

Following the Cosmic Dance
An Advent Reflection
Esther de Waal

REFLECTION

When on December 10 in 1941 Merton entered Gethsemani to follow his monastic life it would have been Advent and it would have been winter. He writes of this:

"The world around you is dead
Life has ebbed to its dregs
The trees are stripped bare
The birds forget to sing
The grass is brown and grey
You go out into the fields with mattocks to dig up the briars
The sun gives its light, as it were, in faint intermittent explosions, 'squibs' not rays, according to John Donne's conceit in his Nocturnal on St. Lucy's day."

What these months of November and December bring I find most clearly recognised by the Celtic people for whom the year started on November 1st, as that was also the date on which the timing of Benedict's liturgical hours also changed annually. For this is, in the northern hemisphere, from time immemorial, the turning of the year, the passing of the year, the thinnest time of the year, the season at which the darkness overtakes the light, when the flocks are brought into the homesteads, beasts are slaughtered, bonfires are lit to burn the old carcasses. Winter means darkness, cold, barrenness, the threat of danger and of death.

But it is also the time when the cry rings out:
O radiant Dayspring
splendour of eternal light and Sun of Righteousness,
come
and shine on those who dwell in darkness
and the shadow of death

In the church itself, at Gethsemani that first evening it was the second Vespers of St. Lucy, the light-bringer, and in the liturgy, Merton found warmth and light. "The cold stones of the Abbey church ring with a chant that glows with living flame, with clean, profound desire ..."

And then, every day from then on, the office would continue with the deep impassioned cries of the old prophets calling out to God to send the Redeemer.

Merton therefore found himself inserted into the life of the monastic

community at the point at which both the calendar of the church and the pattern of the changing seasons draw on deep, traditional images and symbols ... that season in which symbols and images crowd in, touching us in depths which are not accessible to words.

the symbols of light and dark,
of sleeping and watching and waking

of dying and coming to new birth

a time of looking forward,
a time for the deepening of the memory of God's great deeds in times past
and a looking into the future to the fulfilment of time by him who came and is still to come.

Here is a recognition of something that is very deep, primitive in the pattern of the year, the liturgical year, the changing seasons, and the way in which we respond to that pattern, that rhythm. Praying in this way carries a reminder of the flow of times and seasons, the pattern of creation, the pattern of redemption, the wholeness of our lives and their connectedness with the physical world around.

This was something that was written into Merton's prayer in the years that followed: the movement from the dark to the light, from sleep to daybreak.

Merton we know used to rise at 2.15am when the night was at its darkest and most silent:

"It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to dawn.

It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of the Day, in blank silence when the sun appears ..."

These were his hours of secret prayer. We can only glimpse them. That is right. Why this man matters to each one of us here is precisely for this reason - we cannot capture him, in words, theses, books, articles. He is bigger than all of us - because there is something in him that is totally, universally human and that therefore touches some deep, secret place of our own humanity.

To rise before dawn was of course the pattern of the monastic day, so if at the end of his life he prayed alone in his hermitage, in those early days he would have prayed in choir with his brothers, a day that would also have begun in the darkness, rising for the opus Dei, the work of God, in Vigils and Lauds at

3am and move on towards the coming of the light, - the daily reminder of what the Gospels speak of, waiting expectantly, not being found slumbering or with closed eyes and deaf ears, for the daily coming of the Lord, and for the promise of his final coming.

Those hours before dawn. Rising in the dark of the night and watching the slow coming of the dawn.

'It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of the Day, in blank silence when the sun appears. In this completely neutral instant I receive from the eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'Day', which is never the same. It is never spoken in any known language.'

Here is something here that is universal, fundamental to all humanity. I saw it recently in the native America tradition - as it common to all traditional religion just as the Celtic peoples daily saluted the coming of the sun with joyful reverence. 'In the life of the Indian there was only one inevitable duty - the duty of prayer ... His daily devotions were more necessary to him than daily food ... He stands erect before the advancing dawn, facing the sun as it dances upon the horizon ... Each soul must meet the morning sun, the new sweet earth and the Great Silence alone!'

Merton prayed those hours in secret and alone.

I think that we should draw back, that we should not try too hard to analyse, dissect, organise every thought, every sentence. I think that we should stay with the hiddenness, the secrecy. That after all was what he was quite clear about in 'The Sign of Jonas' (May 17 1947) 'The inviolability of one's spiritual sanctuary, the center of the soul, depends on secrecy. ... Do not let your right hand see what your left hand is doing. Keep all good things secret even from yourself'.

'A person is a person insofar as he has a secret and is a solitude of his own that cannot be communicated to anyone else. I will love that which most makes him a person: the secrecy, the hiddenness, the solitude of his own individual being, which God alone can penetrate and understand'. And then he goes on 'A love that breaks into the spiritual privacy of another in order to lay open all his secrets and besiege his solitude with importunity does not love: it seeks to destroy what is best in him, and what is most intimately his'.

Those hours before dawn were Merton's secret and hidden time with Christ, not because he wanted to seek Christ, but because he believed that that was where Christ wanted to find him. He said of his own Christian life and belief that it was

'life and wisdom in Christ
it is a return to the Father in Christ
it is a return to the infinite abyss of pure reality in which our own reality is grounded
and in which we exist
It is a return to the source of all meaning and all truth'

'Whatever I have written, I think it can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ'.

