'Give them Poetry, Poetry, Poetry'

The Donald Allchin Memorial Address delivered at the Ninth General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Oakham School, Rutland on 13 April 2012

Paul M. Pearson

I am reminded of a story told of Donald Allchin. When asked once for his advice on what a speaker should bring to an audience, Donald's immediate and simple advice was: 'Give them poetry, poetry, poetry!'

And poetry was certainly one of the gifts that Donald brought to Merton. Most notably he introduced Merton to, and encouraged his reading of, R. S. Thomas, David Jones and Ann Griffiths. Merton writes of R.S. Thomas in June 1967 as 'a marvelous discovery...perhaps better than Muir, with such a powerful spirit and experience', and he goes on to ask Donald: 'is there any-

thing about his life, or who he is?'[1] to which Donald responds:

> R.S. is a country priest in Wales. In his fifties, I suppose; dislikes the 20th Century and England pretty strongly. His son (who was up at Magdalen and has just taken his degree) said, 'My father can always think up a good excuse for not leaving Wales'! The only time I met him and we had a long talk, he certainly made me feel that I should be leaving the promised land and descending to some pretty Sodomish kind of plain on my 150 mile drive back to Oxford!
>
> ...he's a very fine man; gloomy, with a great craggy face, and all the sensitive perception that you can see. One of the things that struck me was the extraordinary seriousness and workmanlike way in which he regards his parish work (he's obviously a complete enigma to most of his parishioners, but he pushes on). ...He's just moved to a new parish in the most Westerly part of Wales (he writes of it as being 'over-run by Birmingham and Liverpool and Butlins and Philistia'!)[2]

Like Merton himself, Donald was a man of unbounded enthusiasm and for those of us who knew Donald it is hard to imagine the energy that must have been present when Donald met Merton for the first time at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1963 and on his subsequent visits in 1967 and 1968. Remembering that first meeting Donald recalled his shyness on meeting Merton, the world-renowned author and spiritual master, until in small talk he mentioned that his host, Dale Moody from the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, had taken him to the Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill, whereupon the conversation immediately took off. Donald recalled, 'we started off on the Shakers and that got us going. And from that time we never stopped... there were so many things we talked about. It was very difficult to make a kind of catalogue of them. There was a kind of quicksilver quality about the conversation.'[3]

But where does 'give them poetry, poetry, poetry' leave us when we consider Merton's book *Raids on the Unspeakable* and the theme it sets for our time here together this weekend? What is the title about, *Raids on the Unspeakable*? Well, 'Raids' is easy enough—attacks, sorties, incursions—all words that convey the same sense, suggesting that the essays in this volume are forays into Merton's subject, the 'Unspeakable,' a subject that, by implication, is the enemy.

So what does Merton mean by the 'Unspeakable'?

In a letter to his literary agent Naomi Burton Stone at the end of

August 1965 Merton comments on his own choice of the title for this volume writing that is was 'an improvement, I think, on a phrase from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "raids on the inarticulate"' and, adding, 'it sounds a little more sinister, and therefore good for a title.'[4] Others have called the change in title 'more passionate and disturbing, even somewhat apocalyptic.'[5] The change from 'inarticulate' to 'unspeakable' is quite a distinctive change which, implies for me, that Merton understood what he meant by the 'unspeakable,' it was not just a matter of being unable to put it into words, unable to articulate it, but that what he had in mind was in fact worse than that, it was 'Unspeakable.'

So I'd just like to take a few minutes to reflect on what Merton might have in mind when he refers to the 'unspeakable' and then to conjecture a little what the 'unspeakable' might be in our own day.

In his 'Prologue' to *Raids*, where he gives 'the author's advice to his book', Merton suggests that the 'unspeakable' is an eschatological image, that it is the void behind 'the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds,'[6] it is the void 'that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss.' Merton then goes on, in the 'Prologue,' to illustrate this by referring to certain essays in *Raids*.

