

Remembering Jim Forest and his great friendship with the TMSGBI

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At the very first conference of the TMSGBI held in Southampton in May 1996 'Your Heart Is My Hermitage', Jim Forest took part in the round table discussion between Merton's friends, and he also gave the Sunday homily.

In his homily he described how Thomas Merton brought people together:

Merton has been to each of us a guardian, a mentor, a source of encouragement, for some of us even a spiritual father. We have found in his writing, in his example, something of real importance in our lives. Not simply something - but someone.

At the most recent event organised by the Society and held online in May 2021, Jim presented his thinking on Merton's essay 'The Cell' (MJ Advent 2021) where he saw Merton's time in the hermitage as 'direct confrontation with the baffling mystery of God', and linked it to our own lockdown during the pandemic. In the 25 years in-between, Jim regularly contributed to the Society through his writings and presentations, speaking at conferences which included a day in Winchester in 2003, as a keynote speaker at Oakham in 2012, and in Scotland in 2018. He also offered personal friendship and guidance to many of us.

Jim's memoir, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines*, was published in 2020, and there one can read about his extraordinary life and vocation as a peace activist. His many publications include works on Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Dan Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, books on the roots of war, on the icons, grace, and loving our enemies. He has also written children's books; he was a regular user of social media communicating with many, many people all over the world.

For us in the Society he was also a direct link to Thomas Merton, offering us reminiscences and insights into their friendship. At the 1996 discussion, Jim spoke of Merton as one of the least contentious persons that he had ever met in his life, and he quoted this story that he learnt first from Merton:

It is simply a story he liked to tell. It is one of the Desert Father stories and it is included in the Wisdom of the Desert, of two fathers who had been living together for twenty years or more. One of the fathers said to the other, 'You know, we've never had an argument. It's not too late. Let us see what it is like because men in the world are always arguing.' And so, they discussed this and the other one said, 'I have no idea how to do it.' The first one said, 'It's very simple. All we need is a brick. I'll put the brick between us and I will say it's mine and you will say it's yours and then we will have an argument.' So, the other one reluctantly agreed - agreeable person that he was, he agreed to argue. The first father came with a brick and put it in the middle and said, 'This is my brick.' The other one did his very best and said 'This is my brick,' - very meekly. The first shouted, 'No, it is my brick!' And the other one said, 'Well, in that case . . . it's your brick.'

In his talks and writings about Merton, we can also see so much of Jim. For example, in the story above and when speaking of Merton's quality of fearlessness and what it might mean to live a fearless life. He suggested that reading Merton's journals we might hold in mind how open Merton is and unprotective he is about himself, and his future. This quote from the discussion is timely in the context of Jim's recent passing.

There is some place where he just says that you have to abandon yourself completely, to love God and love your neighbour. This sense of abandonment. Not to be worried about the future and what will happen. Will you have the house? Will you have this and will you have that? Will people care about you? Will you be important etc. etc.? ... [T]his theme ... is of simply abandoning yourself so that you can live very freely in the Resurrection because there is nothing actually to worry about. There's nothing we can do to prevent our death. There's absolutely nothing we can do to prevent a good deal of suffering in our own lives. It's all going to happen. And so, you just say well that's going to happen. The form it will take remains to be seen. The only thing that actually matters is just simply living in obedience, living in attentiveness to this wonderful creation that's been given to us and which will carry us along in whatever way is

necessary. This sense of the providence of God. Whenever you meet somebody like that, it's a life-changing experience. As much as people talk about it, when you encounter the reality of somebody who lives with that kind of absolute confidence in the providence of God, you are never the same again. It's very freeing.

In his homily Jim described love as a state of being radically awake. He added:

We can imagine that what will be strangest about heaven is how it is at once so familiar and yet so different. It will seem to us that in the first part of our lives, we were more asleep in the day than in the night. Our eyes were open but we saw so *little*. We heard so *little*. We understood so *little*. We loved so *little*. Not only our eyes but our souls were bricked over most of the time.

Opposing love is fear. Recall Merton's insight: 'The root of war is fear.' Still more important, recall the many times in the Gospel we hear the words, 'Be not afraid.' We are not speaking here about fear of God; this is in fact that fear which should cure us of all our petty fears. But how often do we allow fear to prevent us from reaching out to others, to divide us from others, to make us into enemies of others, even to decide what we will do with our lives and with whom we will spend our lives?

But in moments of love, we see more clearly and are able to live without fear in the freedom of the Resurrection. What freedom that is! As we sing throughout the Easter season in the Orthodox Church, the words falling on us like heavy rain on dry fields: 'Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life.'

In our sadness at the loss of Jim Forest, we express our gratitude for all he gave us and for the deep wisdom that he shared with us.

The texts of the round table discussion and Jim's homily may be found at <http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/Heart/index.htm>

Fiona Gardner was chair of TMSGBI 2004-2008 and co-editor of the Merton Journal from 2008-2014.