

# Theology and the Back Streets

## Kenneth Leech

Today my work base is located at St Botolph's Crypt in Aldgate, at the point where the City of London ends and the East End begins. I am employed here, on the staff of this inner city parish, as a theologian. The Crypt has, for thirty years, been the main centre for homeless people in the area. My task, in communion with my comrades and co-workers, is to try and make creative and redemptive sense of the turmoil and upheaval which characterizes this part of London, and through it try to discern the will of God and the working out of God's activity.

In this attempt to work out a theology in the midst of social struggle, many people, living and dead, have been of literally crucial importance to me. I chose here eight people, all dead, whose work, writings, and influence, and in two cases, personal friendship, have helped to give shape and direction, vision and inspiration, to my work. I believe that such reliance on, and communion with, other human beings is a necessary part of what it means to be part of the 'communion of saints' and indeed what it means to be human at all.

### **Sentinel on the world's frontier:**

#### **The contemplative spirituality of Thomas Merton**

'The men of the twenty-fifth and fiftieth centuries', wrote one commentator, 'when they read the spiritual literature of the twentieth Century, will judge the age by Merton.'<sup>1</sup> In spite of all the exaggerated claims, and the growth of a cult around his memory, there is no doubt that Thomas Merton (1915-68) was one of the most significant figures in the history of modern Christianity. One of the most prolific authors of his day, Merton was, for most of his life, an enclosed Trappist monk. He once wrote of his vocation:

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry.  
 Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon.  
 Beyond the scope of sight and sound we dwell upon the air  
 Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.  
 We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners  
 With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:  
 Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,  
 Planted like sentinels on the world's frontier.<sup>2</sup>

Two images dominate this poem: watching and listening. They are the key elements in contemplative prayer: vision and attention, the ministry of eyes and ears. There is another image: that of helplessness, marginality and bafflement. Together they represent the life of Thomas Merton, and, in a most powerful way, the situation of Christians in the present age, the situation which he embodied and symbolised.

Merton's life was a struggle with illusion, a struggle for humanity. In all his writing he laid great emphasis on the importance of 'accepting ourselves as we are in our confusion, infidelity, disruption, ferment and even desperation'.<sup>3</sup> He had seen many examples of people who were never themselves and who wore out their minds and bodies in trying to have other people's experiences.<sup>4</sup> So Merton was concerned with the attainment of solitude, of interior harmony and peace. His writings were taken up with such themes as the desert, conflict, and contemplation in the midst of action. In his view, contemplation was not a way of escape, an avoidance of action. It was an advance into the reality of solitude and the desert, into the confrontation with poverty and the void. Only through this process could any wholeness be achieved.

I discovered Merton in the midst of a very active ministry in Soho. He was a wise guide to me in a number of ways. He saw the danger of 'do-gooders' who rushed into the work of helping others, but did not deepen their own self-understanding and integrity. They could only communicate to others the contagion of their own obsessions, delusions, and prejudices.<sup>5</sup> Merton was a prophetic sign and warning to me as I slogged away at the problems of Soho, but he was also an illuminating symbol, a light for my path. For he spoke to me of the work of the solitary explorer, the monk who searched the existential depths of faith. The monk in Merton's vision was a marginal, restless person. The monk withdrew from 'the world' in order to 'deepen fundamental human experience'.<sup>6</sup> The monk confronted humanity at the point of darkness and despair. I

came to see that what Merton said about the monk was actually true of all Christians in the modern world. 'The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the contemporary world and its structures.'<sup>7</sup> But Merton went further than this: he held that the marginal position of the monk brought him into a solidarity with other marginal people and groups.

What drew me to Merton most of all was his sense of the holiness of the common, the immense dignity and value of ordinary life. For here was a mystic of the streets, one who saw glory in the midst of the common life. So, in a well-known account of one incident in his life, Merton wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. That we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.<sup>8</sup>

The sense of holiness of the world, and of the dignity and God-shaped character of human beings, which comes through so strongly in these words, was central to Merton's mysticism. It was through the common that one encountered the holy, through human beings in their ordinarieness and common life that one encountered the divine. Merton's spirituality was utterly incarnational and worldly. For it was into this world that Christ had come, and it was here, and only here, that he could be discovered, known, served and loved.

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world.<sup>9</sup>

Merton helped me to see that all of what is called 'social ministry' is in

fact a discovery of Christ, a revelation and epiphany of God's presence, a working out of the truth of the incarnation in terms of human relationships.

But Merton was a social critic as well as a servant. Or rather his servanthood was not to the false values of the world but to the prophetic Christ, the challenger and disturber of human illusion. He spoke words of truth to a world which existed in 'the womb of collective illusion'.<sup>10</sup> Much of Merton's later writing was of a prophetic kind, an expression of his disturbing ministry of interrogation directed towards conventional notions of reality and sanity. Merton saw real dangers in sanity, dangers which are brought out most clearly in his 'Devout Meditation on the Death of Adolf Eichmann'. Eichmann had been pronounced perfectly sane by a psychiatrist at his trial. How much easier it would have been for us all had he, and other key figures within the Nazi terror, been treated as psychotic, deeply deranged, mad. Yet he was quite sane, without doubt or inner turmoil. Merton sees his sanity as the central problem because, while we equate sanity with justice, humanity, prudence and the capacity to love, and rely on the sane people to preserve the world from barbarism, in fact it is the sane people who are the most dangerous. In a world where spiritual values have no meaning, the whole concept of sanity has become meaningless.<sup>11</sup> Merton believed that the 1960s in the United States were comparable to the 1930s in Nazi Germany, and it was symbolic that he died on the same day as Karl Barth.<sup>12</sup> Both of them had been theologians of resistance, spiritual figures of great power in confrontation with evil.

