

# Together – Apart

## Merton reflections in a time of lockdown

### Kenneth Carveley

I found myself during the pandemic lockdown considering the prescribed social distance between us, the problem of keeping in touch but staying away from those we most want to see and meet, the desire to reach across the gulf of separation which no plethora of Zoom encounters can quite replace.

This brought to mind the passage in Merton's biography where his brother John Paul visited him at Gethsemani, poignantly the last time they would ever meet as John Paul was later killed in action. During the visit Merton was worried that his brother would get lost and eventually came across him in the church, which brought echoes of childhood:

I turned around. At the end of the long nave, with its empty choir stalls, high up in the empty Tribune, John Paul was kneeling all alone, in uniform. He seemed to be an immense distance away, and between the secular church where he was, and the choir where I was, was a locked door, and I couldn't call out to him to tell him how to come down the long way round through the Guest House. And he didn't understand my sign.

At that moment there flashed into my mind all the scores of times in our forgotten childhood when I had chased John Paul away with stones from the place where my friends and I were building a hut. And now, all of a sudden, here it was all over again: a situation that was externally of the same pattern: John Paul, standing, confused and unhappy, at a distance which he was not able to bridge.

Sometimes the same image haunts me now that he is dead, as though he were standing helpless in Purgatory, depending more or less on me to get him out of there, waiting for my prayers. But I hope he is out of it by now!

Merton and John Paul received communion together; we can hear Merton's wistful longing on John Paul's departure from Gethsemani the following day:

As the car was turning around to start down the avenue John Paul turned around and waved, and it was only then that his expression showed some possibility that he might be realizing, as I did, that we would never see each other on earth again.<sup>1</sup>

How we bridge the divide is problematic, the desire that seeks relationship beyond the chasm, the silent echo of God's longing for humankind bridged in the 'saving' event of Christ for us.

The one place we can hold each other is in our life in God where living and departed may be beyond our sight, but never beyond our prayer.

We are placed in this kind of awkward lockdown *noli me tangere* in which others are out of reach and we are stuck and cannot quite get beyond desire to encounter.

### The triage of truth

More widely, the gap itself is as socially threatening as the pandemic's disease.

Living with the space between may unfortunately reveal a vacuum in which anything can be syphoned up for public consumption. In a time of fake news the manipulations of untruth demand a perpetual succession of falsehoods to maintain its stance, whereas the truth sets us free. Truth is increasingly detached from the public square; the speed of communications makes messages available almost instantly whether they be true or false, leaving the unguarded prey to a whole host of distortions from nationalist, group or personal agendas.

Merton would have recognised the presence of racism which stalks our public life and media and the necessary instinctive protest it has generated.

Much of what passes for political and social discourse fails to live up to the best in humanity and its bright hope revealed in the grace given to us in Christ. Too often it distorts the authentic human vocation, succumbing to the worst we can be and do.

Merton's readers will readily recall how perceptive he was for our time:

God leaves us free to become whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects, and if we lie to ourselves and to others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it.<sup>2</sup>

Here I think we may have a lot to gain from Hans Kung's search for a global ethic inspired by a wider ecumenical initiative, freed from distorting inverted lenses to witness to the truth of the nature and vocation of humankind. In this there resides a deep integrity which resonates with the being of the One who is.

### Life in the hermitage

Strangely, in our isolation we are all hermits now. What is so engaging about Merton's hermit years is the somewhat unsettling dialectic in which he is clearly most himself and at home on his own with God, but at the same time visitors appear at the hermitage as if he cannot quite relinquish contact with others, even if human contact is only the regular return to the monastery for supplies, medical attention and mail. It's a kind of being separate together. Then of course there are the texts which bring Merton to the world and vice-versa, and which, despite his disclaimers and desire for solitude, are part of who he is, the Writer.

Might there be a difference between solitude and being on one's own? One's own implies there are others out there who own our friendship, the other approximate but distant.

Might our lockdown separateness bring us to recognise the vital integrity of truth, the truth about loving, and who we really are?

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), pp. 438-9. John-Paul was baptized on July 26, 1942.
2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 31-32.

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