more. So it's impossible to give a lecture on Merton without taking that development into account. And I think it would dishonour his spirit if I, or anybody else, said, "Well, this is exactly what he said, therefore follow it." So I want to speak of what this disciple believes he might well have wanted to say today if we know something of what he said then and something of the situation in which we find ourselves today. What would he be saying, what sort of things would he want to say now given the situation of the church in England as we draw towards the end of the second millennium?

I believe that there are two particular things he would have wanted to say – one practical and one theoretical. The first is that we must recover a contemplative church and a contemplative lifestyle. So I want to spend the first part of my talk saying how we might recover a contemplative church and a contemplative lifestyle for us in the church. The second is that I believe that the conditions are actually ripe at the moment for us to retrieve that contemplative approach, what I will call in shorthand the mystical tradition (though I will interpret that word mystical as we go along). I believe that the conditions at the moment are ripe and the necessity deeply pressing for that to be done and that when we do those two things, when we recover a contemplative church at this moment in time, then the

church will be a more honest place to be than it was, and the church will be a more evangelical place in the proper sense of that word, using that word in the sense of 'living the evangelical life whatever the consequences'. And then I want to conclude with one or two remarks about the relationship between ministry and mysticism and the necessity of mysticism for ministry today – and I mean ministry in the broadest sense of that term.

But before I start, a government health warning. I would not want you to go away with the impression that I am anything like what I describe in this talk. These are ideals. I happen to be a canon in a very busy cathedral, coping with the visitor ministry and, at the moment, with thousands, literally thousands, of people coming for Carol Services twice or three times every day. Yesterday we must have had, I think, probably two and a half thousand people through the cathedral, in one way or another, for different carol services including one thousand very stalwart WI ladies from every part of Somerset. This is fun but it's not contemplative. I'm also a human being and so just as divided as everybody else, as full of fantasies and dreams as everybody else and need the purification of the gospel like anybody else.

But first of all, two incidents from my ministry to illustrate what I want to say. In one of my parishes I had an insurance surveyor who travelled the South West advising large companies to insure their units, whether they were mines or factories or whatever. He was an extremely busy man, driving hundreds of miles every day. And he rang me one day and said "Let's do lunch". I thought in my professional way that he had a problem that he wanted to talk to me about. Not a bit of it – he thought I had a problem. As we sat sipping our beer he said, "Your trouble is that you're getting to be like me – far too busy. Somehow you must slow down. You ought to be in the position where, if I or somebody like me rings up in a crisis, you can offer me any one of two evenings in that week." Any parish priest here knows how impossible that is. Of course, I laughed but he was serious and had a point about the lifestyle of the parson or, in one sense, about the lifestyle of any of us.

The second story concerns somebody who is, or has been for some time, coming to me for spiritual advice. She is a psychotherapist and for a long time she was in therapy. During that time she had to

write, as part of her therapy, something about her experiences. And she has given me permission to quote from what she said. She says that her experience of therapy was with a Jungian-inclined therapist who was able to provide an empathic environment that included the use of the couch:

My experience of this period of my therapy was of lying for long periods in depressed silence and inarticulate silence during which I experienced my therapist as providing a holding and containing presence communicated to me not through interpretative interventions but by allowing herself to be felt and heard by me in the different rhythms of her breathing and the movement of her body conveyed through the creaking of her chair.

In other words, there was a silence between them. She goes on to say that:

... it was towards the end of my long, depressed silence in therapy that the surprising thought and desire came that I wanted to seek sacramental confession – the wish arising not from neurotic guilt but a recognition that what had happened should not have happened. It was the beginning of a reconciliation with a faith from which I had become traumatically estranged – a reconciliation that led to the development of a contemplative capacity, the reawakening of a sense of inner aliveness and a capacity to symbolise. It is in this re-connection with a sense of true self that I understand as enabling a capacity to be alone by which I mean not solely actual physical solitude but rather a capacity to become truly comfortable with the experience of “I am who I am” then this experience is one of the distinguishing experiences of a contemplative capacity. Contemplation, said Thomas Aquinas, is the simple enjoyment of the truth.

