

# Advent with Thomas Merton

Patrick Woodhouse

*In November 2010, Canon Patrick Woodhouse of Wells Cathedral led a retreat day in Winchester for the Thomas Merton Society. This is an edited version of his talk.*

## 1. Beginning Again

Throughout his life Thomas Merton was a compulsive writer. He wrote a huge amount in different genres, but arguably the most important part of his writing was his personal journals, now published in seven volumes. Altogether they span nearly twenty-nine years, from the first entry on May 2, 1939, written in New York, to the last on Decem-

ber 8, 1968 written in Bangkok just two days before he died. More than any other form of his writing, these journals lead the reader into Merton's personal explorations and struggles over this long time frame. In his introduction to the first volume, Patrick Hart, who was the general editor, writes that the journals expressed 'what was deepest

in his heart with no thought of censorship.<sup>1</sup> So we may say that they provide a window into Merton's soul. I want to base our reflection on three short entries from these journals – entries that give us a glimpse of what Advent meant for Merton at a particularly important juncture in his life.

Advent 1964 was significant because it was in the autumn of that year that his dream of greater solitude began to be realised in that he began to move out of the monastery where he had lived since he first came to Gethsemani in the Advent of 1941, and into the cinder-block hut in the woods about half a mile from the main abbey buildings. And so 'the hermitage years', the last and most fruitful period of his life, began. That Advent therefore represented a most significant new start.

#### December 1st 1964

*Will not easily forget the thin sickle of the old moon rising this morning just before dawn, when I went down to say Mass. Cold sky, hard brightness of stars through the pines, snow and frost, exaltation in the bright darkness of morning. In the cold of Advent I recapture the lostness and wonder of the first days when I came here twenty-three years ago, abandoned to God, with everything left behind. I have not felt this for a long time here. The mon-*

*astery is too warm, too busy, too sociable for that! But breaking off and living (to a great extent) in the woods brings me back face to face with the loneliness and poverty of the cold hills and the Kentucky winter – incomparable, and the reality of my own life!<sup>2</sup>*

In this piece Merton is talking about beginning again. Advent – perhaps the church's most neglected season – is always a time to begin again. In this demanding business of trying to lead a spiritual life, do not ever be discouraged or disheartened if you have the sense that you are *always* having to begin again, for that is how growth in spiritual maturity happens. It is never a question of smooth linear progress, but rather an unending process of new beginnings, from which we reap deeper and deeper understandings. One of the very great teachers of the early centuries of the church Gregory of Nyssa wrote: 'Our ascent is unending, we go from beginning to beginning by way of beginnings without end'.<sup>3</sup>

For Merton, as he slowly stepped into this new stage of his life, this Advent of 1964 was a time when he both began again, and he was vividly reminded of his first beginnings at Gethsemani in the Advent of 1941. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he writes with ardent enthusiasm of that first Advent, and what it meant to him as he arrived in what he called with romantic excess, the

'court of the Queen of Heaven'.

*Liturgically speaking, you could hardly find a better time to become a monk than Advent. You begin a new life, you enter into a new world at the beginning of a new liturgical year. And everything that the Church gives you to sing, every prayer that you say in and with Christ in His Mystical Body is a cry of ardent desire for grace, for help, for the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer.<sup>4</sup>*

Advent 1941 was then, the beginning of Merton's life as a monk. Advent 1964 marked the beginning of his life as a hermit. They were two key dates in his journey. However, the path between them had not been easy. While for many years after his entry into the monastery he was deeply content to be there – a young man alive in his search for God and secure in the strict disciplines of that medieval place after all the chaos and loneliness of his early life – the peace and contentment did not last. The beginning of the 1950s was a bleak time when he suffered bouts of deep depression, particularly in the period from September 1949 to December 1950. References to this bleak period – when perhaps some of the buried pain of his early years surfaced in his consciousness – are to be found in the journal he kept at that time, entitled *The Sign of Jonas*. Fortunately though it was not to

last. Through the 1950s he gradually emerged from this dark period, and became deeply involved in the institutional life of the monastery as Master of Scholastics in 1951 and then Novice Master in 1955. However though a brilliant teacher, he increasingly yearned for what he knew lay at the heart of the contemplative tradition, but which in that busy crowded place seemed to elude him.