However, as I recently re-read *Raids on the Unspeakable* with these questions in mind, a theme that struck me a number of times was Merton's criticism of the way that society had developed, and was continuing to develop, which led to the loss of individuality, to dehumanization, to the loss of soul. Frequently that critique of society related to what Eisenhower called in 1961 the military-industrial complex—though in a much broader sense for Merton, including technology, banking and all forms of bureaucracy that ultimately led to the individual person being viewed as a mere digit. Expressed in varying ways in different essays in *Raids,* one of his most succinct descriptions comes in the essay 'The Time of the End is the Time of No Room', writing:

> ...everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration...
>
> We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshaled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point

> of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything.[7]

Insights so fitting to this particular essay equating our time with the time of Christ's first coming when there was no room at the inn due to the Roman census, trying to number their minions, turning them into digits, for the purposes of taxation.

So, for Merton, the wheels of state, and the efficiency and organization they demand, are an example of the unspeakable, with the debasement that it brings to the human person, a debasement horrifically portrayed in the figure of Adolf Eichmann in his essay 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann.' Eichmann is a model of the perfectly sane person beloved of political systems who 'conscientiously' went 'about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder'—reducing millions of people to figures, to numbers in his ledgers, to bundles of hair, mountains of shoes, and soap. Merton writes: 'He had a profound respect for system, for law and order. He was obedient, loyal, a faithful officer of a great state. He served his government very well.'[8]

Against this backdrop Merton asks his reader whether it is still possible to 'save ourselves from becoming numbers.'[9]

The period in which Merton was writing *Raids on the Unspeakable* was the height of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. The oppression, segregation and prejudice rife at that time were a debasement of the human on Merton's very doorstep. Certainly not on the same level as Eichmann and the Nazi extermination camps but, none the less, invidious to the human spirit.

In a letter Donald Allchin wrote to Merton, dated 4 April 1967, a year to the day before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—a day Donald would also spend with Merton in Kentucky and the circumstances of which he would frequently recount—Donald wrote that on his return to Louisville, from seeing Merton at the Abbey, after 'a good day haranguing the Baptists' at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville he attended a speech by King in Louisville and took 'part in a demonstration!' adding in his letter 'So there's one ambition fulfilled.'[10] Though it is unclear from Donald's letter whether that ambition was to hear King speak, or to take part in a demonstration—I like to think both.

Racism, I'd like to suggest, is one way in which the unspeakable continues to manifest itself in our own time. Although the segregation that Merton would have witnessed in Louisville as he passed through *en route* to Gethsemani in 1941 and on subsequent visits to the city is now illegal, segregation is present in many other ways. Having moved to

Louisville from London I am struck over and over again by its almost all white neighborhoods, churches, schools and universities. Bellarmine University, for example, despite its fair words and good intentions regarding diversity (and Bellarmine found a way around the laws of the time to admit African-American students in 1950 at a time when Louisville was a *thoroughly* segregated city[11]) still has only a small percentage of students of color among its student body, less than 10 percent. The African-American community now has human and civil rights yet, all too often, it lacks what I will call 'silver rights.'[12] Legally they can attend any school they wish, stay at the top hotels, live in any neighborhood they choose, but the lack of financial equality, the lack of silver rights, ensures that segregation continues. The struggle for equality still has a long way to go.[13]

Merton touched on this same problem in his book *Faith and Violence*, speaking of the need to genuinely give African-Americans 'equal opportunities in everything' and challenging white Americans saying that they 'might admire black dignity at a distance, but they still did not want all that nobility next door: it might affect property values. Nobility is one thing, and property values quite another.'[14] Merton pointed to the racial discrimination that was being practiced in economic injustice, noting that there were, at the time he is writing, thirty-five black millionaires in the United States, but what is that next to twenty million white millionaires? It led him to write to his lifelong friend, Robert Lax, 'I am trying to find out some way I can get nationalized as a Negro as I am tired of belonging to the humiliating white race. One wants at times the comfort of belonging to a race that one can like and respect.'[15] Yet, almost fifty years later, 33 percent of African American children live in poverty, compared to 10 percent of white children. On average white families possess 10 times more wealth than do families of color and, since 1998 that 'wealth gap' has grown with white families seeing a 20 percent boost in their net wealth, while African-American families have seen their wealth decrease.[16] Similar statistics are true of the U.S. Justice System —black or Hispanic defendants whose victims were white are much more likely to be charged capitally and sentenced to death than their white counterparts—5½ times more likely in Mississippi, 30 times more likely in Texas. White people have the power and anyone who encroaches on that will be dealt with severely.

