

Beyond the Politics of Peacemaking: Retrieving the Mystery of Hospitality

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At a number of levels Northern Ireland is trying to deal with the past, both politically and psychologically. Issues around truth-telling and personal stories, the search for justice and peace, the opening up of old wounds and their healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, have all come to dominate public life as never before.

In this paper I want to examine Thomas Merton's great capacity for conversation and friendship. Using examples drawn from his life experience, I will make some connections between the virtues of friendship and hospitality and the contemporary challenge of peacemaking. This will lead on to a consideration of some of the problems posed by the concept of forgiveness being lived out in a divided society. It might then just be possible that in listening to Merton, we catch a glimpse over the rim of chaos.

The process of peacemaking – which is the search and struggle for peace in our communal and personal relationships – is, first and foremost, an affair of the heart. Set against the current international context of various peace initiatives, whether it be a Good Friday agreement in Belfast or Middle East roadmap, there remains one single and most uncomfortably elusive truth: that true peace takes place within. This is particularly resonant in Northern Ireland just now. Peace cannot simply be packaged for us through the politics of spin with sexy promises of economic investment, foreign tourism and the eventual triumph of collective goodwill over the toxic poison of sectarianism. However, true and lasting peace is not the same as the absence of terrorism. With religious and social polarisation, an increasing drugs market and teenage suicide becoming an all too common feature of urban life, it would be foolish to become complacent. The after-shock of thirty years of violence still remains. After ten years of cease-fire

and with the reduction of the intense levels of political conflict that were once so familiar, people are now asking themselves the question: where is the peace we all voted for in 1998? Sadly, peace in our hearts and peace in our time cannot simply be 'delivered' like roses on St Valentine's. Peace-work is slow, painful and hidden – unlike much of the rest of our culture that demands the instant, the easy and the glamorous above everything else.

The decade of the 1950s brought very little peace for Father Louis, at least in the early part of that period. His own self-searching and restlessness were the result of a lengthy and often ambivalent reflection on the nature and scope of the monastic vocation in the world. This was a time full of big questions and big ideas in Merton's development both as a man and a monk. It is characterised by what Lawrence Cunningham has described as 'a temptation that he had to go through when all of these elaborate plans fall through ...'.¹ There would be no going off to the Carthusians, no new foundation in Latin America, no sailing away into the contemplative sunset to some remote island off the coast of Nicaragua and so on and so on. When the letter finally arrives from Rome telling him to stay put, the matter is closed. And Merton gradually begins to realise that peace of heart would have to be sown within himself in a small wooden tool-shed called St Anne's in the grounds of Gethsemani, the place that would later become his hermitage. He would have to look beyond the maps of geography for a solitude that would enable him eventually to address the world. Just like Merton, our only chance of a meaningful peace in Northern Ireland is to be found not in 'the elaborate plans' of the Dublin-London political establishment or some grand social vision of the great and the good. Rather, it is there already within the hearts and minds of the many, those who have come to know and trust in Peace and experience it for themselves.

Merton gradually came to the conviction that it might just be possible to develop an entirely new relationship with contemporary culture – even from within the contemplative setting and under the Rule of a Cistercian monastery. The year 1958 was to mark a significant watershed in his life. Much of the 1950's now seemed 'strangely inert and negative.'² He describes this renewed sense of psychological integration and wellbeing as 'finally coming out of a chrysalis.'³ After years of inner turbulence, voracious reading and intellectual exploration of a host of literary and philosophical sources, Merton's sense of himself

was being 'transfigured'⁴ by a deep compassion for the world beyond the enclosure. Having promised in *The Seven Storey Mountain* never to return to it, he was now experiencing what William Shannon calls 'a new point of vision,'⁵ of 'human solidarity in God'⁶ and union with others. But having finally come to a sense of peace within, how would he incarnate his new commitment to mission in the world? The traditional Benedictine vow of stability ensured that monks travelled only when absolutely necessary and monastic guests were always housed at a distance from the community. As Father Shannon succinctly puts it again: 'What did it mean for him to be in the monastery for others?'⁷

Making peace with the world would take the form of an 'apostolate of friendship'⁸ between Merton and intellectual culture spanning three continents and lasting the next ten years of his life. Convinced of the unique contribution that he might make in this area, he wrote to Pope John XXIII outlining his rationale. It is not the purpose of this paper to comment on particular relationships that Merton developed over this time, but it is worth identifying some of their enduring qualities.

Firstly, there were individuals he had known before becoming a novice, people like Mark Van Doren, Bob Lax and Robert Giroux from Columbia days, as well as Dan Walsh and Ed Rice. Merton somehow managed to faithfully sustain these various friendships over thirty years. There were also the major poets and writers he had discovered from other cultures and places, figures like Boris Pasternak and Ernesto Cardenal. And of course, friendships developed with scholars from other religious traditions such as the Zen scholar Dr. Suzuki, the Indian poet and philosopher Amiya Chakravaty and finally and perhaps most poignantly on that final pilgrimage of 1968, there were his meetings with the Dalai Lama. It is worth plotting the trajectory of these rich and varied encounters over such a fertile period of Merton's more 'mature' years.

