Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble

Martin Wroe

It's not often that three former US Presidents are present at the funeral of someone they each called a friend. But John Lewis, whose funeral took place in Atlanta, Georgia, on Thursday was a remarkable figure in American history. Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and George W Bush were all present to eulogise him.

One of ten children, born into a family of sharecroppers in Alabama, as a teenager Lewis was enthralled by a popular comic book which told the story of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, one of the first major protests against racial segregation. That book changed Lewis and by the age of 17, he had met Parks and King and began organising student sit-ins against segregated lunch counters. By his early twenties he was standing with King in the frontline of the civil rights campaign.

Despite beatings, arrest and imprisonment Lewis, like so many, refused to give up. As history was slowly reformed - painfully, haltingly, as it still is - Lewis went on to become a Democrat Congressman. He dedicated his life to making what he famously called 'good trouble, necessary trouble'.

Former President, Bill Clinton, described to mourners what Lewis had in his backpack, on the day in 1965, when he led 600 marchers from Selma to Montgomery. They stopped to pray when faced down by State Troopers, who then attacked them, breaking Lewis's skull. Lewis had packed his rucksack with an apple, an orange, toothbrush and toothpaste, and also a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk. Merton had given up the promise of a life in literature for life in a remote Cistercian monastery. Lewis, who had trained to be a Baptist minister, made a different switch - from the church into politics.

But both were dedicated trouble makers – convinced there was no division between prayer and politics, between contemplation and social justice. 'Without prayer,' said Lewis, 'the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings.' And Merton was not choosing to leave the world by becoming a monk – only choosing to see it differently.

'Prayer does not blind us to the world,' he said, 'It transforms our vision of the world.'

Contemplation produces transformation – as any one of us may find in the books we choose to put in our rucksack for the journey ahead. Books can help us pass the time – or books can change what we do with our time. We can lose ourselves in books – or find ourselves for the first time. The unassuming route from first page to the last, can change our entire story.

If you're lucky enough to have a few days away over August, be careful what book you choose to put in your backpack. To quote John Lewis, it might cause you trouble - 'good trouble, necessary trouble.'

Text of Thought for the Day, *broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Saturday 1st August. Used by permission of the author.*

John Lewis tweeted in June 2018: "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

The quote by Thomas Merton is from the start of the final chapter of *Contemplative Prayer*: 'Prayer does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all men, and all the history of mankind, in the light of God. To pray "in spirit and in truth" enables us to enter into contact with that infinite love, that inscrutable freedom which is at work behind the complexities and the intricacies of human existence.'

Martin Wroe studied theology before becoming a staff writer on *The Independent* and *The Observer*. He won a Sony Gold Radio Award for the Radio 1 series *The Big Holy One*, and co-authored, with Malcolm Doney, *The Rough Guide to a Better World* (2012). He is a volunteer vicar in his local parish and a regular contributor to *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4. He keeps chickens.