

Introduction

But I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it. Daniel 8:27

Don Grayston recently sent an e-mail to a group of friends (of whom I am one) containing an article 'The Rise of Disaster Capitalism' by Canadian political analyst Naomi Klein and published in *The Nation*, dated April 14, 2005.¹ He prefaced the article by saying that he feared that what she is saying is true and asked for our responses. Another correspondent later remarked that as he read the article he also had that sinking feeling and that sense of powerlessness in the face of the greed and exploitation of the powerful.

Klein's article argues that disasters have become lucrative business and it doesn't much matter whether the disaster is of human origin (i.e. war /conflict) or an act of nature such as the tsunami last year in south-east Asia. Klein quotes Condoleezza Rice who ingenuously described this latter event as 'a wonderful opportunity.' In the article Klein reports on the establishment in the U.S. State Department of the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization that has drawn up 'post-conflict' plans for up to 25 countries *not yet in conflict*.

The cynical among us might wonder whether this is not more than simple forward planning (being prepared in the event of...) and is more akin to drawing up plans for the extraction of the resources of a new territory (there's gold in them there hills) and even laying the tracks for the acquisition of such territory – or is that going too far? Klein certainly believes that in the absence of the wild-west frontier, reconstruction (whether after war or natural disaster) is perceived to be the new *terra nullius* – virgin territory. And it is not simply good for business in terms of the companies involved and for the World Bank in financing the operations, it also clears the way for *political reshaping*. Which in turn of course is good for business....

Meanwhile, for light relief (?) I'm reading Malcolm Muggeridge's *The Thirties* and realizing that little has really changed. I detect many parallels between Ramsey MacDonald's claim to be 'an old fashioned socialist' whilst heading a government made up largely of Conservatives and Tony Blair's 'New Labour.' Much running back and forth to the

League of Nations in Geneva, or the U.N. in New York, frantically trying to avert war whilst cruising into the inexorable. *Plus ça change*. It is easy to become fatalistic – that's just the way it is, the way it's always been and probably always will be – but not world without end. That sinking feeling of powerlessness. What then is to be our response?

For those of us with faith, the response must be the response of faith. The faith that it is *not* 'world without end,' not simply in the sense of finitude (this world *will* come to an end) but in the sense of purpose and meaning (it is not all vanity). Faith also that we do not have the whole picture, we do not have the whole story: we do not know how it will all end but trust that ultimately justice will prevail. Although even as I write those words I have that nagging, accusing feeling that maybe that's too easy and it's not enough. What does justice look like for the little girl who's left alone, dusty and tear-stained, after her family has been blasted away in a strategic strike? For the parents receiving the coffin of their only son who died in the line of duty at 19? The hope of a heavenly home maybe, and that 'all shall be most well.' But what hope for this world now?

These are the questions that stand before us, unless we shut our eyes. They were the same questions confronting us at the Fifth General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland when we met at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham in June 2004. A year after the war in Iraq and in the early stages of 'reconstruction.' Three years into the 'war on terror.' And now as I write another year on, I sense no diminishment in the *threat* of terror, no diminishment in the sense of fear. In the face of this an indignant defiance arises within me that *I shall not be afraid*, and I hear the words quoted by Donald Allchin in his address in 2002: 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair.'

It is in the face of these questions that we sought to stand at the Conference and to wrestle with them and to make our response(s). The Conference title, 'Across the Rim of Chaos' articulates the sense of surreal inevitability with which our apparent powerlessness gives rise. There was even a feeling, a fear perhaps, that we had already crossed over into the abyss. Nevertheless keep your mind in hell and do not despair. The subtitle articulates the choice that lies before us: 'Peace and Plenty ... War and Destruction.' And in the choice there is perhaps also a hope.

Both title and subtitle are words drawn from Thomas Merton's

Prayer for Peace read in the U.S. House of Representatives in Holy Week, 1962. Kennedy was President, the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba had taken place a year before and the Cuban missile crisis was to come to a head in October of that year. The proliferation of nuclear weapons; the Cold War threatening to burst into flame; the struggle for civil rights; and Vietnam rising on the horizon. 'But how is it possible to be sanguine about the future in this age of the H bomb when this country is by and large so determined to be led by its fears into absurd and catastrophic situations?' asked Merton in his journal almost a year later (March 16, 1963). In the face of a no doubt familiar feeling of slipping inexorably towards catastrophe comes this prayer. It's not his only response to the times he lived in – there were all the words and letters and articles – but somehow this prayer focuses his response. A response of faith.

