

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Merton and Traherne: The Two Thomases

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IN THINKING OF WHAT I WOULD SAY THIS EVENING I HAD A DILEMMA. I wondered whether to speak in very general terms, Merton and the new millennium; or Merton and the spiritual and theological situation of our Post-Modernist age; or perhaps a little more particularly Merton in relationship, I believe a potentially very fruitful relationship, to the current of theological and spiritual writing which is emerging here in Britain, a current which is sometimes described in terms of *generous orthodoxy*. That is a current which as far as Anglicans are concerned can be represented above all by the work of two outstanding theologians, one an Irish layman from Dublin, and the other a Welsh archbishop from Swansea; David Ford, Regius Professor at Cambridge and Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Wales, one of our keynote speakers in our conference two years ago. It is perhaps particularly good for the English amongst us to recognise that Anglican and English are not necessarily synonymous!

But the more I thought about it the more I decided to avoid generalities, we have had too many of them in the turn of the millennium; and instead to concentrate on a few minute particulars, and in particular on one quite narrow topic, Merton's attitude to and indebtedness to some of the classical Anglican writers of the seventeenth century.

No-one could pretend that these classical writers bulk large in Merton's work. Of course he had had some knowledge of the poets of the period from his student days at Columbia when, not unexpectedly, he had been particularly drawn to John Donne and Richard Crashaw. Later one can find expressions of particular interest in Henry Vaughan. Indeed Merton was interested not only in Vaughan's poetry but also in his prose writing, for instance in his translation of the fifth century Latin writer Eucherius. Merton even thought at one time of trying to

make an edition of Vaughan's translation of his work on the solitary life.

But in a letter of 1964, Merton writes of this classical period of Anglican writing with a kind of uneasiness, almost a wistful nostalgia. "It seems to me that the best of Anglicanism is unexcelled..." But then of course we have to recognise that it doesn't always reach its best.

For my part I will try to cling to the best and be as English a Catholic as one in my position can be. I do think it terribly important for Roman Catholics now plunging into the vernacular, to have some sense of the Anglican tradition.

But Merton goes on to say that he is not at all sure how far that can happen in practice. The language, the style and the ethos of the seventeenth century is, as he says, "perhaps no longer within reach of the majority in this country now and is perhaps no longer relevant."¹

But if we look carefully we begin to see that there are a few passages in the Journals which show how much these seventeenth century writers could mean to him. We discover, for instance, that he had the *Preces Privatae* of Lancelot Andrewes in the hermitage at Gethsemani, and that he had recourse to them in moments of darkness and desolation. It is after all Andrewes who is the greatest of these post-Reformation Anglican writers, and it is he, more than anyone else, who, through the illumination of his sermons and his prayers, gave inspiration to some of the outstanding Anglican poets of the seventeenth century. Not only the seventeenth century writers drew their inspiration from him; it was to Andrewes that one of the greatest Anglo-American poets of the twentieth century, T.S.Eliot, turned in the moment of his definitive affirmation of the Catholic faith of the Church.

So it is not only interesting, but moving, to read Merton's Journal entry for December 3, 1964, beginning with a quotation from the *Preces Privatae*

Evening; the heart is deceitful above all things, the heart is deep and full of windings, the old man is covered up in a thousand wrappings.²

Merton comments,

True sad words. I would not have felt the truth of them so much if I had not had so much solitude these days with rain coming down on the roof and hiding the valley. Rain in the night, the nuisance of water in the buckets. Cutting wood behind the house, a faint smell of hickory

smoke from the chimney, while I taste and see that I am deceitful and that most of my troubles are rooted in my own bitterness. Is this what solitude is for? Then it is good, but I must pray for the strength to bear it! (the heart is deceitful and does not want this—but God is greater than my heart!)

And then again come lines of Lancelot Andrewes,

I will acknowledge my faults O Lord, O who will give scourges to my mind, that they spare not my sins?³

Perhaps even more striking is the entry for a few days later.