She rediscovered through the contemplative presence of her therapist, a contemplative capacity within herself which returned her to holy church. I was privileged enough to be the person who heard her confession and she is now fully established within the Church and thinking about the priesthood.

And so my thesis is that this capacity to be the contemplative presence is what my overworked insurance surveyor needed, what my spiritual director needed and discovered and it is precisely this that the

Church in its present frame of mind, with its emphasis on mission, management and marketing, finds it difficult to represent. I think that it is difficult because there are a number of factors at work which collude together to produce the present impossible situation. The first is our ego-selves. Our ego-selves drive all of us within the Church to achieve and be noticed. We are all, to some extent, ego-driven. This is reinforced by the demands of the people around us, the communities of which we are a part who expect us, not just priests but each one of us in one sense or another, to be there, to chair meetings, to provide all sorts of ministerial functions within the whole of the Church, schemes for pastoral care etc. etc. These forces mean that the ego-demands of each one of us and the requirements of the congregation and the communities to which we belong reinforce each other in a very powerful way so that our individuality, our true selves, as Merton would have called them, disappear and we are replaced by something which the Church creates so that we all become ‘cardboard cut-out’ Christians in one sense or another. The people who had originally heard the call to be disciples – or whatever it was that we heard – are in some way submerged by the ongoing life of the Church which colludes with our own ego-demands to be noticed.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, there is a third force now at work particularly in the Church of England called “The Decade of Evangelism”, or “The Diocesan Programme” or “The Diocesan Initiative” – whichever diocese you are in, it’s bound to have one. I think that Salisbury’s is called “The Vision”. Ours in Bath and Wells is called “Go for God”. And these only add further requirements to our existence which then cause us to disappear entirely because we are somewhere submerged, hidden within these particular programmes. What I believe we need is a strategy for the recovery of the reality of Christians, the inner contemplative persons who are hidden away somewhere within that morass of competing forces, bearing in mind Thomas Aquinas’ statement that contemplation is the simple enjoyment of the truth which means the truth about ourselves, not about our ego-selves as much as the truth about the universe. So I want to lay down some items on a programme for the recovery of the contemplative person. These are not in any particular order and they all link in one to another.

The first item in the programme for the recovery of the contemplative person is the refusal of definitions and roles. I was reminded as I thought about this of the way in which Merton so often refused definitions and roles and did not want to be the abbot or any other thing. In my smaller parish in my last incarnation I was known to many of the older people as 'the parson' and they would say "Parson said" or whatever. They wouldn't refer to me as vicar or even as Melvyn, quite simply as 'parson'. After an initial surprise I came to like this. I felt that it was a term which defied definition. Everybody else had a role – he or she was an accountant, a butcher, a schoolteacher, but I was nothing. I was the one without any specific, professional role because I was quite simply the person in that place. And in one sense the priest represents what the whole community of the Church should be, that it should be persons. The problem is that the culture of the day finds persons without roles or definitions quite difficult to accept.

This is particularly well picked up by Christopher Moody in his book, *Eccentric Ministry*.¹ He's talking in particular about the role of the priest but I think, myself, that this applies to all of us. He says that in the Church, in the priest's ministry, in practice those sorts of encounter which are by their nature fleeting and obscure are undervalued and neglected in favour of those over which we have most control. This is the result of over-professional development and it restricts pastoral activity to a narrower and narrower field in a society where more and more contacts are actually of a transitory nature. He goes on to say, later in that chapter, that he feels that we need to discard many of the notions about professional pastoral ministry which have helped to imprison this activity within Church congregations – what I was talking about earlier, the same syndrome. We need to reach back to a different understanding of it as something authenticated on the basis of shared faith rather than on claims to a particular professional competence and status. Now that is heresy in many circles and it's worth remembering. So first of all, we need to refuse definitions and roles.