The prayer begins and ends with the affirmation that our peace is to be found in God's will.

In your will, O God, is our peace!

This is the heart and the premise of the prayer and of all our striving for peace: we believe that God is a God of peace. Yet in the world we find the opposite, not peace but war and conflict. The reason we do not have peace, Merton says in the prayer, is because we do not know God.

Because we do not know you, we have no peace.

Often it seems today God's name is freely evoked within the U.S. Administration and the populist American understanding of U.S. foreign policy is that it is ordained by God. I get nervous therefore when we begin to use God's name too freely or to think that we know what his will is. It becomes very easy to take the Lord's name in vain, attributing words to him that are not his words. This is a particular danger of our time (paradoxically given the rise of secularism) but it also applied in 1963 when a Catholic was in the White House. Though perhaps the crusading rhetoric was less in evidence then and God's name less frequently invoked to legitimize U.S. foreign policy. This no doubt reflects changing socio-religious culture. It is also reflected in the difference between the U.S. and the U.K. in justifying the Iraq War and continuing involvement there – God has less currency in Great Britain than in the United States.

As well as a response of faith the prayer also represents something of a *call* to faith: to trust that peace is indeed God's will and therefore to turn to God and seek him. Merton appeals to the faith of the Members of Congress in reminding them (in the prayer!),

that sins against the law of love are punished by loss of faith,
And those without faith stop at no crime to achieve their ends!

It's as if he is trying to appeal to the 'better sides' of the Members of Congress (are we like 'those without faith?'), which perhaps should not surprise us in a prayer to be read in the House of Representatives but it would be interesting to know what reaction, if any, the prayer received. Merton also holds up the clear spectre of judgment:

Our choice of peace or war may decide our judgment and publish it
in an eternal record.

In this he is impressing on his readers, those invited to pray the prayer with him, members of the U.S. government, the weight of the moment – 'this moment of destiny' ... 'this fatal moment' – the moment of choice:

In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient
architecture of peace
We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos.

The moment of choice that is also a moment of hope. Despite the gravity of the situation we may put our faith in the God in whose will is our peace and we may place our hope in the fact that there is still a choice to be made, even if the choice is simply not to resign ourselves to fatalism.

So he prays (as we may pray) to be saved from our obsessions, that our eyes would be opened, our confusions dissipated so that we might understand ourselves as well as others, not least our 'adversaries.' The first bidding in the prayer is therefore for self knowledge; that we may see beyond our illusions. It is a prayer that we may have clear sight and see things as they truly are. He then offers a number of biddings that we might use what we have for good and not for harm, to bless and not to curse and wrestles with the torment presented by the dilemma of having so much power at our disposal. A power that, he says, was not desired but by which the nation has become enslaved. He prays for long-suffering in anguish and insecurity, to wait and trust; he prays for light, strength and patience for all who work for peace;

and he prays for wisdom for all those, small or great, in positions of power, including 'our adversaries.'

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power,
Wisdom in proportion to our science,
Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might.

So well might we, as members of the powerful, technologically advanced, wealthy, mighty nations also pray. Merton asks God to 'bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples' along the road to what sound like traditional American values of 'justice, liberty and lasting peace' (c.f. life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness) which draws him to conclude the bidding section of the prayer by returning to our need for clear sight, having eyes to see things as they truly are:

But grant us above all to see that our ways are not necessarily your
ways,
That we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of your designs
And that the very storm of power now raging on this earth
Reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable decision.
Grant us to see your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm.