In the hermitage one must pray or go to seed. The pretence of prayer will not suffice. Just sitting will not suffice. It has to be real—yet what can one do? Solitude puts you with your back to the wall (or your face to it!) and this is good. One prays to pray. Donne's poems and Lancelot Andrewes.

Having seen how Andrewes could be of help to Merton at times of darkness and testing, it is interesting to see him coming to the rescue again at times of thanksgiving and fulfilment.

Exactly three years later in December 1967, at the end of the first retreat for contemplative nuns at Gethsemani, which brought Merton such unexpected joy and encouragement, he notes of the concluding mass, "I opened with a prayer of Lancelot Andrewes instead of the Confiteor," and at the end of the mass he turned to Lancelot Andrewes again, presumably making use of his version of the postcommunion prayer from the liturgy of St Basil, and also a prayer from the old Syrian liturgy for hermits. "Then we sat and had coffee and had a wonderful time. The hermitage is blessed with the memory of it."⁴

Among the seventeenth century writers however, perhaps the one whom Merton appreciated most was Thomas Traherne. Merton wrote very little about him; there is a page or two of luminous analysis in *Mystics And Zen Masters* when, significantly, he compares him with Julian of Norwich. He can hardly give him greater commendation than that! There is also a reference to him in one of the best of his letters to his Aunt Kit in New Zealand. In May 1964, in a long chatty letter, he remarks

Lately I have been reading about hermits and recluses in early Celtic Christianity and in England. Wales was a very monastic and eremitical sort of place. I think we all have some of this in our blood.

And then he veers off

Did you ever read Thomas Traherne? He is one of the very best and most delightful of Anglican writers.⁵

With this reference to Thomas Traherne I come to the point where I should perhaps have begun this address. For I had at first thought of speaking entirely about Traherne and Merton. I am very glad that we shall have at least one presentation on that subject during this conference. I thought of doing this, first because I felt sure that there is a deep, if hitherto largely unrecognised, affinity between Merton and Traherne, but secondly because I wanted to say at least something about the recent discovery of major, unpublished and hitherto unknown Traherne manuscripts.

This discovery has added another chapter to the almost unbelievable story of the long series of discoveries of Traherne manuscripts which has gone on all through the twentieth century and which reached a climax three years ago with the finding of a new long poem in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, and a big composite manuscript in the Lambeth Palace Library in London. It is as if Traherne himself, or his guardian angel, or the divine providence at work through what looks like chance, had kept hidden for more than three centuries, writings which now confront us with a major mystical theologian, a startling and original thinker, in the England of the Restoration monarchy.

When Traherne died in 1674 only one of his books had been published. Another one was in process of publication and it appeared soon after his death. But neither book made much, if any, impression on his contemporaries or their successors. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century when the first two major manuscripts were discovered and published, *The Poems* and the *Centuries of Meditations*, that Traherne began to be recognised as at least a significant devotional writer of his time. He is a man who can convey to us in wonderful poetic prose, a childhood vision of a transfigured, unfallen world, the world of Eden. That is the impression of Traherne which by and large has remained with the general public down to today. There are a number of fine poems, and there are a number of wonderful pieces of prose which have found their way into many anthologies. In them Traherne speaks of this world as a world in which the glory of eternity is seen shining out through all the things of time.

But throughout the last fifty or sixty years, other manuscripts of Traherne have kept turning up. The most remarkable of these was the one found three years ago in Lambeth Palace Library. This work has as yet not been published, and the scholar who was working on its transcription, a brilliant and delightful teacher at Trinity College in Cambridge, Jeremy Maule, died quite suddenly and unexpectedly, of cancer, a little over a year ago. So the publication of the manuscript is delayed. But what is already becoming clear from the five different pieces contained in it is something which had already been becoming evident through the earlier discoveries of Traherne's works. That is to say that Traherne is not only a beautiful spiritual writer but also a coherent theological thinker, and, what is more, a more powerful and creative figure than has previously been recognised.

