

Why Merton matters

John Moses

'Why Merton matters' is the title of my talk but perhaps it should be, 'Why Merton still matters'; and even more, 'Why Merton matters to us today'.

There is a golden thread that runs through many of Merton's writings: it is his emphasis upon the present time. And so we read in one of his letters that, 'What is valuable is what is real here and now;' and in *Conjectures* we find him writing that, 'What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.'

So what are the possibilities and challenges which Merton embraced and which he asks us to recognise? There's nothing new in what I have to say, but Merton was well aware that some things have to be said, and said, and said again.

Take for example his delight in the natural world. Many of his happiest hours, many of his deepest moments, were spent in the woods that surrounded his abbey as he wandered freely. It was there that he marvelled at the wonder of the created order and at the bonds of kinship that bind all life together. But he looked beyond the confines of the monastic enclosure and he observed the consequences of intensive farming, of the use of chemicals, of the movement of people from the country to the town. And he feared that our capacity as a race for self-destruction would inflict untold damage on the earth's natural resources, upon the plants, the birds, the insects, the balance of the whole ecological system. It's difficult to dissent from his judgement that 'we deal death all around us *simply by the way we live.*' Is this a phrase that still matters?

It is the way we live that led him to be so outspoken in his criticism

of his adopted country, the United States. He knew what the American dream was all about, but he saw its limitations, and he wrote of 'a society which for all its unquestionable advantages just does not seem to be able to provide people with lives that are fully human and fully real.' But Merton's diagnosis was not confined to America. It extended to the whole western world. He deplored the cult of celebrity and the emptiness that lay just beneath the surface. He hated the seductive power of advertising, of the mass media, of public entertainment. He found too much evidence of power, money, complacency, and a great capacity for self-deception. He asked his readers to face the fact that 'we live in a pretty sick culture.' Is that a phrase that still rings true?

Or consider the way in which Merton depicted the global scene as he deplored the 'unmitigated arrogance' shown by the Great Powers—America, Russia, China—in their dealings with other nations. He could be strident, far too strident at times, in his political judgements; but nearly fifty years after his death we might hesitate before condemning out of hand his complaint that the United States failed to pay sufficient attention to the way in which other nations might see the world, or that many activities would be seen by others as an attempt to police the world, determining for other countries how they should live. And so for him, nothing less than a global vision, a global ethic would be sufficient.

There are times when we need to remind ourselves that Merton was writing against the background of the Cold War in the 1950s and the 1960s when the possibility of a nuclear war was never far from the minds of many people. And so he directed attention to what he called our 'fatal addiction to war'. Violence, he suggested, had become the universal currency of choice, and he feared for a world in which 'slaughter, violence, revolution, the annihilation of enemies, the extermination of entire populations and even genocide *have become a way of life.*' Am I alone in thinking that he might have been writing about our world?

It was inconceivable that the church should escape his censure. He looked out on a church that had lost its bearings in a post-Christian world. He pleaded for a church that would enter into wholehearted dialogue with the world. He sought a church that would not merely embody the past but might actually embrace the future. He wanted a far greater contemplative orientation in the life of the church, but he wanted the church also to rediscover its prophetic vocation, to be 'a stumbling block to the world, a sign of contradiction'.

And, of course, Merton became through his many friendships and his extensive correspondence—with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists—one

of the forerunners of dialogue between world faith communities. He argued for a far wider definition of the church's task. He wanted a free exchange of ideas, of experience. He wanted to explore that shared inheritance of contemplative wisdom without which he believed men and women would never find their true humanity.

It's not surprising that one of his brothers at Gethsemani should have said that, 'He continues to speak to us today in circumstances that, in many respects, are marked by the issues he identified half a century ago as crucial for our world.'

But Merton has a way of turning the spotlight upon us. I love the way in which one of his brothers could say, 'Merton understands what I want to be, or what I would like to be, or what I'm trying to be, or what I've gone through, or what I'm coping with.' I guess what I value most – the reason why Merton matters to me – is that I find in him a type of Christian discipleship that is open, questioning, passionate and engaged. Those of us, and I include myself, for whom God and faith and prayer and the meaning of discipleship are at times very uncertain can take encouragement from one who was a mass of contradictions, but who still speaks with a prophetic voice and who does so with courage, hope and love.

This is an edited version of the talk given by John Moses at St. James's Piccadilly on 31st January 2015 as part of the Society's centenary celebrations.

John Moses is an Anglican priest, who retired as the Dean of St Paul's in 2006. A review of his most recent publication, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*, may be found on page 42.



Panel for the Question and Answer session at St James's Piccadilly following John Moses' talk – (l to r) Revd Lucy Winkett, John Moses, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Fiona Gardner & Esther de Waal.