This is further picked up in *The Contemplative Pastor*, a book by an American pastor called Eugene Peterson. In it he says that the busy pastor – well, he calls it a heresy because the busy pastor is usually busy for two reasons: one because he is vain and cannot refuse

any invitation by anybody to do anything or secondly because he is lazy and cannot order his diary in such a way that he has space for himself or his family. In any case either reason is a bad reason and he points out that the pastor who really inspires people is somebody who finds interior silence at the root of his being. "All speech that moves men and women was minted when some man's mind was poised and still."² And for any of us in the Church, whether we are pastors or not, those moments when our minds are poised and still, are usually very few because all of us have accepted a culture which requires us to be continually active and doing.

Secondly, I think that the Church needs to recover the monastic spirit of place. The Rule of St Benedict and the vows which a Benedictine monk takes are different from the vows which are taken by a Franciscan or a Dominican. The Benedictine makes a vow of conversion of manners and a vow of *stabilitas*. The vow of stability dedicates him to be in that place with that community and in one of my little books, I make the point that Anglican parish life actually owes more to the rule of St Benedict with its emphasis upon place than to the Franciscan way with its emphasis upon movement and availability. What we have seen I believe, over recent years, is a loss of confidence in the Church of England in that Benedictine spirit and the importance of place – being actually there where you are. We have to remember that the Benedictine spirit is the one to which we owe allegiance. We are witnesses, or should be, rather than missionaries. We are witnesses to what is present in our lives and we are not sent to discover something in another place which we think might be there or ought to be there. By maintaining a witness to the importance of place, we witness to people something of the abiding love of God where we are with the people who we have to sit next to even if they are not people we can particularly warm to in the first place rather than always thinking that the love of God exists more fully somewhere else. Chaucer's *Poure Persoun of a Toun*, of course, is the supreme example of this and this is a tradition which goes through English spirituality right from Chaucer through Herbert into the present day.

Chaucer's poor parson did not flee to a brotherhood in London or a chantry somewhere else where he might have some gracious, comfortable life doing what he thought was really spiritual but actually lived with the people that he had. This, of course, is one

of the refrains in Merton's own life where there was a constant tension between loving the people he had been given to love, including the abbot, and his desire to become a monk somewhere else. And he was somebody who knew in the end that the spirit of place was essential whatever the struggle.

The third item in this programme for the recovery of the contemplative life in the Church is the recovery of wonder and delight as primary categories of living. Delight and wonder come first and it is within that primary sense of wonder and delight that Christian doctrine should be framed. Christian doctrines are not intellectual concepts in the first place. They set themselves within the wonder and delight which we have in God and he in us. The doctrine of the Trinity is a detailed expression of our wonder and delight at the nature and being of God. Without that, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a sterile argument about the attempt to reconcile three and one. Without that deep sense of wonder the being of Christ becomes nothing more than an argument about squaring manhood with Godhead. Within the context of wonder and delight which we have in Christ then that doctrine becomes a reality, a deeper and more profound reality. Without a sense of wonder and delight, faithfulness becomes a work, prayer becomes a duty, and we convey very little to those to whom we minister.

I believe, too, that we have spent far too much time in the Church up until now talking about commitment to God and the committed action which springs from that rather than about the beauty and delight which we may have in God and he has in us. The consequences are that we now tend to wear ourselves out if we are not careful in pursuit of the true activity of God and we see the will as being the primary means for knowing or being like God – what we can actually do. We are all secret voluntarists. But God is better described as absolute beauty and our primary means of knowing God is wonder or desire. There is an indication that wonder and beauty are returning more to centre stage of the theological scene. Hans Urs von Balthazar and now Patrick Sherry and the Bishop of Oxford in this country and then Michael Mayne in his retirement after being Dean of Westminster are a number of the figures at the forefront of a recovery of theological categories of beauty as a means of understanding God rather than 'commitment'. But it is hard work because we all believe

we have to choose and do things rather than simply attend. In practice people attend more than religious leaders give them credit for and this is more important to them than we recognise. Abraham Heschel, the Jewish mystic, says,