At the beginning of the 1960s his longing for a deeper life of silence and solitude was finally answered when he was given permission to live (part-time at first) in the hut in the woods away from what he calls in this passage the 'warm ... busy ... sociable' life of the monastery. The route into the greater depth of the spirit that he so yearned for, was solitude; and the aim was not, on the face of it, to know 'God' more deeply in the sense of pursuing a more intense religious life surrounded by all the trappings of religion. That may have been the essence of his original longing when he first came to Gethsemani, but over the years a profound but subtle shift in his thinking had taken place. As he begins his life in this hermitage what he has in his heart is the conviction that in this silent lonely place he will discover 'the reality of my own life'; that he will enter into a deeper understanding of who Thomas Merton really is; that he will receive more deeply the gift of his 'true self', and so 'recapture the lostness and wonder

of the first days ...'

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this word 'lostness', for it points to what this deeper journey is all about and suggests what is required of us. If we are going to embark on this path, we have to lose our life in the world. When Merton crossed the monastery threshold on December 10, 1941, and the great door closed behind him, he thought he had done this. He thought the world was entirely gone, that he was lost to it with all ties severed. Later he was to recognise that making that severance was not so simple. The deeper journey that he found himself on in 1964 – and which all of us are called to follow in our own very different circumstances – required a deeper kind of 'getting lost', a more profound leaving behind of ways of being and behaving and thinking that may be axiomatic to what it means to be 'successful' in the world but continue to re-enforce what Merton called 'the false self': the masks so easily worn, the games so easily played, the ways we perform, or seek validation, even applause from others, from ourselves. All this has, slowly, to be left behind. It is not easy. Watchfulness, mindfulness, is essential. And this is why solitude and silence are so important; for they can lead us into a profound 'emptiness' where we may begin to discover who, in the secret silent depths of our souls, we really are.

## 2. Repentance

In this second reflection, I want to go deeper and consider the whole vexed question of repentance.

December 3, 1964

*Evening: The heart is deceitful  
above all things  
The heart is deep and full of  
windings.  
The old man is covered up in a  
thousand wrappings.*

(Lancelot Andrewes, Pieces)

*True sad words, and I would not have felt the truth of them so much if I had not had so much solitude these days, with rain coming down on the roof, and hiding the valley. Rain in the night, the nuisance of water in the buckets. Or cutting wood behind the house, and a faint smell of hickory smoke from the chimney – while I taste and see that I am deceitful and that most of my troubles are rooted in my own bitterness. Is this what solitude is for? Then it is good, but I must pray for the strength to bear it! (the heart is deceitful and does not want this – but God is greater than my heart!)*

*I will acknowledge my faults  
O Lord  
O who will give scourges to my  
mind*

*That they spare not my sins?*

December 7, 1964

*Guerric of Igny's beautiful Fourth Advent sermon on the consecration of the desert, and the grace placed in it by Christ, 'preparing a new place for the new life' and overcoming evil not for Himself 'but for those who were to be future dwellers in the wilderness.' Not just evil, the Evil One! The desert is given us to get the evil unnested from the crannies of our own hearts ... After twenty-three years all the nests are well established. But in solitude and open air they are revealed and the wind blows on them and I know they must go! <sup>5</sup>*

In this passage we glimpse what it was like for Merton to live in the hermitage, as he sits in the rain and enters into the silence and experiences the solitude of that place. Let us consider the two images he uses about sin which take us into this question of repentance.

'The old man is covered up in a thousand wrappings'. For Merton the question of sin was not so much to do with what was right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral. At the heart of it was what was fabricated or false over against what was real or true. So much of his thinking was based on the polarity of what he called the 'false self' and the 'true self'. And the challenge of

the spiritual life is to break through to a deeper dimension and discover what is true and so leave all the nonsense of the false self behind – the masks we wear, the games we play, the personas we adopt. As we are known in the infinite mercy of God, all these are shown up for what they are – illusory.

*Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. ... All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life ... Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences ... to clothe this false self ... I wind experiences around myself ... like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world ... But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures has no foundation. <sup>6</sup>*

So if we are to enter into true self-understanding we have to leave this false ego consciousness behind, and face up to what can feel like an abyss of emptiness underneath – and discover it to be an extraordinary fullness. This is what 'repentance' means. The word for repentance in the New Testament is 'metanoia'. The word breaks down into two parts, 'meta' and 'noia' which, depending on how you

translate the word 'meta' can mean either to go *beyond* the mind, or to go into the *large* mind. So let us consider this understanding of repentance in terms of the practice of meditation which was so central to Merton.

When we sit in silent focussed meditation, although the body may be still, we will immediately become aware of the chattering noise of the mind as anxieties, conversations, fantasies, memories, needs, longings all crowd in like a swarm of bees, all circulating around 'me'. But if we persist in our practice of silently repeating a prayer word in time with the breath, slowly and gradually the internal noise of the mind will begin to fade, and we will find that, at an intuitive level deeper than rationality, we are beginning to go 'beyond' the mind, or enter into the 'large' mind, what Martin Laird calls 'the Silent Land'. Then the 'nests' of our own compulsive patterns of behaviour will simply begin to disintegrate with practice, patience and persistence.

Merton challenges us to not to be afraid of the emptiness as we learn to be still in the privacy of our own praying space. The journey of prayer – of repentance – can bring us also face to face with deeper more pervasive tendencies within us, the deeper patterns of our psychic life. It will bring us into the 'large' mind. In this entry of December 3rd it would seem that Merton was touching on a deeper strata within himself when he writes that

he could see he was 'deceitful' and that 'most of my troubles are rooted in my own bitterness'. Somehow our search for a genuine repentance must reach this level too.

One metaphor that I have found helpful in understanding what this deeper repentance is about is likening the journey of prayer to the slow descent of a diving bell to the bottom of the ocean. On the surface are the turbulent waves – which represent the agitated surface of consciousness. As you practice your stillness and patiently attend to your word, which is like the diving chamber taking you slowly down, you begin to leave the immediate world of agitated thought behind. However, as you descend everything below the surface is by no means necessarily calm. Some distance down can be found the huge currents of the ocean which may be likened to the powerful psychological forces that run below the surface of the mind and which can drive and shape what we do and how we behave. These provide the energy for our agitation. Here can be found our need to succeed, our addiction to work, our fear of emptiness, our craving for recognition – powerful forces that drive us on and make us the people we wish we were often not. In the silence of prayer, with the mind starved of distractions, we may become disconcertingly aware of them. Persistence, faithfulness and attention to the word we silently say, the name

we silently name, will lead us away from these too. Eventually we arrive at the bottom of the ocean where the currents have finally ceased, where it is utterly silent and still. Here it is possible to rest with a great sense of gratitude. Here God dwells and in secret, we dwell in him.

### 3. Happiness

In this third reflection on Merton's diary of Advent 1964, I want to move forward a few days to what was a minor epiphany in his life, a moment of intense realisation. He uses the simple word 'happiness'.

*December 9th 1964*

*Last night after a prayer vigil in the novitiate chapel (didn't do a good job – was somewhat disorganized and distracted), went to bed late at the hermitage. All quiet. No light on at Boone's or Newton's. Cold. Lay in bed realising that what I was, was **happy**. Said the strange word "happiness" and realised that it was there, not as an "it" or object.*

*It simply was. And I was that. And this morning, coming down, seeing the multitude of stars above the bare branches of the wood, I was suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the immense mercy of God was upon me ...*

*... in the light of this simple fact of God's love ... the only response is to go out from yourself with all that one is, which is nothing, and pour out that nothingness in gratitude that God is who He is. All speech is impertinent, it destroys the simplicity of that nothingness before God ...<sup>7</sup>*

The precondition for this intense moment is the silence and solitude of the hermitage. As he lies in bed in this silent place it is as though it takes a few moments for him to become aware that he is – and in the diary the word is in italics – 'happy'. There is a note of surprise. Happiness is a 'strange' word. Perhaps he feels that he has not really ever known it before, so tied up has he been in his own confusions and longings and fears and anxieties ... and as he puts it himself, his 'deceit'.