In Isaiah we are told that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and that our ways are not his ways (Isaiah 55:8) – there's no 'necessarily' about it! I can't help thinking that was a concession to Merton's Congressional audience. But the point remains that notwithstanding all that has gone before, the hands of faith remain upturned in acceptance as well as supplication. It's the response of faith and the response of the powerless to seek God's face in the midst of the cosmic storm, even if the storm has swept us across the rim of chaos. Or as Daniel's compatriots said to Nebuchadnezzar when faced with the prospect of being thrown into the fiery furnace:

If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of
blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if
not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and
we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.
Daniel 3:17,18

Merton's own comment on the prayer was:

One encouraging thing, though it does not amount to much. A Senator Kowalski asked me to write a prayer for peace, which he intends to read in Congress when testing is resumed. At least a symbolic gesture. But what we need is a really strong organization of all the different peace groups, and above all some way of making clear that this is not a question of oddball pacifism or radicalism of some spurious kind.²

A symbolic gesture, perhaps; and certainly not the only response; but as to how much it amounted to, who's to say? There's always the nagging question, the doubt, as to whether we can really make a difference, especially when the odds seem so stacked against us. It's easy to have that sinking feeling. On the positive side, despite all that did happen in the 1960s and all that threatened to happen, there was not a nuclear holocaust and we are still here. Hell though at times it may seem to be, we have kept our minds and have not despaired. And that, for now I guess, is my response to Don's e-mail and the potentially disheartening scenario presented to us by Naomi Klein.

The papers that follow offer further diverse, but complementary, responses to the challenges that face humanity today. Each in its own way brings to it the conviction that these challenges are at least as much to do with the inner world of the spirit as they are to do with the world in which we live. Each attempts in differing ways to bring these dimensions, the outer and the inner, together. And that, quite literally, is contemplation.

I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?' He said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined, but the wicked shall continue to act wickedly. None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand ...' Daniel 12:8-10

Angus F. Stuart
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Notes and References

¹ <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20050502&s=klein>

² Letter from Thomas Merton to Leo Szilard dated April 12, 1962. *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, William H. Shannon (ed.); New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995, p.50

Merton's Prayer For Peace

This prayer, written by Thomas Merton, was read in the House of Representatives by Congressman Frank Kowalski (D, Connecticut) on the Wednesday in Holy Week 1962.

Almighty and merciful God, Father of all men, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, Lord of History, whose designs are inscrutable, whose glory is without blemish, whose compassion for the errors of men is inexhaustible, in your will is our peace.

Mercifully hear this prayer which rises to you from the tumult and desperation of a world in which you are forgotten, in which your name is not invoked, your laws are derided and your presence is ignored. Because we do not know you, we have no peace.

From the heart of an eternal silence, you have watched the rise of empires, and seen the smoke of their downfall.

You have seen Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome, once powerful, carried away like sand in the wind.

You have witnessed the impious fury of ten thousand fratricidal wars, in which great powers have torn whole continents to shreds in the name of peace and justice.

And now our nation itself stands in imminent danger of a war the like of which has never been seen!

This nation dedicated to freedom, not to power, Has obtained, through freedom, a power it did not desire.

And seeking by that power to defend its freedom, it is enslaved by the processes and policies of power.

Must we wage a war we do not desire, a war that can do us no good, And which our very hatred of war forces us to prepare?

A day of ominous decision has now dawned on this free nation.

Armed with a titanic weapon, and convinced of our own right,

We face a powerful adversary, armed with the same weapon, equally convinced that he is right.

In this moment of destiny, this moment we never foresaw, we cannot afford to fail.

Our choice of peace or war may decide our judgement and publish it in an eternal record.

*In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient
architecture of peace*

We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos.

*Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate confusions,
teach us to understand ourselves and our adversary!*

*Let us never forget that sins against the law of love are punished by
loss of faith,*

And those without faith stop at no crime to achieve their ends!

Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us.

Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction.

*Show us how to use atomic power to bless our children's children, not
to blight them.*

*Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we
most hate, confirming in them their hatred and suspicion of us.*

*Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and
beyond bearing.*

*They are at once a torment and a blessing: for if you had not left us the
light of conscience, we would not have to endure them.*

Teach us to be long-suffering in anguish and insecurity.

Teach us to wait and trust.

Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace,

To this Congress, our President, our military forces, and our adversaries.

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power,

Wisdom in proportion to our science,

Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might.

*And bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples to travel, in
friendship with us,*

Along the road of justice, liberty and lasting peace:

But grant us above all to see that our ways are not necessarily your ways,

That we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of your designs

And that the very storm of power now raging on this earth

Reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable decision.

Grant us to see your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm,

O God of holiness, merciful to men:

Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found!

In your will, O God, is our peace!

Amen.