

THOMAS MERTON AND SCRIPTURE

a retreat led by David Scott at Glastonbury, May 2003

Reflections based on my Journal Notes

**Do two walk together unless they
have made an appointment?**

Amos 3:3

**Imagine the scene – the two of them
walking – get the images, visualise before
analysing it – get into it – the spirit and
the meaning of the text. Place yourself
face to face with God. If your eyes are
open you can understand the text.**

Merton on Tape

IT WAS BOTH STRANGE and inspiring, sitting hearing the voice of Thomas Merton addressing the novices on reading scripture. Listening to the tape, I could see through the large windows part of the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey against a damp grey sky.

In my mind I also saw two figures walking along the road. We listened to the tape sometime later on the Saturday —Merton said that we need to keep searching and to generate energy to live now in the present and in the presence of God. A bit before we'd talked about how we had each come across Merton. Everyone's experience was different, but for many of us he had met some need within us and acted as a spiritual guide—almost as if he had made an appointment to walk with us on part of our spiritual journey. Someone said he was a 'great guy' and most people nodded in agreement. There was a felt connection amongst us—an atmosphere that was deepened as we shared the Eucharist on the Sunday morning.

Scripture isn't abstract – we are people chosen to deal with God – there are deeper choices – if our eyes are open we see them, new in our own

life – the renewal of our basic commitment – it's happening constantly.'(Tape)

As David Scott explained in the first main session, Merton was inevitably immersed in scripture through the divine office and *lectio divina*, he had remarked at one point that he felt closer to the biblical authors than to virtually any other writers. He understood the taking in of scripture as basic food—part of our diet. It is natural, ordinary and glorious for being that.

I am taking St Luke to meditate on in this interval for a month, and it is so beautiful that I am all lighted up with lights inside and there is a feast in my heart' (8th January 1949).

From about the early 1950s, Merton reacted against the literal meaning of scripture. He preferred the figurative, patristic and allegorical picture— looking beyond the actual words. Influenced by St John of the Cross, Merton moved from the text to the emotional impact of the meaning and the transfiguration of the words by the Divine.

When I sing the Gospel I am searched and penetrated by the light of what I sing, for the words of God are a two-edged sword piercing you to the division of the soul and the spirit' (3rd April 1949).

God comes through what is hidden and helps us to reveal mystery – this is mystical theology. The Bible opens itself out to help us find the hidden depths in our relationship with God. As scholars we find scholarship, as geographers we find geography: Thomas Merton wanted to find God. The purpose of

God within scripture is not delineated by *chronos* – the historical time line – it becomes a different sort of time – *kairos* – God's own time. This is the time of decision and transformation that transcends the quantitative approach to time as measured by the clock. If we look we can find in scripture the dynamic process between the Old and New Testaments, and the dynamic process within ourselves, where God's time can become present to each of us, here and now.

God is constantly working with those who have responded to God's word – "the faithful remnant" – the extension of the idea of the people of Israel – those aware of their individual responsibility in relationship with God. A central nucleus of those who have gone further and ready to respond to God's will. (Tape)

In another main session David read and talked about some of Merton's poetry, he unpacked some of the images for us including those in 'Rahab's house' and 'I have called you'. In Merton's poem 'Rahab's house' (1946) we read about: '...the flowers that will one day rise from Rahab's earth

... see the generations
Fly like a hundred thousand swallows into heaven.'

Later David read some of his own poetry based on journeying around sacred sites in this country. As a writer for God Thomas Merton tried to be the channel of God's will and spirit. The discipline of routine and obedience provided a framework for his creativity, and it is this creativity that now helps us. As David reminded us looking again at Merton's relationship with scripture, Merton is one more of a long line of those who have struggled and guided us. It is an engagement with faith – the faith that God will speak to us through the book of faith – a process that we have to trust. A bit like water we need to jump into

it—offering our self to the depths. But there are dangers from rocks in the water which Merton warns us about. One such rock is the poetic; we can be seduced by the glory of the language and if scripture becomes just poetry without a rigorous look at the literal then we can founder. Another danger is the allegorical rock where, again, our ideas may take us too far from the actual meaning of the text.

By the late 50s Merton noted his reading of much contemporary theology.

Necessity of the Bible. More and more of it. A book like Gillet's 'Themes bibliques' fantastically rich and useful ... Opens up new roads in the Old Testament. Extraordinary richness and delicacy of the varied OT concepts of sin – very existential concepts, not at all mere moralism! For instance sin as a "failure" to contact God... "I have failed Thee – I have failed to reach Thee". And all that follows from that! Importance of reading and thinking and keeping silent. Self-effacement, not in order to be left looking at oneself but to be "found in Christ" and lost to the rest. (12th November 1957).

Staying in Abbey House we were able to walk straight into the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey. At first sight there was the mown grass and the neat informative plaques placed at each ruin, but a bit like contemplating scripture the text plus imagination revealed layers of history and meaning. Here is a living Christian sanctuary on the site of the oldest church and once the greatest Abbey in the country. 63 CE is the probable date for the building of the old church and the possible foundation of the first Christian community, as legend has it, by Joseph of Arimathea. From this arise all the myths of the Holy Grail, Chalice Well and

the holy thorn tree seen in the grounds of the Abbey—and all the shops now selling 'spirituality'.

From 600 CE, the carbon dating confirms the first monastery building, replaced by the first stone church a hundred years later, which in turn is replaced by another stone church and then, further down the line, by the Norman church: another building is replaced, following a fire, by another; and so on, until 1539 when, with the dissolution of the monastery, the buildings are ransacked. Stories of monks slaughtered on the high altar, the graves of King Arthur and Guinevere all contribute to making the place. I looked in the Abbot's kitchen and walked round the fish and duck ponds, and the cider orchard which is being replanted in its medieval layout and the smell of the apple blossom drifted in the damp May air.

The lovely grey-green valley, misty clouds sweeping low over the hills... iron dark clouds heavy above them. The rainy gloom full of the pale-yellow irises and the cloudy white blossoming green masses... (14th May 1967)

In 1965, Merton writes of the challenge to respond not just intellectually to scripture, but with the whole self. He respects the contributions of the 'historico-critical method' in clarifying the meaning of the texts themselves, but holds to his belief that the Bible is the locus of encounter with: an ultimate Freedom which is at once the ground and source of man's being, the centre of his history and the guide of his destinies' and 'the Holy Spirit enlightens us, in our reading to see how our own lives are part of these great mysteries – how we are one with Jesus in them. (TM Encyclopedia pp.341 and 30).

We can read the prophets such as Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos and see the will of God in its purest form. We can encounter the full power of scripture if we approach it in an existential way, as an experience of redemption and so a power for meaningful transformation in our own lives.

The challenge is to listen to the will of God and apply it to our own spiritual life – even if it challenges ourselves and our beliefs. Even if the message is anti-establishment – or rather anti our own inner establishment – we can listen in the secrecy of our soul and speak to God. It becomes a process of discernment. God – the invisible in this visible world – manifests himself in unfamiliar ways – the most unfamiliar is when we die and our passing into an unfamiliar realm. (Tape)

Bring my sons and daughters
From that far country
From their house of bondage
Set them free
Bring them back in glory
Home to me.

Do not be afraid
O my people
I have called you by your name
You belong to me.
(I have called you, 1966)