Here is a man coming home. All his life, Merton had an immense amount of inner baggage to deal with from his early life. But in this hermitage he begins to deeply come home – to himself, and to the mystery of God buried in his longing heart. There have been profound homecomings before: when he was baptised in Corpus Christi church in New York 1938, and, as he put it, his sins were pulled out 'like teeth'; when he first visited the monastery at Gethsemani in Holy Week 1941 and found his heart captivated by this vast place full of



silent praying men; when at St Bonaventure's he realised his vocation to be a Cistercian monk as, at night, he prayed desperately in the lonely garden of the college where he lived, and suddenly in his mind, above the sound of the night wind, heard 'the great bell of Gethsemani ringing', 'as if it were calling me home'. It was a homecoming when at last his longing was realised and he first entered the monastery in December 1941; and then when he was ordained priest in 1949 which was he said: 'the one great secret for which I had been born'. All these were profound moments of realisation and epiphany.<sup>8</sup>

But here in these silent woods he is going deeper, realising more than he ever has his need for silence and solitude and in this empty place, he begins to taste, perhaps as he never has before 'the immense mercy of God', and finds himself 'hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything.' That final phrase says a lot about belief itself. One of the fallacies of our time is that faith can be discovered simply by the thinking mind. Of course that can take us so far. But faith is not born in the dry pursuit of intellectual understanding, but rather in the process of learning a profound surrender and trust: learning how to wait for the mercy of God in secret and silence. In the end belief is not a rational faculty at all. It is a deep intuitive awareness that is beyond words and deeper than the mind. All we can say is that we

glimpse it when we somehow know – with a knowledge too deep for words – that everything coheres, that life, despite everything in our world that suggests otherwise, is good and beautiful, and that we are loved, and find we are enabled to love others (which is always the proof of faith).

It would seem that a comprehending of this came to Merton on that cold December night. And such 'seeing' is possible for us all. But we avoid the ingredients necessary for finding it. Again and again we are reluctant to go alone into our room and shut the door and pray to our Father in secret. Though we may sense that this is our deepest need we neglect it, and along with the rest of our culture rush around, grasping at experience and searching for happiness as an object – an 'it' as Merton puts it. This is what consumerism is about. It turns happiness into an 'it'. So happiness becomes something to crave, and we fail to realise that we are on a false trail and that in fact, the 'immense mercy of God' is upon us all the time. All we have to do is realise it. Then happiness becomes something we are.

So he moves from craving to being. From I want, to I am. And the response is a life of gratitude. 'the only response is to go out from yourself with all that one is, which is nothing, and pour out that nothingness in gratitude ...' Note the words, 'which is nothing'. It would seem that in these first days at the

hermitage, Merton goes through a profound experience of ego-loss, of death to the 'I-ness' of 'I'. It is tied up with awareness of physical death.

On December 4th he writes:

*How often in the last years I have thought of death. It has been present to me and I have 'understood' it, and known that I must die. Yet last night, only for a moment, in passing, and so to speak without grimness or drama, I momentarily experienced the fact that I, this self, will soon simply not exist. A flash of the 'not-thereness' of being dead. Without fear or grief, without anything. Just not there. And this I suppose is one of the first tastes of the fruits of solitude. So the angel of death passed along thinking aloud to himself, doing his business, and barely taking notice of me. But taking note of me nevertheless. We recognised one another. And of course the other thing is that this 'I' is not 'I', and I am not this body, this "self", and I am not just my individual nature. ... I feel within this individual self the nearness of disintegration.<sup>9</sup>*

One is reminded of the words of Jesus: 'Unless a solitary grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies ... it will not produce a rich harvest'. Unless in solitude and silence we

yield up the insistent demands of the ego, starve it of its life, we will not break through to that deeper dimension of 'being-itself' ... and find the gift, the buried treasure, of true happiness.

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939–1941*, Ed. Patrick Hart O.C.S.O. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p.xii.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five 1963 – 1965*, Ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.172.
3. Gregory of Nyssa, 'Homilies on the Song of Songs, 8' (Patrologia Graeca, Migne 44, 940–41). Quoted in Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, (New City, 1993) p.240.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1948), published in Britain by Sheldon Press, 1975. p.379.
5. Merton (1997), op. cit. p.173 & p.177.
6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, (Anthony Clarke Books 1972), p.27.
7. Merton (1997), op. cit. p.177.
8. Merton (1948), op. cit. p.224, pp.365–6, p.181.
9. Merton (1997), op. cit. p.173.