

# Merton's Prophetic Voice

## A Meditation for Advent

Willy Slavin

It is said - and I'm not at all sure about it, everyone must speak for themselves - that it was the figure of the child washed up on the beach *wot done it*. Millions tweeted: *omg, this is wrong, something has to be done about the refugee crisis*. Advent prepares us for the image of a child in a manger who is described as God. That can't be right, can it? If it is right, should we not be doing something about it?

This summer, in the year of the centenary of Thomas Merton's birth, I had the privilege of visiting the house where he was born in Prades, France, not far from the eastern border with Spain. Although some of the monks in Gethsemani regarded him as French, technically he was more Catalan since Prades is a town of the Languedoc. It is on the edge of the region where once flourished the Albigensian heresy, a millenarian movement better known today as the Cathars. The air of protest might still have pervaded the place where he was born.

Prades is a substantial town on the main road from Perpignan to Andorra. The house, at the corner of Rue du 4ème Septembre and Rue du Palais de Justice, about 100 metres from the town centre, looks well appointed and is still privately occupied. There is a plaque above the door which says: ICI EST NÉ THOMAS MERTON, ECRIVAIN AMERICAIN. *American writer?* There is no mention of religion. In France laïcité rules!

This would have amused Merton. And it may make us pause to think, for it is as a writer that Merton is known to us. A prophetic writer at that. Not in the sense of predicting the future but in being outspoken when others 'kept their peace'. This offers us a reflection for Advent. For Advent is the time for prophecy.

Advent, through readings from the prophet Isaiah, takes us back to

the beginning of our religious story when the Israelites were engaged in a struggle over the status of Jerusalem. Should they make allies with Assyria in the north or Egypt in the south? Would they survive exile in Babylon to the east? The role of the prophets was to argue for the peace that Yahweh wants for all people.

How closely our present travails mirror those of the biblical prophets! The status of Jerusalem is the spark for the current conflagration in the Middle East. In the north Syria is in turmoil while Egypt in the south is at risk of the same. In the east the land of Babylon (Iraq) and of the Persians (Iran) are seen as threats. All that the powers of the world feel they can do is to pour oil on the troubled waters. The position of the peacemaker today is no easier (or harder) than it was in Biblical times.

The biblical readings recommended for Advent have both apocalyptic and consoling aspects. Can these opposing trends be reconciled? Surely both speak to our contemporary reality. We can be afraid of doom but also see hope in the chaos. We tend to think of the biblical prophets as authors. We forget that it was their followers who wrote down their sayings, sometimes as in the case of Isaiah, over a period of several centuries. It would help if we could see the prophets as celebrities of their age. Isaiah was a fiery character. Jesus was recognised by his followers, first of all, as a prophet.

My notes on Merton date from 1956. They were on *Elected Silence* (as we then knew his autobiography). Here it seemed to me, as a sixth-former, was a voice that was different. Neither a scribe nor a Pharisee but someone who spoke with authority. My first political memory was the fall, a few years previously, of Dien Bien Phu, the fortress that the French Foreign Legion had built to confront the Vietnamese communists. When the United States stepped into the breach the American voice I heard during the Vietnam conflict was Thomas Merton's. He had been galvanised by Buddhists burning themselves to death in protest.

Much earlier I had had the opportunity to visit Merton's grave at Gethsemani. I remember the monk at the gate saying: *don't forget to pray for him*. Perhaps not everyone was a fan. This too is the lot of the prophet. In a crisis - like the present tidal wave of refugees - we may feel helpless, unable to do anything. But of course we can seek out prophetic voices. And if we dare to speak out ourselves, tell the truth as we see it, which is what the prophets did, even that may cost us.

The current refugee crisis forcibly brings home the apocalyptic aspect of Advent. For most of us it was difficult to feel affected by the horrors we were reading about when they were in faraway places with strange

sounding names. Now the chickens are coming to roost at our own front doors. Our only concern cannot be 'homeland security'. If we find it hard to accept any upset to our routine we may shortly find that the way of life we have come to take for granted cannot be sustained. We need a wider vision, the longer view which envisions peace for all the world, even at cost to ourselves.

Clearly we are at the advent of a new age. Its apocalyptic possibilities may find consolation in the image of the Child in the Manger for whom there was no room at the inn. Whatever our chronological age there is a spirit within us that is forever young. We can recognise that much of what we have taken for granted, even what we struggled to build up ourselves, is not as important as we thought. Some of it may have to be sacrificed. Those who knew Thomas Merton commented on a certain childlike nature he had retained throughout his life. When he died what he owned could have been contained in a plastic bag. Apart from his writings, that is. A hundred years on from his birth these remain prophetic, both challenging our assumptions about the size of the inn we inhabit, and consoling us with the longer view and a better vision of the future.

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### ***Did you know that . . . .***

#### ***. . . . Merton spent a summer in Scotland?***

At the start of the third section of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 'The Harrowing of Hell', Merton describes how in 1929, between leaving Ripley Court and going to Oakham, he and his father Owen, who was by then quite ill, went to stay for the summer with 'an old friend' of Owen 'in Aberdeenshire'. After a few days Owen became so ill that he had to return to London for treatment, and so Merton, who didn't get on with the family, spent the rest of the summer in 'my own unhappy isolation', reading and cycling round the local countryside.

Research shows that their host was Theodore Haughton, an artist whom Owen had met in Paris, who lived at Williamston House outside the village of Insch, about 15 miles from Aberdeen.

*For further information see the article on The Haughtons (part 1) at:*

**<http://www.camphillresearch.com/magazine-articles/>**