We do not have to discover the world of faith, we only have to recover it. It is not a terra incognita, an unknown land. It is a forgotten land and our relationship to God is like a palimpsest, a medieval manuscript which has faded and has been overwritten with the writing of modernity.³

As part of the programme of the recovery of wonder, I would recommend to you Michael Mayne's book *This Sunrise of Wonder*⁴ where he describes a number of triggers whereby we might recover the place of wonder and delight in our lives. As a subset of this I believe that we also have to recover a deep sense of the beauty of creation and the beauty of ourselves.

In turn this will lead to the fifth item on my programme of recovery for the contemplative life, which is the recovery of the capacity to pray. I believe that prayer is not something which we do but is something which is being done within us and within the whole creation by God which we can either allow or turn away from. Prayer is a constant inner music which is playing within us and within the created order from which we have become disconnected. We need to rediscover this music and allow it to be played within us. There is within each one of us a space where this music can be heard, a silence within which it is played.

Then I believe that we need to recover, as part of the programme for the recovery of the contemplative life, a negative capability. This phrase comes from Keats. In one of his letters, he describes negative capability as being "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁵ And he criticises Coleridge for being unable to be content with imagery caught from the penetralium of mystery because he was incapable of being content with half-knowledge. Our age and Coleridge are very similar – we are unable to be content with uncertainty, we do not have a large negative capability. I want to say more of this later but it is that which much contemporary theology lacks and because of that honest men and women who are not in the Church are repelled from the Church because they know instinctively

something of the truth of what Keats spoke of but they see that in the Church we have abandoned that quest almost entirely.

Lastly, I believe that we need to recover an approach to Scripture where Scripture is regarded as a text or the text of which we are a part. Rather than continuing to treat Scripture as an objective reality or a record of objective history somewhere in the past, we must see something of the mystical and symbolic nature of Scripture, and we must see ourselves as part of an ongoing narrative. We need to recover our sense of this if we are to be a truly contemplative church and I commend to you the work of Gerard Loughlin. His book is called *Telling God's Story, Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*. And in this, he says: "We must stress that baptism is entry into the story of Christ as the story of the Church. As the people who are learning to grow in the strength and shape of Christ, who are learning to live in the world as people who are not of the world, who are learning to speak a new language, the tongue of Pentecost." ⁶ And he goes on, "Salvation thus is no more and no less than entry into the narrative space of the Church. It is beginning to speak a new language in the company of those who are called to be friends by one who does not desert his friends even though they desert him."

All of those items on a programme of recovery for a contemplative church will involve us in a *Via Negativa* or a stripping but eventually we will discover what St Teresa calls the room with no door and enter into that room and so be able to live through and over against death. Four particular comments and questions about this programme of recovery . . . firstly, this programme of recovery does away with the concept of the objective observer. We are not the objective observer over against the life of the Church, we are part of it and we must let go of our ego-selves which say I can observe the Scripture, I can tell you what Christian doctrine is, I can tell you what the Church is. We must relinquish the objective observer of the Enlightenment. Secondly, this is essentially a monastic spirituality. The monastic tradition should preserve something of the subversive characteristics of contemplative living within the Church. Thirdly, I believe that the parish is the monastery now. If you look for a place where the school of the Lord's service will be, it is within the parish where you are called to live with the brothers and sisters that God has given you. Every parish priest, I believe, should read the Rule of St.

Benedict regularly to his congregation. Then lastly I believe that this is true evangelism. If you want to talk about evangelism then being like this is true evangelism but we have unfortunately sold this heritage for a mess of pottage in the present age.

