

Thomas Merton — Theologian of the Cross

David Scott

Those of you who have been bearing with me for long enough will have guessed that one of the theologians of the cross we are looking at in this second hour was likely to be the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton. Merton's early life and upbringing in France, and then in England, first in Surrey, then at Oakham School, and then in Cambridge, was somewhat peripatetic. The death of his mother when he was 6, and his father when he was 15, might give you some idea as to why he may well have had a fractured and troublesome early life. It wasn't until he went to America to continue his studies in New York, and finally discovered his vocation to be a Trappist monk, that we can begin to understand what the cross might have meant for the life of Thomas Merton.

The sacrifice that Jesus offered at Calvary has been taken on in the Christian life by an uncountable number of people. Each unique, as we all are unique in the sight of God. Merton gave up his essentially random existence and took on a life of monastic discipline dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ. It was a service lived in silence and worship. Merton gave up a lot of his external freedoms, to receive back the glory of belonging to God, and feeding his spirit from that deep source of infinite wisdom. Merton wrote: 'If you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on Earth, consult not your own imagination but faith. Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross.'

What might that look like and feel like for us? We, who are unlikely ever to be seeking formation in a monastery, how do we live in Christ in the ordinary world? How do we shoulder the cross day by day? First, we have to let Christ into ourselves. We have to invite him in. Some people experience Christ breaking in. St Paul experienced that, and Merton did as well. Before becoming a monk, he walked off the street into a church in New York, because he felt he had to. Once in the church, his life began to shift its orientation from self to the holy other, to the loving Christ, and to the father who welcomes back his prodigal son. What Merton felt, and ultimately felt in the heart of himself, was that he had been made new. It was the spirit's work, the work of love, the Spirit of Christ. He describes it like this: 'You keep finding this anonymous Accomplice burning within you, like a deep and peaceful fire.'

He said: 'Life in Christ is life in the mystery of the Cross.' We are involved in a sacrifice which brings struggle but it also brings peace and a sense of rightness. And he also says this about sacrifice, which comes fresh to my ears:

The implication seems to be that sacrifice is something *subjective* and *difficult*.

The true notion of sacrifice is, on the contrary, something quite objective and the note of difficulty and pain, is not essential to it except in so far as our weak and fallen nature comes into conflict with the divine will. By rights there is no reason why a perfect sacrifice should also be painless: a pure act of adoration, a hymn to the divine glory sung in ecstatic peace.

That's original! That our sacrifices for one we love can be a joy, a matter of deepest love.

'The mystery of the cross, of the redemptive death and resurrection of the saviour is renewed each day in the Eucharist,' says Merton, for us no doubt less frequently, but it would be good for us to remember that that is what our Sunday Eucharist is doing — It is making real for us the bread and wine, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Merton's life was not always so perfectly ordered and serene. He had a running battle with the Abbot, mainly over the freedom to become a hermit in the woods around the monastery. In one sense he became a bit of a law unto himself, eventually with good grace and permission. He continued to feed many people with his spiritual writings, which touched the mood of the times: that is the fifties and sixties, and still does. Christ became for Merton a more universal Christ; Christ longing to be with all sorts and conditions. Christ's cross remained a focal point in his hermitage. By his prayer and his writing and by the grace of God, Merton won back many souls for the love of God, and if you'll share the theology, continues to do so.

David Scott gave this homily during the Three Hour Service for Good Friday in 2010. The other Theologians of the Cross he included in his homilies during the service were St. Paul and Simone Weil. All the quotations by Merton are taken from 'Life in Christ' and 'The Mystery of Christ' in New Seeds of Contemplation.