

A Few Thoughts for Advent by Derek Reeve

We are all familiar with Merton's moment of Epiphany 'at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district'. Merton says that, at that moment, he was aware of his oneness with all those people that he saw around him. He became aware too that the monastic separation from the world easily gave rise to the notion that monks were a 'different species of being' and that this was an 'illusory difference'. 'Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men', he wanted to cry out as he recognised what a glorious destiny it was 'to be a member of the human race'.¹

When I first read those words, many years ago, they made an enormous impact and have remained with me ever since; but I want to share something of my own experience which is not dissimilar to that of Merton's.

More and more, over the years and especially as I have grown older, I have found people fascinating. I don't mean when I meet them and establish a relationship with them, though that has been a major part of my life as a priest. What I mean is people in general, people I don't know and probably never will know, just people.

As a priest, my contacts have been many and varied but, nevertheless, quite limited. I have got to know many people in some depth, and relationships have sprung up with members of my parish community, students for whom I was a chaplain for many years, those whom I met when I was a prison chaplain and many others. But even though I'm sure these number thousands over sixty years of ministry, they are but a limited few.

The people I am talking about are the vast numbers who live around me, whom I meet in the street, whom I see on Television newsreels and so on. I suppose, over the years, I have gradually come to view them differently, a little as Merton viewed the folk around him on the corner of Fourth and Walnut.

I think I have always had a vivid imagination and I have tended more and more to construct a story around people when I see them. The old woman on her own, perhaps having a cup of tea and a cake in a Supermarket restaurant. Is she alone in the world? Does she have a family? Is there a dog waiting at home to welcome her? Is there anyone who loves her? The rather obese woman with one or two children, probably smoking and revealing some unsightly tattoos on her arms or

legs. Does she have a partner? Does she struggle to support those children? Is her weight problem the result of her being depressed and seeing little purpose in life? The young man who seems to be out of work and who looks dishevelled and unkempt? Has he got a family to go home to? Is there anyone who really cares about him? Does he hang around with his mates and yet, within himself, feel a desperate loneliness and the pointlessness of his life? And what about the poor devil who is sitting alone in a doorway either drunk or high? Is there anyone else in his life? Maybe his only friend is the dog who snuggles up to him. Not only do I wonder about their lives as they are, but also I wonder how they have come to be the person they are and what has brought them to their present place in life. The list could go on and I am sure that you have all thought these thoughts often enough. But, as a Christian, what can I do with them? I can't save the whole world, however many charities I support or efforts I make to be involved in helping others.

I suppose the first thing to say is that, unlike Merton, I don't feel automatically one with them. I am living my comfortable little bourgeois life and their situation is very different from mine. At times there is the danger of thinking that, however sad or painful their situation, maybe they are in some way responsible for getting into it — and that is a temptation I don't want to give in to.

You may wonder where all this going but it springs from my wanting to share a few thoughts about Advent, the time when we reflect on the coming of Christ into our world.

More and more I have recognised that all these folk that I see and about whom I construct little scenarios are Christ! Merton was struck by all the people around him whom he wanted to tell 'that they were all walking around, shining like the sun'.²

I suppose I have been struck more and more by the fact that each and every one of the people I see around me are, in fact, Christ himself, lonely, unwanted, downtrodden, abused, hurt and suffering in a million different ways. Christ comes to me at every moment, in every one and in every place.

I want to say, too, that when I see so many examples of love around me, I am also moved to recognise in them the Christ who is happy and rejoicing. The very common sight these days is of the young father who is bringing his small child to school and who so often shows a tenderness and affection that I wouldn't have expected. What hopes and fears are in his heart as he gives his child a goodbye kiss? And the way in which those

who are carers show real love and concern for an elderly person or a person with disabilities, to say nothing of the care shown by those who work in the National Health Service – these are all situations where Christ is encountered.

None of these thoughts are very original and I'm sure many others have thought and shared them. What I have tried to do with them, however, is to develop compassion. By that, I don't mean feeling sorry for them, though that can be a very real part of what one feels when one encounters suffering of any kind. What I mean is trying to develop that way of seeing people which allows me to enter into their life a little, and see in it the Christ who is alone and desperate or who is gladdened by the simplest of things, like a trusting little child. Merton said in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 'I must learn to share with others, their joys, their sufferings, their ideas, their needs, their desires.'³ From my search for God in prayer must spring my ability to recognise the God who comes to me in every other human being. So I must try to see in that other person, who I shall probably never know, the Christ who is living, loving, suffering, rejoicing, just being alongside us.

During this Advent, when we prepare to welcome that feast of Christ's coming to us as a little child, perhaps a good way of doing that would be to try to develop that eye of compassion which sees him coming in everyone around us and to hold each and every one of them in loving prayer before God, recognising that in God we are one with them and that all that makes them who and what they are is ours also and is Christ's.

Notes

1. The whole episode is described in: Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1997), pp. 153-155. It was originally recorded in Merton's journal entry for March 19, 1958.
2. *Conjectures*, p. 155. The phrase was not included in the original journal entry.
3. From 'A Body of Broken Bones' in Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 77.

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