I will now make one or two comments about why I think it is possible intellectually and spiritually to recover this contemplative stance in the Church along with those particular notes which I have outlined - those notes of loss of identity, being part of the narrative of the Church and so on which I explained to you - why it is possible to retrieve that now while the doors are opening for us, or reopening for us. If you look around at the Church today, it seems as though we have lost the capacity to speak of God in these negative, contemplative terms. Our church language is full of "the presence of Christ" "the light of Christ" "the reality of Christ to me" etc etc etc. I think that we need to move beyond that. When I was working in Bristol as a university chaplain, I was speaking with some students one evening about the experience of the absence of God and I mentioned the dark night poetry of St. John of the Cross. The student that I was talking to had never heard of what I was talking about and found it alien and difficult. She said that Jesus was her friend or words to that effect and was present and what she said I was talking about was not Christianity. The same was true the other day when I was talking about prayer within the diocese of Bath and Wells. I talked one moment about the contemplative life or the mystical life and several people found that what I said was difficult - because surely the light of Christ was always with us.

The question comes to my mind - well, what has happened to our theology of darkness, has it disappeared? I think that in one sense it does appear to have disappeared. If it's gone anywhere, it appears to have been put into non-church based spiritualities. A number of our contemporary poets are far more aware of the contemplative existence and negative capability and the possibility of speaking about God in negative terms than the Church is. You've only got to read the later poetry of R.S. Thomas to know that he is a poet who finds it within his poetic life. You've only got to read the poetry of Rilke or Paul Celan from the German tradition to know that other poets have found it. This is also true, to a certain extent, of the poetry of Elizabeth Jennings. Poets find this sort of language appropriate.

Church people do not. The psychotherapy movement finds the language of absence or darkness appropriate. The Church does not. Some would say that the Church has, indeed, still does associate itself with affirmations of light and truth, what people call the grand narrative of light and truth which has been imposed upon culture and people by a male-oriented church throughout the ages and has forced this negative, contemplative tradition to go underground. I actually think that there is a lot of truth in this and that the alliance between the Church and State which began with Constantine, reinforced by the alliance between theology and rationalism during the Enlightenment has only reinforced the grand narrative of light and truth imposed by male thinkers upon the Church more strongly. And some would say that we ought to rejoice that all this is now gradually coming to an end – that the grand narrative is disappearing. Don Cupitt has written some very interesting things – in the end, I think, wrong things – but interesting things about the possibilities of re-discovering the mystical way in a post-modern age.⁷

What I want to say is this. The principle reason why there is a paucity of mystical language about God has been not because God is unreal but precisely because God is so real and so enormous and so much God that we find ourselves afraid or unable to use language about him properly. The paucity of mystical language in the present-day church is because we do not take the reality of God seriously enough. In fact we treat him so casually in our modernised, sanitised, quick, light-based church that he becomes a reality very much like any other reality and so we talk about God as if God were simply another thing in existence. In other words, the paucity of mystical language in the Church is nothing to do with modernism or post-modernism. It is to do with the reductionist view of God brought upon us by our assimilation to various forms of rationalism. Lack of mystical language is a sign that we have no problem with talking about God. But we should have a problem in talking about God. If we don't have a problem in talking about God, then we don't believe in God ... in my view. We do not take the unreality of God seriously enough to force us into mystical language. In other words, we are in the Church living with a reductionist view. Trivialised language is the product of the trivialisation of God of which we are guilty.

