

Contemplative Prayer A Commentary

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Merton's prolific output, with some sixty books currently in print, can be off-putting. Surely he can't have had time to do more than scratch the surface? He can seem a jack of all trades, and master of none, compromised by his sheer range of interests. I have read him off and on for most of my life, different aspects appealing more or less at different times. Here I want to explore a little of his writing about prayer and say why he seems to me a sure guide who performs the essential service of a spiritual writer of recasting traditional wisdom (there is nothing wholly new, after all) in a contemporary idiom: nothing fashionable or self-consciously modern, simply a language clear, pure and direct. He is unembarrassed in talking about loving God, and especially lucid on how to keep on loving when the well dries up. He is at home with the vocabulary which characterises our troubled century: "affliction", "despair", "the void" and "nothingness" are all confronted.

The book I want to concentrate on has been a friend and companion since I picked it off a bookshop shelf as a student. It is called *Contemplative Prayer*. I remember being attracted by its brevity (144 pages), the clear print, its neat, pocket size. At the time I wanted to understand more about prayer, and my own experience of it. The clincher was the absence of a publisher's blurb on the back. Instead of glowing platitudes there was a paragraph from the book itself, talking of alienation and self-questioning, the ultimate meaning of our life. This was meat and drink to my twenty year old self. As Merton says, 'our external, everyday self is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication. It is not our true self.' (*Contemplative Prayer*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973, p.87) I was acutely aware of that at the time. I clearly remember the attraction of someone being able to actually bring that vivid and messy area into relationship with what then seemed the esoteric, other worldly, but fascinating experience of prayer. It is a book I have gone back to time and again, and found another layer in it to nourish me, gradually coming to realise in my

heart as well as in my head that the two strands – the mess of life and the love of God – go together, the one penetrated by the other.

Reading it again recently, I get the sense of a sureness of touch, and Merton's hard-won personal experience at the book's heart. Indeed it is one of the last things he completed and was only published after his death. It stands in contrast to Merton's more rhetorical early writings such as *Seeds of Contemplation*. It is a mature, disillusioned book. In some ways it fleshes out for us the classic Merton prayer which is lifted from *Thoughts in Solitude* and runs:

MY LORD GOD, I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE I AM GOING. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

(*Thoughts in Solitude*, Burns & Oates 1958, p.70)

Contemplative Prayer is a kind of longhand commentary on, and detailed application of, that prayer. It is a quiet, tender, but unflinching, exploration of human emptiness; an anatomy of what the cloud of unknowing looks and feels like from the inside, how to cope with the shadow of death. It offers a measure of comfort and reassurance that the bleaker end of human experience has its own obscure meaning and purpose. There is nothing trite or glib or pious here. It is not designed to make you feel better about yourself. There is no attempt to minimise or spiritualise the anguish of life. But for me, time and again, it has spoken to my experience, setting it in a context I could understand, feeding my limited courage and faith.

The book has a strong existential dimension which I felt at home with. As a teenager I had been immersed in Camus, admiring his

integrity and humanity; his ability to combine goal-keeping and literature; his role in the Resistance; his affirmation of life and sunshine; his courage in declining the comfort of belief; his stand against the death penalty; his revolt against whatever is shallow and cruel. I was challenged by his agnosticism: I had been touched profoundly by God at moments in my life, but I had difficulty reconciling the attraction of the Gospel and the person of Christ with the seam of demoralising, distressing experience that is one part of life. I felt the need to find God in that bleak but inspiring moment that Camus paints so vividly and succinctly in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.....What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening.....

(*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin 1975, p.19)

Brian Masters gives a useful gloss on this which chimes with Merton's starting point:

Most people have experienced at some time or other the sense of weariness with the pantomime which Camus describes, and many find the shock so unnerving that they close their eyes to it, and sink back into the routine which will end in death. With the moment of awareness comes a sense of exile, a feeling of being a stranger in a world suddenly deprived of its familiar sense.....

(*Camus*, Heinemann 1974, p.37)

Merton has the ability in *Contemplative Prayer* to incorporate that existential recoil from things as they are. He doesn't deny it or suppress it as 'unchristian' but baptises it, showing clearly and calmly that it is not only 'all right' to feel what he calls a certain existential 'dread' - 'a sense of insecurity, of lostness, of exile, of sin. A sense that one has somehow been untrue not so much to abstract moral or social norms, but to one's own inmost truth.' (CP, p.26)

Merton's identification and description of this 'dread', and his positive interpretation of its meaning and significance, lie at the heart of the book. In fact he portrays this dread as a healthy Christian emotion, a sign of growing maturity, rather than a cause for despair.

