

The Gift To Be Simple

Thomas Merton and the Inner City

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You know how some people with a reputation as scholars, who give the impression of having the brainpower and all the emotional sensitivity of a mainframe computer, reduce ordinary mortals like ourselves to talking gibberish and mumbling platitudes about the weather. And yet others, maybe much more impressive in their scholarship, immediately put you at ease and come across as totally human. Well, though of course I've never met Thomas Merton, and despite the fact that he's written more books than I've had hot dinners, and read more books even than Ken Leech, I feel sure that he would put me at my ease, gratefully break open the can of beer which I brought, and chat as if we'd known each other for years. I'd feel that he would be interested in what I had to say whether it was trivial gossip or high-level philosophy. I hope that with Merton's help I can ask some questions in this paper, and important ones, about the church's role today.

My perspective is that of an ordinary Church of England parish priest trying to make sense of ministry and mission in late 20th century London. There are some specifics about that package which won't be shared by all or even many of you. It's different outside London; it's different outside the Church of England, and it's different even in the inner city and the suburbs from the rather nondescript urban fringe where we operate. And of course it's incredibly different from an enclosed monastery in rural Kentucky half a century ago. But I guess that Merton's insights are prophetic enough and universal enough to have a lot to say about our own situations.

I began my ministry in the late sixties, so I was a pretty immature and inexperienced young priest when Thomas Merton died in 1968. His books had been recommended to me but I didn't read any of them and knew next to nothing about him for ages. It was Monica Furlong's biography (which of course has its critics) which opened my eyes to him and his significance. Bit by bit from then on

his insights began to percolate into my consciousness. And there was one quotation in particular which stuck in my mind and kept itself there as a sort of motto, a guiding principle for anyone who has some sort of responsibility for or influence on a Christian congregation. Unfortunately it is so long since I read it, that I can't remember which book it appears in or whether I've got the wording right. (Perhaps someone can help - I've asked people before with no luck.) But I remember it striking me so much that I copied it down and had it pinned up over my desk for a year or so - so I'm sure the sentiment is genuine Merton. It's this, as far as I can remember it:

The monastic community is called together by God, not to indulge in polite religious discourse... but to hear the Word of God, and to open up to it as a flower opens to the sun.

And of course it applies every bit as much to the ordinary parish church as it does to a Trappist monastery in the Kentucky countryside. It was perhaps the guiding principle of Merton's own life and how he saw himself fulfilling his vocation.

Last year the Diocese of Southwark, and the parish, bundled me off for a 3-month sabbatical, and I was able to make a sort of pilgrimage alongside Thomas. I was in at the birth, so to speak, in Prades in southern France, and paid my respects at the simple grave in the community cemetery at Gethsemani. But I have to say I chickened out on the Bangkok bit. Mainly for reasons of time and money, but also because I admit that I've yet to catch up with the whole multi-faith perspective of the *Asian Journal*, and I suppose I didn't really want to tempt providence by risking contact with dodgy electrical fittings.

I've identified three strands of Merton's pilgrimage. I was going to say three stages, but that would make it too neat and tidy, and suggest that his life was a smooth progression towards enlightenment, or something. It wasn't of course - and it's very reassuring to know that Merton's life was as messy and complicated and full of contradictions - and yet he can still show us something of God's glory.

Stranger and pilgrim

These all died in faith... and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

[Hebrews 11:13-16 KJV.]

Thomas Merton was born in frontier land. Prades is in the very south of France, in the foothills of the Pyrenees and surrounded by the remnants of ancient Catalan culture and language. The town - at least at first sight, as one arrives from the station - is grey and dusty, cement-rendered walls and lots of ornate but graceless ironwork. The main street seems like an alien implant from northern France into rural Catalonia. It reminded me of nothing so much as a small Welsh town. Towns in Wales were English outposts from which the locals at one time were barred, and even now they retain a slightly uneasy air in contrast to the open beauty of the surrounding countryside. Where do you belong if you're born into this sort of environment? Do you side with the occupying power or the oppressed tribe?

I was writing this part of the talk three weeks ago when there was one of those evenings you sometimes get even these days on television - three hours of unmissable gems. First of all there was the *Inspector Morse* one-off, when he investigates a miscarriage of justice in the 19th century. Then there was the last of Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* (the one with Thora Hird). And finally Victoria Wood. Morse is the odd-ball, the policeman who doesn't fit into police culture but because of this can see injustice that others miss (it's a pity there wasn't a Morse to catch Stephen Lawrence's murderers). Alan Bennett is the wry northerner who is a compassionate observer of ordinary people's lives because he can both identify with them and is inevitably distant from them at the same time. And Victoria Wood has a lot in common with Alan Bennett. They're all outsiders. But for Merton, his outsider's view was sharpened by his Christian and monastic perspective.