It is important to note how Merton always maintained close contact with the key thinkers 'from within' his own Catholic tradition – both in America and beyond. Significantly, they tended to be with individuals on the cutting edge of new and challenging thinking, though he was well aware of the differences between the truly prophetic and the popularly faddish, particularly on the issue of church renewal. 'Outside his tradition' he was beginning to discover the Anglican Divines through Donald Allchin, as well as the Russian Orthodox writers like Berdyaev

and Lossky who provided much of the theological framework against which all this human exchange could be appreciated. And then from the vantage point of self-knowledge and awareness, he was able to reach out and transcend the culture of Christendom, towards an assimilation of the great religious mystics of the East. They represented such great potential for the unity in all humanity that he sought to reconcile within himself.

This would never become a merely academic exercise in comparative religious studies. Merton the monk was drinking in all this learning and wisdom and incorporating it with his own progress in the twin arts of prayer and writing. Such 'contemplative ecumenism' (to lift another phrase from Lawrence Cunningham) or the 'dialogue of the heart,' derived from a core belief in and experience of 'Christ as Word and Sophia-Wisdom' that was so central in Christian Orthodox theology and tradition. For Merton, Christ is the One who is present in the entire cosmos, uniting all things in Himself – the same Christ for whom insider and outsider distinctions are rendered obsolete:

God speaks and God is to be heard not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the voice of the stranger. That is why the people of the Orient, and all primitive people in general, make so much about the mystery of hospitality.⁹

Hospitality was something that Father Louis understood. For in the middle of all this serious 'inter-monastic dialogue' and boundary-crossing, there are flashes of wicked humour, friends call round for picnics-and-sixpacks of beer and head off into the woods for a stroll and plenty of conversation. Not forgetting a head-over-heels romance with a student nurse when he should have been lying low after a serious operation. Looking now at the photographs of Merton getting up to his old tricks in books by Ed Rice, John Howard Griffin and Jim Forest, the one word that sticks in my mind is 'human.' In fact, he looks so human that he could easily be mistaken for a Kentucky railroad worker or in other poses, a rather windswept Breton fisherman. In a recent issue of *The Merton Journal*, Jim Forest's account of first meeting his old friend at the monastery, emphasises those qualities of irreverent energy and deep humanity. He depicts the 'be-habited' monk on the floor of a guesthouse bedroom in Gethsemani: '... a kind of gale of joy ... his knees in the air, hands clutching his belly ... the man laughing with such abandon was Thomas Merton'.¹⁰

The playful joy and warm humanity so characteristic of Thomas Merton, have often been so glaringly absent in our peacemaking efforts over decades in Northern Ireland and in so many other parts of the world. These same qualities also tend to be in short supply in the life of the western church as a whole. Our public interaction with contemporary culture is often punctuated more by populist moralising, divisive in-house politics or sound-bite spirituality rather than by fraternal engagement, prophetic utterance on the global agenda and practical involvement on peace and justice issues affecting us all. I am not suggesting that peace and reconciliation should ever become the Merton equivalent of rolling around on the floor, though it is a pity that we have underestimated the importance of humour and laughter – at work, play and worship. However, I would want to argue that any model of peace-building that elevates 'forgiveness and reconciliation' over 'friendship and hospitality' is in danger of divesting that process of something universally attractive, mysterious and deeply profound.

The first problem, as I see it, relates to the language of forgiveness and the culture that has developed around it. Catholic priest and theologian, James Alison makes the very real but unpalatable point that 'the silken glove of forgiveness is but a clever disguise for the iron fist of vengeance.'¹¹ Putting that in a Belfast or Derry idiom, talk of forgiveness can be launched more like a petrol-bomb than applied as healing balm. Sadly, the demand for forgiveness tends to perpetuate a goodies-and-baddies sort of culture that can end up looking more like a caricature. It reinforces a 'them and us' view of society that makes a show of the guilty and the wounded alike, who often just want to be left alone or who have in fact, moved on much further than any of us care to imagine. This of course dismisses Average Joe and Jenny Public, who feel more like 'guilty bystanders' than terrorists or victims in all this, to the civic equivalent of the changing room where they no longer take part in the action. Sadly, everybody receives their own label according to this way of thinking – the righteous and the unrighteous, the criminal and the victim, the moral high ground and the low-life wasteland. It's the sort of worldview that might have worked with John Wayne and Hollywood westerns, but it's really rather weak as a meaningful theology of grace. In short, talk of forgiveness has become cheap because we naturally prefer sanctimony, rather than the breaking of our hearts as James Alison makes clear.