... a direct confrontation of our nothingness is demanded. Instead of a stoical acceptance of "providential" decrees and events, and other manifestations of "law" in the cosmos, we should let ourselves be brought naked and defenceless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness, without explanation, without theories, completely dependent on his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy and the light of faith. . .
(CP, p.85)

He fosters the courage in the reader to go on believing in the dark, to persevere in solitary prayer when nothing happens, to face uncomfortable truths humbly and honestly:

Consequently: first of all our meditation should begin with the realization of our nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God. This need not be a mournful or discouraging experience. On the contrary it can be deeply tranquil and joyful since it brings us in direct contact with the source of all joy and all life. (CP, p.86)

Reading the book again, I am struck by the connections with Camus and the other existentialists whom Merton read. In that passage he seems to gracefully hint at Camus' own image of Sisyphus at some level finding happiness in his struggle to push the boulder up the hill ("it can be deeply tranquil and joyful"). He also seems to glance at Sartre's confrontation with nothingness in the form of the gnarled tree in his novel *Nausea* ("we should let ourselves be brought naked and defenceless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness. . .")

In these same experiences, though, instead of absurdity, Merton finds the ground of a secure faith; secure because purified of illusion or any sense of our own self-worth or righteousness. We discover ourselves as 'naked, insufficient, disgruntled, malicious

beings' (CP, p.122), we see too clearly that all that is 'ours' is nothing, and can completely fail us. The dread and dereliction Merton describes is a kind of hell. However, just as St. John of the Cross experiences God's light as a profound darkness, so Merton (quoting the Cistercian father Isaac of Stella) qualifies this 'dread' as a hell of mercy, and not of wrath. But Merton pulls no punches. This is as far from prayer as emotional perfection or an uplifting few minutes as you can get. It can be a hateful experience:

To be in a 'hell of mercy' is to fully experience one's nothingness, but in a spirit of repentance and surrender to God we decide to accept and do his will, not in a spirit of diffuse hatred, disgust and rebellion, even though these may be felt at times at the superficial level of emotion.

(CP, p.128)

In Chapter 13, Merton writes about the depth of dislocation involved in this encounter, the overwhelming reversal that meeting God in prayer brings, interweaving his words with analogies from Hosea about God leading Israel into the wilderness. This is an area difficult to convey, where many good spiritual guides drift into vagueness. St. John of the Cross expressed it in allegorical poetry. Merton, a poet himself, describes it in admirably simple prose, brief and precise:

. . . the unitive knowledge of God in love is not a knowledge of an object by a subject, but a far different and transcendent kind of knowledge in which the created 'self' which we are seems to disappear in God and to know him alone . . . the self undergoes a kind of emptying and an apparent destruction, until, reduced to emptiness it no longer knows itself apart from God. (CP, p.94)

The toughness and unpleasantness of the experience is not occluded by misty euphoria, and it is not represented as the province of a spiritual elite. It is spiritual stuff, but it happens in the context of everyday Christian life. God himself leads us into the anxiety and confusion we recognise so well, but often mistake for a barrier to our relationship with God:

... all values lose their shape and reality and we remain, so to speak, suspended in the void. (CP, p.96)

To see this state as normal, and graced, is a huge liberation. We slowly learn to trust, at all times. God is big enough to contain any disruption, and to use it, if we let him. In the surrender is the freedom:

... in fully relaxing our determined grasp of our empty self, we find ourselves lost and liberated in the infinite fullness of God's love. (CP, p.128)

A particular strength of the book is the absence of a false linearity in the experience described. How many of us have felt unworthy failures, or cast aside, through a sense of having temporarily lost the plot? For Merton, this is completely normal. He frees us with the knowledge that the *metanoia* process goes on all our lives, like a tide round a shore, gradually eroding our absurd selfishness, our stoniness dissolving into God's mercy and love, in a pattern of ebb and flow. Merton gives us the sense of God shaping our lives with total freedom beyond our comprehension, once our consent is freely given, whatever confusion reigns in our minds and hearts.

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