

Ken Leech - Contemplative Priest, Prophet and Friend

Terry Drummond

In reflecting on the life of Ken Leech it is important to recognise that he was a priest, a theologian and a prophet. His ministry was rooted in an understanding of the incarnation at the heart of which was his belief in the word made flesh. Jesus, ministering to the communities through which he travelled on his journey to Jerusalem, needed time out in the wilderness and places of quiet in which he could pray and reflect on his calling. So too with Ken. His ministry and prophetic activity in the wider community were rooted in his periods of prayer and reflection, which in turn led to many important books, and numerous essays and papers.

The influence of Thomas Merton on his journey of faith was profound – an understanding of the importance of a monastic tradition that was rooted in the world whilst offering a space in which to reflect in prayerful silence on what the Christian message can offer to a world that prefers to turn its back on God.

In Ken's book *True God*, there are fifteen references to Thomas Merton, a sign of his importance to Ken's spiritual life, his call to service and to speaking truth to power. Many are called to this very important task, but the powerful in the church prefer to be deaf to any message that challenges their pre-conceived assumptions.

Whilst Ken was not a monastic (though when he moved to Whitechapel in the early 1990's his flat was as near to a monastic cell as one could make it), and lived out his ministry in the communities in which he found himself, his daily pattern of life was based on the Offices of the Church, in the cycle of Daily Prayer and the Eucharist. Thus grounded he could speak with authority both on spiritual and political issues, able to bring the two together in a manner that is sadly lacking in today's church.

The City was Ken's place of ministry, his special affection being for the community around the Whitechapel Road and the wider East End of London. It was where he could walk the streets and feel at home, whilst aware that for some people it was a wilderness in which the search for truth was just over the horizon. It was here that he could be both contemplative and activist, appreciating the fact that he was living in a community rooted in history and which was the home to people of many nationalities. But it is important not to lose sight that he was, like all of us, sharing in the ups and downs of life – he could write from personal experience about the darkness that on occasion will come to all Christians.

Like Thomas Merton, Ken lived on the edge, on the fringe of society. He was at home with the outcast and those who society all too often rejects, whilst he was also able to relate to those of us who have a more stable place in society. Ken's gift, like that of the Jesus he followed, was to be open and available to all who came into his life.

An important element of his ministry was that he sat lightly to formal structures. He was a theologian of the streets who could speak to the academy on its own terms. The call to follow in the way of Jesus, and the demands of that call, were far more important than being tied to a restricting management structure.

In reflecting on his life, it strikes me that, as with Merton, both were rooted in the call to be prophets, who from the depths of their spirituality were able to challenge what they believed to be the structural sources of sin.

In *True God*, Ken writes of Merton:

A central idea in Merton's writings towards the end of his life was the theme of *marginality*. He saw the monk as 'a very strange kind of person, a marginal person'. The monk is one who deliberately withdraws to the margins of human society, and in so doing, finds a certain solidarity with marginal people, some of whom have been effectively marginalized by social and political forces.¹

In these words, Ken is describing Merton, at the same time coming close to offering a self-definition. He could write in this way because he was drawing on the rich stream of his own experience.

It is a sad truth that in the Church of today all too often the understanding of marginalisation and prophetic ministry is lost to the call of managerialism. To counter this the message of both Merton and Leech remains both relevant and challenging.

Notes

1. Kenneth Leech, *True God* (London: SPCK, 1985), p.147.

Terry Drummond was commissioned as a Church Army Evangelist in 1972 spending his ministry up to 2005 in urban communities, with a particular commitment to theological reflection on urban and public policy. He was a member of the Jubilee Group from 1975 and of Ken Leech's Support and Advisory Group at St. Botolph's Aldgate, Bishop of Southwark's Chaplain 2005 -10 and the Bishop's Advisor on Urban and Public Policy 2011 - 2015. In December 2016 he was ordained as a Distinctive Deacon in the Church of England. He was a close friend of Kenneth Leech for over forty years.