Listen to this quote from *Raids on the Unspeakable*. In 'The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room', Merton meditates on the 'mystery of Peace... proclaimed to a world that cannot believe in peace.' [p45] The Word is spoken to the world from outside. The 'unspeakable', Merton says, is

the void that we encounter, you and I, underlying the announced programs, the good intentions... the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. [p.4]

Perhaps he would also say, if he were alive today and commenting on contemporary British politics, that the unspeakable is the void that sucks the life and hope out of New Labour's good intentions. But, with a slight shift of perspective, the 'unspeakable' could become the word that fills the void, the word of hope that is spoken by the outsider. The Word that is made flesh in the child born in the stable because rejected by the world. The unspeakable spoken by the child in the crowd as the naked emperor parades past.

Minorities speak the unspeakable. The still small voice of the outsider needs to be heard despite the clamour of the powerful. The danger is not just that of obvious tyrannies like those of Hitler and Pinochet, but the imperialism of a culture that is deaf to anything other than clichés and half-truths. Like the American blockbusters filling our cinemas and TV screens. It is not just that they are blocking out our own culture, but that in their blandness they ignore the real richness of America's own culture. Just as the whole 'New Labour' phenomenon owes its success to the suppression of the voices of the minorities. As Peter Selby, now Bishop of Worcester, wrote in 1991:

We are increasingly in a position where the vote, which was the device for preventing those with military or economic power from oppressing the majority is now the means whereby a relatively well-off majority puts out of its mind the increasing poverty of minorities.

[BeLonging, p.12]

Middle England has won. It was Middle England where Thomas Merton the teenager lived and studied. Oakham today is the sort of trim, prosperous Heritage market town where you expect to find the sort of middle-ranking independent school that you do. No doubt a couple of generations later, Merton would have been as much out of place in an inner-city comprehensive school. But certainly at Oakham he was an outsider, though it seems a generally happy one. It's there that he encountered anglicanism as interpreted by the Revd Buggy Jerwood:

'His interpretation of the word "charity" in [1 Corinthians 13]... was that it simply stood for "all that we mean when we call a chap a 'gentleman'." In other words, charity meant good-sportsmanship, cricket, the decent thing, wearing the right kind of clothes, using the proper spoon, not being a cad or a bounder.'

[Seven Storey Mountain p.75]

This has echoes of John Betjeman -

St. Mary's where the Rector preached
In such a jolly friendly way
On cricket, football, things that reached
The simple life of every day:

[Distant View of a Provincial Town]

At Cambridge Merton the outsider tried hard to be the 'insider'. The *Red Cow*, a pub he frequented, is a symbol of that. He hurt several people along with himself in that disastrous episode of his life. But if he hadn't, who knows how things might have turned out instead. He could have graduated, gone to Westcott House and ended up as an Anglican archdeacon. Thank God he remained an outsider.

Dancing in the Water of Life

... is the title of the recently published fifth volume of his journals. But it's a theme, the enjoyment of the richness of the world and humanity, which has always been very much part of Merton. In *The*

Seven Storey Mountain he describes his childhood years in St. Antonin. It's a very small and somewhat forgotten medieval town in the hills near Albi in the south of France. To an impressionable ten-year-old, arriving from the stark modernity of America, this would be a powerful experience of another mysterious and ancient world. It is still a 'labyrinth of narrow streets', and its general atmosphere is of a town that has seen better days. As Merton describes it

'The medieval town was there, but for the fact that the streets were no longer crowded and busy, and the houses and shops were no longer occupied by prosperous merchants and artisans, and there was nothing left of the color and gaiety and noise of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, to walk through those streets was to be in the Middle Ages, for nothing had been touched by man, only by ruin and by the passage of time.'

[*The Seven Storey Mountain* p.36]

A notable feature of the town is the number of relief carvings on various walls. They celebrate the humanity of the people of that day. One in particular is singled out by the Tourist Board with ubiquitous brown signs pointing to 'La Maison d'Amour'. It is a simple carving of two heads, a young man and a young woman exchanging a loving kiss. The young Merton must have seen this frequently, and it is not too fanciful to suggest that the image must have alternately mocked him and encouraged him throughout his life. It symbolises the importance of human love and the personal dimension to any religious or political scheme. But St. Antonin - and even Oakham, to some extent - is an organic civilisation based on Christendom.