And so my sympathies are entirely with the enthusiasts, the enthusiasts who find that they have to use metaphor upon metaphor upon metaphor upon metaphor like Bernard of Clairvaux or like Annie Dillard or like Thomas Traherne or, let us say, the cataphatic mystical tradition, the positive, affirmative mystical tradition of which in many ways Merton is also a protagonist or we have to have sympathy with those who can not use any language at all because they believe that all language is totally inadequate. Both are right. What we need is more of a recognition of the total inadequacy of language when it comes to talking about God and therefore a recognition that you have to be a total enthusiast and either use every metaphor that you can possibly lay your hands upon including, if you're Bernard of Clairvaux, 'kissing' which, in our terms, means sex, or you have to be an enthusiast for using no language at all. I believe that there is a deep correspondence between those who can not stop talking about God and those who are forced to stop talking about God because they cannot find any language which is adequate. So in that sense 'darkness and light are both alike to thee' (Ps. 139.11).

Merton, I think, is a protagonist of both ways. He is both a cataphatic mystic in the sense that he has to find poetry – he goes on writing, he cannot stop writing, and one of the great things about Merton is that there seems to be some enormous explosion of metaphors – constant, constant metaphor. How many diaries? All the diaries overlap. He writes one diary then writes another one about the same thing, then writes another journal about that – he goes on and on, piling metaphor upon metaphor to talk about his experience of God. Or else suddenly, he stops and says nothing. Bill Shannon's book upon the mystical way in Merton is indicative of that.⁸

Denys Turner, who is now the Professor of Theology at Birmingham University, has written a book about this where he talks about the parallels between the positive mysticism of Bernard and the negative mysticism of Eckhart and says that really in one sense they are both the same. And I would commend to you very warmly his book *The Darkness of God* in which he starts from that, because he says, "Thomas Aquinas made it very clear that in the end we do not know what kind of being God is." And because we do not know, because there is an unknowability about God, we either have to use every metaphor that is to hand or no metaphors at all. I think that it

is a lack of recognition of that theological insight which impoverishes the Church in our present day. But there is the chance that we can recover that and just let me give one or two reasons why that might be the case.

There has been a certain amount of recent research into the mystical tradition, which Merton would have known about and approved of if he had lived, which shows that mysticism is nothing to do with experience. It is not 'an experience' in the same sense that other things are an experience. Just let me run through one or two examples of this research. Grace Jantzen, who wrote a great book about Julian of Norwich some years ago, has just produced a new book called *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*.¹⁰ She says that our understanding of mysticism in the present age has been wrongly influenced by William James who portrays mysticism as a series of ineffable experiences which cannot easily be spoken about but which are there. James had taken seriously the Enlightenment conviction that reason could prove everything therefore reason had disproved religion therefore what can prove religion? Well, experience or experiences can prove religion. If you look at the mystical tradition, you will find it full of mystical experiences and an examination of these mystical experiences will bring us back to the truth of religion. This is the only way left for rational people in the modern age – to talk about experiences.

Grace Jantzen points out that if you read the mystics themselves what they are talking about is not that sort of experience. They are talking about something quite other. It is not a psychological experience to be a mystic. Denys Turner does exactly the same thing in his book where he says that what the mystics were writing about was not experiences of a psychological kind. In fact, those categories of interpreting mysticism were nothing to do with them, they are to do with us, as modern people. Because most of us think that mysticism is something like the experience which the Beat Generation discovered, that mysticism is something which can be produced or induced in the believer by certain techniques such as breathing hard or having a lot of sex or not having a lot of sex, or drugs or some ascetical practices and then you are united with God in some experience or other. What Denys Turner says is that the mystics themselves when they wrote were not writing about anything

like that at all. Experientialism is something which is modern. They were not experientialists in that sense. In actual fact if you look at the work of Eckhart you can see that he was really criticising the flowering of experientialism in his age amongst the Beguine mystics, the women by whom he was surrounded. He was saying, "Look here, don't go in for these special experiences. Mysticism, awareness of God, is something which flourishes in everybody at every moment. It is not something which only comes about at particular times, in particular places, if you've proved that you can do particular spiritual exercises in a particular way."