The situation I'm speaking of in the United States, in Louisville, seems a long way from England, a long way from us gathered here at Oakham. (Though, having said that, the makeup of our gathering is distinctly lacking in racial diversity.) Racism, so we hear, is on the rise in many parts of Europe made worse,

no doubt, by the current economic crisis.

In 2009 Trevor Philips, chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, described Britain, and I quote, as 'by far—and I mean by far—the best place to live in Europe if you are not white.' As Ian Blair, formerly the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, said in his recent Stephen Lawrence Memorial Lecture that 'cannot have been how it seemed in 1993.' Yet, even so, as Lord Blair went on to note just a few paragraphs later:

> We know that black children are twice as likely to die before they are one than their white sisters and brothers, four times as likely to be murdered before they are 30, five times as likely to be imprisoned and three times as likely to be poor in old age. There are no black editors in mainstream journalism, few black judges and there have only been two minority police officers of the rank of chief constable. The financial centre that is the City of London remains a white enclave.[17]

In the current economic climate, as in the United States, the Afro-Carribean community will be one that suffers more than others. And, despite all the changes that have taken place since the Macpherson inquiry, Doreen Lawrence, in a recent interview in *The Guardian*, pointed out that African-Caribbeans are still viewed as 'the face of crime and are near the bottom for jobs and housing.'[18]

In his book *White Like Me*, the activist Tim Wise tells a family story about his grandmother, Mabel Wise, who came of age in the thirties and forties in the South of the USA. Her father was Klan. In her teens she fell in love with a Jew, who she would eventually marry, and she found it harder and harder to tolerate her father's racism and anti-Semitism. Eventually she confronted her father, telling him he had to burn his Klan robes or she would do it for him. He did, he changed his life and would eventually accept her Jewish fiancée into his family. Wise then goes on to tell numerous stories of his grandmother and the ways over the years, time after time, she stood up and fought racism. In the final years of her life she would suffer from the ravages of Alzheimer's. Wise recalls:

> Here was a woman who no longer could recognize her own children; a woman who had no idea who her husband had been; no clue where she was, what her name was, what year it was and yet knew what she had been taught at a very early age to call black people. Once she was no longer capable of resisting this demon, tucked

> away like a time bomb in the far corners of her mind, it would reassert itself and explode with a vengeance. She could not remember how to feed herself. She could not go to the bathroom by herself. She could not recognize a glass of water for what it was. But she could recognize a *nigger*. America had seen to that, and no disease would strip her of that memory. Indeed it would be one of the last words I would hear her say, before she finally stopped talking at all.[19]

And Wise clarifies that she would only ever use it to some of the African-American nurses caring for her. She had some choice words for her white doctors, her white daughters, even her grandson, but never that word. 'She knew' Wise writes, 'exactly what she was saying, and to whom.'

> Given this woman's entire life and the circumstances surrounding her slow demise, her utterance of a word even as hateful as this one says little about her. But it speaks volumes about her country, about the seeds planted in every one of us by our culture: seeds that, so long as we are of sound mind and commitment, we can choose not to water, but also seeds that left untended sprout of their own accord... That someone like Mabel Wise could fall prey to such a sickness tells me all I need to know about how racism can damage us, how it can steal from us the part that is decent. Maybe this is why I tire of white folks [saying] 'I don't have a racist bone in my body' or 'I never notice color.' [Mabel Wise] would have said that too, and she would have meant well. And she would have been wrong.[20]

Wise gives us there, I would suggest, an incredibly pertinent example of the unspeakable. It certainly lacks poetry. However racism and its invidious nature is without doubt one of the forms of the unspeakable Merton has in mind in *Raids*.

The fight against the unspeakable —and, no doubt, we (and Merton) would want to broaden that to include issues such as gay rights, immigration, and the way we welcome the stranger in our midst,[21] — demands an ongoing struggle from us, a struggle which has been so well illustrated by Doreen and Neville Lawrence. The American social reformer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote incisively about this struggle:

> The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions...have

> been born of earnest struggle ...
> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.
> This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle...If we ever get free from all the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and, if needs be, by our lives, and the lives of others.[22]

But against this background, against all that is unspeakable that Merton points to in *Raids*, the unspeakable in our lives today, Merton can give us hope, he can give us poetry in the midst of this vale of tears, as he wrote in his introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable*:

> Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable...The goodness of the world, stricken or not, is incontestable and definitive. If it is stricken, it is also healed in Christ. But nevertheless one of the awful facts of our age is the evidence that it is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable.