What impressed the young Merton more than anything was not its humanity as such, but the fact that the church was geographically and spiritually at the centre of its life. Quite unlike the secular city of the 20th century. New York is the epitome of a human construct. Manhattan at least appears to be a computer-generated city built in defiance of the natural order. Geometrically aligned streets are arranged and numbered in a strict grid pattern. A world so much a human construct that it appears inhuman.

And yet, like birds nesting in telegraph poles, human beings in all their variety and unpredictability make use of the city on their own terms.

One of the excitements of living in a big city is discovering the rich variety of ways in which people use the large-scale structures. Workshops and warehouses and discos in railway arches . . . tiny dwellings shoved in at odd angles on corner sites . . . improvised playgrounds . . . Rather than the museum-like order of a 'heritage site' or tidily policed conservation area, the buzz of the city comes from its untidiness and scruffiness as much as from its monumental architecture and impressive monuments. Or rather, it comes from the juxtaposition of the two aspects, order and chaos.

In England at least, probably since the industrial revolution, there has been a fear of cities and a sense that urban life is unnatural and inhuman, in contrast to the 'natural community' of the small town or village. Of course it is true that one can feel very much alone when surrounded by city crowds. But the city is home to the outsiders, the eccentrics, the ones who challenge easy assumptions. The best photographers of urban life, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, are compassionate and inclusive in their observation. They accept human life as it is without passing judgement. In the same way, those of us who live in cities are used to the great variety of human 'sorts and conditions', and feel uneasy in those places where such variety seems threatened.

Cities, as even a rural poet like Wordsworth recognised, can be places in which to dream. Merton as a young man in New York allowed his emotions and memories free rein:

Today has the smells of a feast. A girl sitting opposite me in the restaurant at breakfast: some perfume on that reminded me of several things. First, the perfume and the softness and complexion of her skin reminded me of a whole class of girls I had been in love with from fourteen on...

Then the perfume too reminded me of all sorts of Sundays and feasts and the rich smells going with them at Douglaston The smell of powder and perfume in my Grandmother's room. The smell of the same room, with all the heat on, in the morning, with my Grandfather having

breakfast in bed: so the room smelling of perfume, powder, coldcream, radiator heat, fried eggs, toast, strong coffee. All at once...

Noises:

Outside, now, it is raining.

Noise of a cocktail shaker at Douglaston, first with a martini being stirred in it, then with something being shaken in it. Generally, sun outside, or late slanting sun through the French windows...

[*Run to the Mountain* p.32]

I am sure that reflection in this sort of way is not just idle speculation but has something of deep value. As a priest I find that there is a sort of pastoral saturation point, when it is impossible to take in any more personal problems or religious words or formal prayer. We are called, however, not simply, or not mainly, to be pastoral problem-solvers, but to offer the life of our communities in prayer. And that life is reflected in graffiti-daubed underpasses, the blank walls of a warehouse, granite setts reflecting the evening sun, clouds scudding across the sky behind the chimney-pots. It passes through with much haste but rather less speed, in the rush-hour traffic, the midnight lorries, the children crowding onto the after-school buses, the commuters pouring out of the stations. It is lived with varying degrees of intensity and happiness behind the succession of front doors in different colours and states of repair; around the dining tables and television sets; in the living rooms and bedrooms; and in the pubs, restaurants and checkout queues.

The turning point of Merton's monastic life has been seen as the moment when he was once more able to acknowledge the goodness of human life and accept it as God-given. It is the significant moment when

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... And if only everybody could realize this! But

it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking round shining like the sun.

[*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp.156-7]

The gift to be simple

The image of a ladder-back, cane-seated chair hanging on pegs on the wall is familiar to anyone who has dipped into a book on 'Shaker style'. Its classic minimalism appeals to many people today who are reacting against the fussy and ostentatious. For them the IKEA slogan, 'chuck out your chintz', strikes a chord. A trivial obsession with surface style, maybe: but one, surely, that would not have arisen without a deep if inarticulate dissatisfaction with the way we live now. And anyone who is able to exert the self-discipline necessary to survive in a starkly minimalist environment, with not a superfluous possession nor anything out of place, has my admiration for possessing at least some of the attributes of sanctity.

Merton was fascinated with, and several times visited, the Shaker 'village' at Pleasant Hill, near Gethsemani. The community there died out earlier this century, but their buildings and environment are very fully and imaginatively preserved, and give a great insight into the beliefs and way of life of the Shakers. They had much in common, despite arising from a very different tradition within Christianity, with the Cistercians. The Shakers rediscovered simplicity, which is all about the integration of life and work, work and prayer.