Yet time and again, the Gospels make it all too plain that the lost, the sinners and the downright damned have a special place in the affections of God. Professor Denys Turner makes the point very well when writing about this aspect of the ministry of Jesus:

... in particular he gained a reputation among his critics for being quite indiscriminate in the selection of the company he was prepared to keep ... he himself was unhappy at exclusive gatherings but obviously enjoyed the company of ex-prostitutes, reformed corrupt revenue officials, ex-terrorists and unpopular foreigners of different religions.¹²

We do not see Jesus entering into the empty media-speak of 'political negotiations', or 'setting the right agenda' for 'a tough round of bilateral meetings'. Nor do we find him 'playing theological hardball' or 'looking for a window' in the diary before 'entering a particularly tense phase of top level discussions on all the outstanding issues to date'. None of the above. But he does believe in sharing a good meal, enjoying a wedding reception, sitting down with friends and strangers, opening up the nitty-gritty of real conversation that eventually leads on to matters more serious.

The other thing Jesus does is to emphasise 'persons' over 'groups'. The current 'forgiveness model' of dialogue, I believe, falls into the seductive simplicity-trap of lazy stereotype. It offers the rather easy belief that the ABCs of religious and political identity are as obvious as Catholic/Protestant, Unionist/Nationalist, Loyalist/Republican; and we could broaden that list out to include Jew/Arab, black/white, old Left or new Tory, gay or straight. Yet secular Catholics, liberal Unionists and Republican Presbyterians do exist where I come from in the 21st century – they have done for quite some time. When 'people' begin to play second fiddle to 'parties and ideologies' then peacemaking can very easily lose its way. Archbishop Michael Ramsey once said that 'the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter ... in a country where there were movements and causes ... the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes, and others – our Lord gives many hours to one woman of Samaria, one Nicodemus, one Martha, one Mary, one Lazarus, one Simon Peter, for the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many.'¹³

Merton's engagement with issues like the Vietnam war, the civil rights struggle and nuclear disarmament came out of a long dialectic of 'silence', 'listening' and 'speech'. Monastic tradition with its emphasis

on the instructive power of stillness to reveal to us the things that really matter – both in ourselves and in our world – urges us to take seriously the centrality of the human person in all our efforts towards lasting peace. The Christian churches of the future – both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere – need to become better at keeping 'silence' if all that we are able to contribute is a theology of certainty or the politics of confrontation. We need to 'listen' more carefully to the often prophetic and unsettling wisdom of strangers to the pews, whose accusations of moral hypocrisy and indifference can ring so deafeningly true. Our 'speech' needs to acquire a new fluency in the language of compassion – one in which those hard guttural 'demands and pre-conditions' of so much political and ecclesiastical discourse – can be unlearned and transformed into the human poetics of Faith, Hope and Love.

Hospitality, Benedictine-style, calls us afresh to welcoming the stranger in our midst, to receiving the Risen Christ in every guest. Thomas Merton appreciated this and pursued it as a lifelong vocation, both in written correspondence and in person. With racism fast becoming the new sectarianism in various parts of Northern Ireland and in the light of a recently enlarged E.U., the challenge to Christians and wider society could not be more pertinent. Do we respond with generosity and openness of heart to neighbour as well as outsider, or do we continue to preach a false gospel of exclusion? I firmly agree with the new leader of the Corrymeela Community, David Stevens, when he says that 'there is a ministry of friendship and hospitality which is of vital significance'¹⁴ for the future of Christianity at this time. The time for talking peace is over – we've got to start living its demanding truth wherever we are and however insignificant we believe ourselves to be.

Peacemakers in the tradition of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Desmond Tutu, Jean Vanier, Brother Roger of Taizé and Thomas Merton, never failed to emphasise the essential oneness of all humankind. That common humanity – to be found even in our opponents and our enemies – is the thread that binds us to the other and is grounded in the Divine Other who befriended flesh and became one of us. This sort of message must never remain just a worthy idea, another idealistic pipedream. Rather, it must be worked out and lived. When this begins to happen, then peacemaking stands a chance and peace can become personal. For beyond the politics of peacemaking, broken and contrite hearts can be made whole again.

Notes and References

- ¹ Thomas Merton: *Poet, Monk, Prophet*, P. Pearson, D. Sullivan, I. Thomson (eds), Papers from the 1998 Oakham Conference. Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998, p.22
- ² Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Three 1952–1960*, Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.). San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996, p.200
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.200
- ⁴ William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*. London: SCM, 1993, p.178
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.179
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.179
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.179
- ⁸ Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p.64
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63
- ¹⁰ *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2003, Vol. 10, Number 2, p.44, taken from an address by Jim Forest
- ¹¹ James Alison, *On Being Liked*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003, p.45
- ¹² Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking*. London: SCM, 2002, p.62
- ¹³ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*. London: SPCK, 1972, p.42
- ¹⁴ David Stevens, *The Land of Unlikeness*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2004, p.90