As we stand before the face of the unspeakable, Merton speaks to us words of hope:

> Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the human image for it is the image of God.[23]

This is the struggle, this is the vision, this is the poetry to which Thomas Merton calls us:

> Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the human image for it is the image of God.

Notes

1. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), p.28.
2. Donald Allchin to Thomas Merton, 20 July, 1967 in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.
3. 'Remembering Merton: A round table discussion between a few of Merton's friends—Tommie O'Callaghan, Donald Allchin, Jim Forest

and John Wu, Jr.' chaired by David Scott in *Your Heart is My Hermitage: Papers Presented at the Southampton Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at LSU College, May 1996.* (London: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1996), p.15.

4. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Time of Crises* edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p.147.

5. Ross Labrie, 'Thomas Merton on the Unspeakable.' *The Merton Seasonal* 36.4 (Winter 2011), p.3.

6. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.4.

7. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.70.

8. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.45.

9. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.53.

10. Donald Allchin to Thomas Merton, 4 April, 1967 in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

11. In 1950 Louisville was a *thoroughly* segregated city—public parks were segregated, public transportation was segregated, theaters, restaurants, stores, swimming pools—even water fountains—were segregated. In fact, a decade later, in 1960, they were STILL segregated—and a proposed city ordinance that year to open public accommodations to all human beings regardless of skin color was defeated by the board of alderman by a vote of eleven to one.

12. I am indebted to the pastor of St. Stephen's Church in Louisville, Reverend Kevin W. Cosby, for this term.

13. Even at the time I write this there is legal action being taken against the local public schools covering Louisville for the discriminatory nature of the way punishments are handled in the school system. Anne Marshall, 'The Truth About Consequences: Jefferson County Public Schools Disproportionately Imposes Harsh Punishments on Black Students.' *LEO Weekly* 22.14 (February 22, 2012): pp.10-14. Available online at: http://leoweekly.com/news/truth-about-consequences (accessed 4 April, 2012).

14. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.122.

15. *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax: When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, edited by Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington, KY.: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p.251.

16. Gerald J. Beyer, 'Why Race Still Matters: Catholics and the Rise of Barack Obama.' *America* 200.16 (May 18, 2009): p.14. Available online at: http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11659 [Accessed 4 April, 2012]

17. The full text of the speech by Lord Ian Blair delivered as inaugural Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust Criminal Justice Lecture in London on 20 February, 2012. Available online at: http://www.obv.org.uk/news-blogs/lord-iain-blair-slams-londons-racism (accessed 29 February, 2012).

18. Interview with Doreen Lawrence by Vikram Dodd published in *The Guardian*, 27 January, 2012. Available online at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/jan/27/doreen-lawrence-no-more-give (accessed February 29, 2012). Similar facts were reported in *The Tablet* recently in a new article about discrimination against young black people. Figures cited indicated that 'more than half of young black men available for work in Britain are now unemployed... unemployment among young black men has doubled in three years, rising from 28.8 percent in 2008 to 55.9 percent in the last three month of 2011. This is more than double the unemployment rate for young white people.' *The Tablet* 266.8939 (24 March 2012): p.36.

19. Tim J. Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Soft Skull Press, 2005), p.131.

20. *Ibid.*, pp.131-2.

21. Reflecting St. Benedict's exhortation to his monks to welcome every stranger as Christ. All too easily, especially in times of social or economic difficulty and upheaval, the stranger, the outsider, can all too easily become the scapegoat.

22. Frederick Douglass, 3 August, 1857. Available online at: http://academic.udayton.edu/vernelliarandall/poetry/NoStruggle.htm (Accessed 4 April, 2012).

23. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.5-6.

Paul M. Pearson is Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, Chief of Research for the Merton Legacy Trust, and Resident Secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society. His most recent book is *Thomas Merton on Christian Contemplation* (New Directions, 2012).