If we know little about what shaped each day for Merton in his hidden, secret times of prayer, we do know that that prayer would have included the psalms. He speaks of reciting the psalms aloud. But he also gave himself over to those other psalms that have no words -

... the psalms of the rain,
of the odors and the cracking of the fire,
the psalms of the stars and the clouds and the winds in the trees
all equally eloquent
And also in this context,
the psalms of one's coughings and sneezing and coffee drinkings.
The psalms of one's heat rash.
for in this nothing need to be hidden from God,
and nothing is lower than any other thing.
All things are taken up and become whole in contemplation.
One does not waste time sorting them grading them,
evaluating them.
They are there as reality, and that is that.
They do not offend God.

He did not waste time sorting them, grading them
They were part of the whole reality and that was that.

His world was a whole, just as the cosmos of the Israelites of the psalms was a whole, one part touching another, and the parts touching the whole

This sense of the wholeness, and the holiness, of the world. It is about accepting each thing for itself, it is about touching, handling with time and with patience so that each thing may reveal itself. It is about not picking and choosing, about accepting the dark with the light and recognising that interconnectedness that ties them together.

But Merton also prayed before the blessed sacrament. Again this is his secret, hidden life and we should not try to possess, to penetrate it. But Fr. Timothy, for long his confessor and close friend, now in Vina the daughter house of Gethsemani, has spoken to me often of how he would see Merton there, kneeling before the blessed sacrament, and how in that he believed lay the centre and core of his life.

For this man, to whom creation meant so much, and in that I include the totality of the whole created world, was no less a part of the church, of the sacramental life of the Church, and he knew God as redeemer as well as creator.

He prayed as he walked through the woods, sat on the porch of his hermitage, but he also prayed in church. That new abbey church at Gethsemani which owes so much to him.

But then again these were not separate things. Here he is, in January 1947, at the end of a week in which he has been serving Fr. Abbot's mass, said in the back sacristy while the conventual mass is going on in the choir. 'Cistercian architecture explains many things about our rule and our life ... "He loved the early Cistercian churches of France" A church like Sananque is born of prayer and is a prayer. Its simplicity and its energy tell us what our prayer should be. It simply says what Saint Benedict already told us: that we must pray to God 'with all humility and purity of devotion ... not in many words but in purity of heart and in the compunction of tears ... The churches of our Fathers expressed their humility and their silence. There was nothing superfluous about either the office of our Fathers or their architecture, ... they did not waste words with God or with men.'

Merton was after all shaped and formed by those Fathers of the Cistercian tradition, and by those communities who in the succeeding centuries kept that life alive in their small or great churches, in their communities, in their dedicated lives of praying the office, celebrating the sacraments. He built on them. Today if we are remembering with gratitude a prophetic figure of that tradition we should also remember, with gratitude all those anonymous, silent, devoted men and women who lived out the Cistercian life in humility and in silence.

Here he is, as it were, thinking aloud to himself in December of that same year, saying again how much he loved the Cistercian architecture of the past because it grew out of the monastic life, and that life is a search for God. "They built good churches because they were looking for God. And they were

looking for God in a way that was pure and integral enough to make everything they did and everything they touched give glory to God.' (Sign of Jonas, December 28, 1947)

What a long way Merton was come by December 1968 from that first winter, that first Advent in Gethsemani. He is now in Bangkok, hot and steamy, surrounded not by his Kentucky family of fellow-monks, but by brothers and sisters drawn from a world-wide monastic family. And here he is part of them, speaking to them of what shapes his life, that journey to God which he called on that morning of December 10th a journey of transformation, the change from the old into the new, "... a commitment to total inner transformation of one sort or another - a commitment to become a completely new man. It seems to me that that could be regarded as the end of the monastic life, and that no matter where on attempts to do this, that remains the most essential thing."

It is of course age-old, the journey, the quest, the search, the continuing journey. It is a journey which is only possible because he had 27 years before come home when he had entered the portals of Gethsemani. So this final, exterior journey is part of the whole, the mysterious whole, of being at home in himself, of making that interior journey by which he all the time asked new questions, broke new boundaries, And all the time holding everything together.

'Each of us has to find the unity in which everything fits and takes its right place
Each must work out just what the right amount may be and it varies at different times of our life.'

In his own life Merton faced the opposites, knew that they depend one on the other
lived them out so that they would bring integration

Doing all this, as it were, for each one of us
Doing all this, as it were, for what the 20th century is exploring, where it is leading us all whether we belong to any church or not.

'We must contain all divided worlds within ourselves' he once said.

'Bring together the west and the east,
the past and the future
the dark of night, the light of day/dawn
the life of the solitary, the life in community
the psalms of the Bible, the psalms of our coughings and sneezings

time calling on God, time for shouting for cold beer'

and all the time knowing, feeling himself to be a part of the whole universe as it swings on its axis of day and night, times and seasons, the coming of death, the coming of life.

And in one of his most lyrical pieces of writing he asks us whether we too want to join in this great cosmic dance that is going on all the time around us. This is mysterious. I am glad of that. I want to stay with something that I cannot entirely grasp, let alone possess. I glimpse of course, in vivid shafts of insight, from his writings, from the images of his photographs, from lines in his poems, his own awareness of what this cosmic dance is, the cosmos as God made it, moving in perfect harmony with its Creator. it is a gift that God gave to himself, in which he himself took delight.

So Merton then leaves us with a question.

The men and the women whom God made to be in this garden of his making were made in his own image - and were made to be free. So we have this choice: to be separate and apart, or to discover our own true identity, our real selves, and 'to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance'.

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