It's not an easy task for the majority of us who are called to live as Christians in a very un-simple world and find ourselves compromising at every step with alien values. But maybe the Shakers died out (almost - there is still one very small community left) because it is impossible to be totally self-sufficient and live without compromising to some extent with the world. Merton is very scathing about the monastery succumbing to capitalist values - supermarkets in upstate New York are full of 'Monks Bread' baked by the Trappists at Genesee and marketed complete with sermon on the wrapper. But how do we keep faith and at the same time keep alive?

'The gift to be simple' – is a gift. Not something that we earn. But it's a gift that we can only receive if firstly we are aware of ourselves as 'strangers and pilgrims' and also compassionately in love with the world and our fellow humans. In his hermitage Merton was able to do justice to both these aspects.

Raids on the Unspeakable begins with a meditation entitled 'Rain and the Rhinoceros'. Although it was written over thirty years ago it could be a commentary on recent privatisations in this country:

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By "they" I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even your rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness.

[*Raids on the Unspeakable* p.7]

In his characteristic style, Merton draws profound truths out of his experience of simple reality. He describes the sound of the rain on the roof of his hermitage, his walk up from the monastery 'sloshing through the cornfield', cooking his simple supper (and hints at his culinary ineptness – 'It boiled over while I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread.') There are some wonderful images: 'The woman from the delicatessen scampers along the sidewalk with a newspaper over her head.' '...the obsessed citizens. . . do not see that the streets shine beautifully, that they themselves are walking on stars and water, that they are running in skies to catch a bus or a taxi...'

The hermitage was a crucial part of Merton's life. It's often been remarked upon that his increasing solitude went side by side with his deepening solidarity with humanity and especially with the civil rights and peace movements. And I'm sure that's not a contradiction. All too often, those who are involved in political campaigns lack imagination . . . they've lost the capacity to dream and they become

rigid, judgmental, and ultimately inhuman. The same is true of religious zealots as we know all too well.

In his hermitage Merton could dream, write poetry, observe the changing seasons and the simplicity of natural objects. He became a talented photographer.

Of course, the clearest expression of the simplicity we're after is in the Cistercian way itself and especially the liturgy. Elaborate display in worship is alien to that, although in the pre-Vatican II days Merton found plenty of that even at Gethsemani. His attitude to liturgical reform was more ambivalent than you might expect, but he was more often exasperated by pomposity than simplicity. True simplicity is very different from the earnest preachiness of the ASB or the similar 1970s liturgies in other churches.

And the ultimate simplicity in the grounds of Gethsemani, along with all the other identical memorials, is the cast iron cross with the simple inscription "Fr Louis Merton, died December 10 1968".

So what is his legacy? Can I just recap on those three areas again and suggest what they might mean for the church where I serve.

Firstly. . . we are outsiders, strangers, pilgrims. The Church of England is perhaps the last denomination to catch up with this reality. We carry this tremendous burden of guilt because we feel responsible for the whole world. Of course there was plenty of merit in the *Faith in the City* report, but behind it there was the sense of a whole load of public-school educated bishops feeling the need to do good to the poor. It's a great relief not to have to bear that burden any more - because the 'establishment' in the inner city is irrelevant. We don't have to feel that *as the church* we have to solve the world's problems. We can focus our energies on what is most important. Which is not avoiding the poor, any more than Merton did that in his hermitage, but trying to see the wood without being overwhelmed with too many trees.

Secondly. . . we are human beings. Perhaps in reaction to the growing irrelevance of the church as an institution, many parishes like our own have in the past turned in on themselves and become a religious club. Church based organisations provided a substitute Christendom, some familiar territory in the midst of an alien world. What's happening now is that we're attracting more and more young stressed out people who have no time, energy or enthusiasm for that -

they are part of this alien culture but they sense the need for a different perspective. We need a church which affirms their humanity and gives them strength to live in the world and yet remain outsiders and critical.

Thirdly, is the need to be simple. I often feel that running a church today is like driving a Routemaster bus down a country lane where there is never more than one or two passengers. We have inherited so much junk, and so much 'machinery' that needs to be maintained.. People walk through the door of the church wanting some vision, maybe even wanting to get on board a new exciting movement, and we feel duty bound to sign them up for a covenant scheme, co-opt them onto the PCC etc . . . And if they are not scared off by all that, and become card-carrying members of their local parish church, they will find that the 'outsider' perspective they maybe hoped to find gets blunted as the church machine takes over and becomes a world of its own. And the more they get drawn into this the less they will have in common with their friends and families and colleagues who are still floundering in the world. And yet all we need to do is 'to hear the word of God and open up to it as the flower opens to the sun.' Part of that listening to the word of God is of course celebrating his presence in the sacraments. Another part is listening to his presence in the people we might prefer to ignore, and who the world does ignore. But we don't need all the impedimenta of the establishment to do that. Just the gift to be simple.

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