This research of Jantzen and Turner and others - Mark Macintosh is another one in America - is showing that the contemplative or the mystical experience is something which is open to everybody. It is not the province of particular people who have particular experiences in particular places but that it is the common experience of the whole church if only we could reopen our selves to it. That God is present to everybody at the deepest levels of consciousness, at the deepest levels of being and that what we all have to do is open ourselves to that possibility. Rowan Williams, the Bishop of Monmouth, is another person who has done some research in this line. In his book on St. Teresa of Avila he says: "Teresa makes it very clear that the criteria of authenticity [of mysticism] do not lie in the character of the experience itself but in how it is related to a pattern of concrete behaviour, the development of dispositions and decisions. There is no one kind of experience that declares itself at once to be an experience of God."¹¹ This research, I believe, gives us the opportunity to say that the contemplative or the mystical life is something which is available within the Church to all who are in the Church. It is present for all of us and it opens a doorway for all of us to recover that in our present age.

Lastly, I want to make one or two comments about the relationship of that to our lives – what does that really mean? How does that cash out? I believe that the rediscovery of the contemplative or mystical tradition will mean firstly that God will be seen as the source of being and not as an object of belief. God is not an object that we say exists in the same way that Ian Thomson exists or the creation exists. God and the creation do not make two. God's being is totally other. God is the source of being. God is not an 'object' of

belief. The second result will be that we become known and not the knower. This comes back to my remarks earlier about the abolition of the objective knowing self. That is why the use of sexual imagery, words such as ravishment, are particularly important within the contemplative and mystical tradition – words which Merton knew the truth of. We become the known and not the knower. Thirdly, joy and freedom result. Joy and freedom for the self. Freedom to act for others. And so the person who is known by God is free therefore to be for and with others and is joyfully able to be free for and with others and particularly for and with others who are marginalised, poor, victims and all the rest of it.

This means that the contemplative person will become a liminal witness. There's a lot of talk in America [at present] about liminal theology. *Limen* is Latin for 'threshold' or 'edge' and I believe that the contemplative person is somebody who always stands on the edge with those who are on the edge, who is able to stand and identify with those who are on the edges of society because they have a deeper freedom within themselves and do not find their authenticity or their identity given them by the establishment to which they belong. In other words, they are free within and therefore can stand on the edge of things. And so the contemplative person will become a liminal witness able to be on the edges with the unemployed and the sick. Hermits are liminal people. Merton was a liminal person in the hermitage [at Gethsemani]. Parish priests, I believe, are liminal people because they are on the edge of established society. I believe, therefore, that we are called at the moment and have the intellectual opportunity to be hermits of the spirit and to rediscover a dark night of the soul for the modern age in the spirit of Thomas Merton.

The spiritual life is essentially a hidden matter. It is occasionally visible but it belongs properly underground, a river deep within the rock of our lives coursing along in the dark. A hidden music. A call sign secreted into the rich and abundant scoring of the great opera of life, a tune which occasionally bursts to the surface and makes its presence known. This spiritual life is secret because it is of God. God is not seen except by his effects. He can not be known entire. He is not experienced neat. He cannot be seen entire or all at once because he is God. To experience him neat would mean our annihilation. He simply is. And we resist this because we want to name

him or to manage him or control him. But in matters of the spirit this is not possible. And that means that our language about God and our talk about God is inherently problematical and must remain so. And we must be content with that. And the fault of the current church is that it doesn't actually see that it is doing another thing. God is what is going on. We are part of that which is going on. He it is who constantly makes and then re-makes what is going on and we are that which is made and needs to be re-made. He constantly goes before us, only showing us his retreating existence and calling us to follow. He it is who constantly redeems that which we have left undone or broken. As Paul Celan says in one of his poems:

Once
I heard him
he was washing the world
unseen, nightlong
real.¹²

[This paper was transcribed from a tape recording of a lecture given in St Andrews Church, Chippenham on December 10th 1998 to mark the 30th anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton]

Notes and References

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2. Eugene H Peterson: *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, W.B.Eerdman, 1993, p. 21
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