

Thomas Merton's Advent, November 27 1966

Signs of Hope in Conflicted Times

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Luke 21:25

Fifty-five years ago, the First Sunday of Advent in the Western-Christian calendar was celebrated on November 27. The hymn, 'Conditor alme siderum', with its haunting plainchant melody, would have reminded the monks at the first office of Advent that the 'creator of the stars of night', whose everlasting light brightens the dark sky, also comes with 'dread' and 'fear'. Merton's journal entries capture Advent's invitation to seek God by way of the reconciliation of such opposites: darkness-light, absence-presence, fasting-communion. Ever sensitive to the double call of the liturgical and earthly seasons, Merton tells us that at the start of the new year for the Church, it is about to turn cold. The 'warm night with wind and many clouds' of November 27 make way for the 'Advent weather' of December 2: 'grey - 28, - probably snow again soon'.

Entries before and after these dates indicate something of his worries and his struggle to resolve his own inner conflicts. Allusions to monastic politics, and his on-going love for 'M' sit alongside the profound concerns he shares about the outside world. In 1966, throughout Advent, Merton's deepest concerns and anxieties bring with them, like the Gospel reading for Advent Sunday, degrees of dismay and perplexity. Merton sees how the world is being overcome by greed; and his palpable allusions to the 'ancient curse' that 'should doom to death a universe' imagined in the vigil hymn are prescient in his journal entry for December 6:

There comes a point where compromise is simply impossible. Either the curse exists or it doesn't. To embrace the 'system' and plunge into it is to say there is no curse and never was and man can by his own ingenuity fix everything just by acting as if there were nothing wrong; and the indifference to humanity which is built into the society he lives in, is accepted as 'love'.

During the first week of Advent, Merton's journal refers to a whole kaleidoscope of people and ideas including William Faulkner, Bob Dylan, popular culture, liturgical reforms, Nicaragua, and his growing 'uneasiness, anguish, dis-ease' with monastery politics and the religious weakness of the community. Perhaps the Church's choice of the passage from Luke for Advent is itself prescient of the chaos and disquiet Merton is describing two thousand years later, such as in his journal entry for December 14:

Atmosphere of Dada and happenings in the Peace Movement. Provos. Yellow submarines, Flutes. Why not? Does it mean anything? As much as any other happening I suppose.

Indeed, it is surely no accident that the Advent readings since earliest times point to a world in need of grace, unable simply to redeem itself. Merton knows and feels that truth. Sadness and joy, despair and hope, death and life mark his very moving reflections. But Merton is a faithful monk, and he is obedient to the scriptures and to the Rule. He knows, now in his twenty-fifth year at Gethsemani, that Advent does not bring an immediate cessation of the world's chaos or an abrupt change in our hearts. Rather, conversion is a lifetime's work. And Merton is attuned to reading the signs of his own life and times in his desire to contemplate and share the workings of grace.

Something of this sense of grace comes in the form of a visit, bringing as it does a bright shaft of light at the beginning of Advent. On December 8, which Merton reminds us is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, was a 'memorable day'. Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl visited the hermitage, 'Ira and I talking about everything and drinking beer (Dec. 10).' They were there all afternoon. As Merton records:

We came up to the hermitage and spent the rest of the time there. Played one side of her new record, "Noel". Lit a fire. Sat on the floor. Talked. Grey rugs spread out. Sitting around, lying around.... Joan sat on the rug eating goat-milk cheese and bread and honey and drinking tea, in front of the fire. Lovely!

The journal entries for Advent observe and record the outstanding beauty of the night skies during winter. The Advent weather brings clear mornings and evenings. On December 16 he records 'a grand dawn - pre-

dawn still – the long dark line of hills, the varieties of red and dark and purple in the sky, the chalk streak of a gone jet about the black trees ... grass underfoot slipping with unseen frost.’ During the preceding night, ‘the Swan was plunging down into the west through my high pines and when I got up Cassiopeia was swinging down into the north, the Great Bear over against her in the northeast.’

At the time of Christ, most believed events in the night sky reflected coming events on earth. The Advent hymn chanted by the monks points to the night sky, and to the light of the stars, as signs of grace and truth. But these signs point to a person and an event. The signs herald the Saviour’s birth. Merton of course knows this. But he also sees that it is finally we ourselves who are the heralds of grace and truth for each other. Merton is keenly aware of his own responsibility in this regard.

But the hermitage is the space for other reflections. A week after the visit of Joan and Ira, Merton is reminded of the joy their conversation wrought: ‘I think of Joan and Ira last week and all they were saying.’ In the same entry, Merton reflects on his own struggles. These simple, frank reflections are also ones that capture the grace-filled journey of Advent: ‘As long as I am in the hermitage ... I can struggle honestly with my ordinary dishonesty and not inflict my problems on other people. I know at least this solitude and this responsibility and this privileged silence. And the need to pray (Dec. 15).’

The closing words of Luke on Advent Sunday encourage us to be ‘vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent (Luke 21:36).’ For a short if precious moment in the hermitage, Merton’s troubles are resolved in his own ‘need to pray’. In the same journal entry he recalls words from Psalm 116: ‘Return, my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has done good things for you.’

Notes

All the journal entries referred to can be found in *Learning to Love, The Journals of Thomas Merton volume 3*.

The initial quotation is taken from the Gospel for Advent Sunday 1 (Year C), November 28, 2021.

The author is a reader and admirer of Merton who wishes to remain anonymous.