Because of his knowledge of the Christian resistance to Nazism, and because of his deep perception into the contemporary religious climate in North America, Merton saw the danger of false spirituality, specifically of that turning in on the self which led to narcissism and self-absorption.<sup>13</sup> There could be no abiding support for the life of prayer in a false supernaturalism which was not rooted in real life. So a major part of Merton's writing was devoted to the attack on unreality in religious life. In Henri Nouwen's words, 'Merton understood that the unmasking of illusion belonged to the essence of the contemplative life.'<sup>14</sup> Yet Merton remained hopeful about human potential and about the power of grace. Like Julian of Norwich, he believed in the reality of the image of God in humankind. That image was indestructible. It had been disfigured, but it could never be destroyed. Like Julian, Merton believed that there was a point within every person which was untouched by sin.<sup>15</sup>

Merton embodied in himself the trends, crises, spiritual currents and

polarisations of his age in a unique way. While his early writing was addressed to the world of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, his later work reflected, and helped to develop, a new age: the age of the counter-culture, of Vatican II, of the east-west dialogue, of the struggle for racial justice, of the recovery of the contemplative spirit, of resistance to nuclear weapons, of post-Constantinian Christianity. His book *The Sign of Jonas* (1952) was a significant turning point in his work, and by 1958 we were seeing 'a vastly expanded social consciousness'.<sup>16</sup> His writings from 1963 until his death in 1968 were the most important and most influential writings of his life. In these writings there was the concern to unite contemplation and action, the mystical and the prophetic, the revolution of the spirit and political revolution. These are among the key issues which will determine the shape of the Christianity of the future. They were the key issues of Merton's spiritual quest.

More than any other single individual, it was Merton who shaped my understanding of priesthood. I recall very vividly, at the height of struggles about drug policy in London in 1968, arriving back at St Anne's Chapel in the early hours, and reading, with renewed meaning, some words from *The Sign of Jonas*:

You just lie there, inert, helpless, alone, in the dark, and let yourself be crushed by the inscrutable tyranny of time. The plank bed becomes an altar and you lie there without trying to understand any longer in what sense you can be called a sacrifice. Outside in the world, where it is night, perhaps there is someone who suddenly sees that something he has done is terrible. He is most unexpectedly sorry and finds himself able to pray.<sup>17</sup>

More than any other words at that time, they helped me to see what I was up to.

## Notes

1. Clifford Stevens, 'Thomas Merton 1968: a profile in memoriam', *American Benedictine Review*, March 1969, p.7.
2. Thomas Merton, cited in George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton Monk and Poet* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), pp.41—2. [The lines are from the poem 'The Quickening of St John the Baptist'. See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp.199-202.]
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p.71.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre

- Dame Press, 1949), p.65.
5. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), p.164.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p.305. From Appendix 3: 'Thomas Merton's View of monasticism – Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968'.
7. *The Asian Journal*, p.329. From Appendix 7: 'Marxism and Monastic perspectives – Talk delivered at Bangkok on December 10, 1968'.
8. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.156.
9. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), pp.51–2. From the section: 'The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room.'
10. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.14.
11. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.29–33.
12. See David W Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p.12.
13. This is a recurring theme in Merton's writing. See especially Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1969).
14. Henri Nouwen, *Pray to Live* (South Bend, IN: Fides, 1972), p.54.
15. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.142.
16. F J Kelly, *Man Before God. Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p.xix.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Burns and Oates, 1953), p.41.

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The passage from *The Eye of the Storm* is taken from chapter 4: 'The Desert in the City – Contemplation and the Back Streets'. The author follows the section titled, 'Theology and the back streets: some inspirational figures from the past', with a short section on each of eight people, and highlights the way that they have shaped his ministry. They are: Julian of Norwich; St John of the Cross; Stewart Headlam (1847–1924) – the rebellious Anglican curate of Bethnal Green and considered by some to be the first true socialist in the Church of England; Thomas Merton; Dorothy Day; Saul Alinsky (1909–72) – American radical activist whose influence lies behind such movements as Citizens UK; Stanley Evans (1912–65) – Anglican radical and parish priest in Hackney, where he saw the role of the Church to reach out to people on the fringes; Ruth Glass (1912–90) – Academic and unwavering Marxist whose entire life and work was dominated by a passionate concern for the downtrodden and the oppressed. This article comprises the section on Merton which covers some of the same ground as his essay 'Thomas Merton – Theologian of Resistance', but testifies to the central importance of Merton in shaping the author's understanding of priesthood.