Traherne will not fit into our usual way of seeing things. He insists that we begin to fit into his way of seeing things. Something of this quality of Traherne the theologian is conveyed in the last chapter of David Ford's recent book *Self And Salvation*; where David Ford, who knew Jeremy Maule personally, writes of Traherne with remarkable insight.

David Ford points out that Traherne was writing in a time of great political, social and religious turmoil, "having to rethink his faith and practice after the Reformation, the Counter Reformation, Galileo and Cromwell and the founding of the Royal Society..."

In this context it was easy for theologians to become defensive and merely reactionary. Traherne was determined not to do this. He was convinced of the need to maintain the tradition which he had received,

but he does not go about it defensively. Instead he meets the new enlarged horizons with an even larger one—a fresh conception of the infinity of God in interaction with creation, in which the new scientific discoveries play a part. He responds to confidence in human thought and pride in human freedom, not by detracting from humanity but by stretching his thinking in order to do justice to God as well as to all that is known about the world, and by revelling in the risk God takes in allowing the completion of creation to rely on human freedom.

Traherne is impatient with divines and schoolmen "who have interpreted the image of God in humanity far too constrictedly, leaving out the most wonderful aspects of God."⁶

Speaking a few days ago on the telephone, to one of the scholars who is continuing Jeremy Maule's work on this manuscript, I was amused and intrigued to find her saying, "the more one studies these late manuscripts the more it becomes clear what an enormous amount of writing Traherne did in the last four or five years of his life. It is almost unbelievable." I could only laugh to hear in her puzzlement the identical puzzlement which many who have studied Merton have felt at the enormous creativity of the last decade of his life, the nondisintegrating explosion of interest, concern, thought, attention and love which marks the years of his maturity at the monastery and in the hermitage. How did he find time for it all?

Some people, after they die, seem to go further away from us and to become diminished by the passage of time. In others precisely the reverse seems to happen. Merton does not grow further away, he comes closer to us, perhaps as we begin to catch up with him in some respects. His nearness to us does not diminish, more and more people find him speaking directly to them. The "mind awake in the dark" is present and active in the darkness of our new millennium, present in the darkness of our own searching, of our own awareness of our lostness and our failures. As a reading of *The Intimate Merton* makes clear in a new way, even to those who may think they know Merton's work well, there is in that writing of his and in his whole life, an extraordinary capacity for communication, which shares itself, gives itself to us utterly.

I know few better descriptions of this quality than that which is to be found in an essay of Elizabeth Jennings who is herself a poet who knows what she is talking of when she tells us of the things of God. This passage however comes not from an essay on Merton but from an essay on Traherne; you must judge how far we could apply it to Merton.

The poetic prose of his meditations is an example of the art of sharing, of participation. It is an art wholly accessible, in no way private... he wears no masks, casts no concealing shadow. He is in the deepest sense a man possessed. What possesses him is a sense of God and this he wishes to share, distribute. He gives himself away to us in such a way that his work becomes our property. Part of our life.

So Elizabeth Jennings writing about Traherne almost forty years ago.⁷

How much the meaning of her words is multiplied and deepened now that we know so much more of the scope of Traherne's vision than was known then. How they are multiplied again and deepened beyond measure when they are taken and applied to this twentieth century Thomas, this brother of Traherne, this friend who shares himself with us so freely, helping us to discover, even in ourselves,

that our own life, our part in the universe is infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest, opening out into infinite further possibilities for study, contemplation and interest and praise.

This "mind awake in the dark" alerts us ever and again to the presence of God's kingdom with us, amongst us, within us, as his seventeenth century brother says with such emphasis, "We are in God's kingdom even now."

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (ed. Shannon) London, Collins Flame, 1990, p.26
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life—The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 5* (ed. Daggy) USA, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, p.173
3. Ibid.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain—The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 7* (ed. Patrick Hart) USA, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, p.21
5. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, (ed. Daggy) NY, Farrar Straus & Giroux 1989, p.62
6. David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*. Cambridge, CUP, 1999, p.276
7. Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape*, London, Dent, 1961, pp. 83-4