

## Praying with Thomas Merton Lindsay Nevin

Thomas Merton did not write many prayers, but what he wrote had a bearing of prayer. There are many ways of introducing him: as a spiritual thinker, a poet, an artist, a peacemaker, a mystic, a monk, a reckless student, but above all I think of him as a teacher who has enabled anyone, who wishes, to find a deeper spirituality, as he has made the path of the mystics accessible.

Learning about the path of the mystics is powerful and also reassuring because it provides the missing piece in the Protestant tradition, that which concentrates on out intimate relation with God. Learning about this pilgrimage through Thomas Merton is lively, often light-hearted and punctuated with phrases which stay in your mind. "God utters me like a wold containing a partial thought of himself"<sup>1</sup>. "Do not be one of those who, rather than risk failure, never attempt anything"<sup>2</sup>. "The thing to do when you have made a mistake is not to give up doing what you were doing and start something altogether new, but to start over again with the thing you began badly and try, for the love of God, to do it well"<sup>3</sup>. "Love is a movement of the will towards what the intellect sees to be good"<sup>4</sup>. When he begins the book, 'Seeds of Contemplation' he implies anyone could have written it, but it happened to be him.

You warm to him. It is characteristic of him to be close, to disclose, to talk about human nature. He highlights the traps we fall into, he explains the things you want to ask without knowing how to express them. To read him is like having a conversation with someone you always want to be with, but also to read him is to be transported to the sacred. He has the ability to magnify our desire for God. He was a mystic who wrote with honesty and humility.

Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as 'the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in a greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment'. Merton draws the reader towards mystical union because he at first speaks to the reader's own situation with clarity and insight. He challenges the hypocrisy of virtue for its own sake. He indicates buried emotion and seeks to release the individual from the cage he builds for himself. He describes a blindness which occurs when people cut themselves off from the love of God. He suggests that our idea of God tells us more about ourselves, than about Him. He encourages the individual to turn around and see all the directions from which the love of God is approaching. He has felt it and he adds, "one is loved by God although unworthy - or, rather, irrespective of one's worth".<sup>5</sup>

Merton speaks possibly most directly when the reader feels separated from God, asking for things which do not seem to be given and becoming disappointed,

flat, dejected, and then angry.

The separation from God allows man to have an identity and hold expectations of his own. These expectations are bound to be frustrated, they are illusions and unreal. He writes, "The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self and enter by love into union with life, who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature in the core of our own souls"<sup>6</sup>. To leave this illusory image of ourselves which gives us worldly recognition, we need to take a huge leap, to turn outside in and become aware of ourselves as known by him.

Before letting go, the need to hold onto the tangible prompts the question, "Wouldn't other circumstances, a change of place, a different job, be the answer?" But the still reassuring words of Thomas Merton guide differently:

"We have what we seek.  
We don't have to rush after it.  
It was there all the time  
and if we give it time  
it will make itself known to us"<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, in his essay called 'The Cell' he describes: "a young brother who is living as a hermit complaining that he is suffering from acute boredom and thinking that perhaps the answer is to go out and visit the sick. The experienced old monk he consults tells him to stay right where he is and face out his inner feelings rather than trying to distract himself. To undergo this struggle, the old monk says, is to imitate the great things St. Anthony did in the desert. Here, in this place, right here, within the frustrating limitations of our own persons, is the place of encounter, with oneself and with God."<sup>8</sup>

Our place, our cell, is within us and only requires a withdrawal from the distractions of life to be there. It is necessary for us to seek this solitude for an awakening, Merton writes, "since the awakening implies a kind of death to the exterior self, we will dread his coming in proportion as we are identified with the exterior self".<sup>9</sup>

We therefore have to shed the props which exalt the ego, the pleasures, the desires, the fantasies, the greed, complacency, conventional concepts and leave ourselves free so God can plant his vision in us.

Stripped of our expectations and illusions, desiring an identity with God, or as the mystics put it, attaining to purification of the senses and purification of the will, the path is open. Psalm 15 outlines the terms of the ascetic life and it was a key for Merton:

"Who can go up the mountain of the Lord or who shall stand in this holy place? He that has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not set his mind on vain things, and has not sworn deceitfully to his neighbour".

He knew that purity of heart was a prerequisite to mystical contemplation, and he describes contemplation as the gift of ourselves to God... "it is a sudden gift of awareness and awakening to the real within all that is real".<sup>10</sup> He also says that no one can teach contemplation, it is God's gift to us. Then leaving us to our own encounters, Merton does not abandon the reader. Like a spiritual director with his novices, he seeks to reassure us during the time we feel alone. He calls this darkness "being under the protection of the shadow of God's wings".<sup>11</sup> This tender imagery comes from the psalms. When you climb a mountain and see the huge flanks of dappled shadow ease and cascading across the mountain ranges as the cloud flies, then you are entering a world of prayer transported by the imagery of Merton.

I wonder if the poem of Hopkins called The Windhover contributed to Merton's vision? The poem is about a bird which is true to its nature, and by watching it we glimpse its essence, its true nature, what Hopkins called its 'inscape'. He dedicated it to Christ our Lord because Christ perfectly obeyed God. It begins:

"I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"

Merton believed our true identity, our essence, our inscape is to be found when our soul seeks to identify with God, that is our sanctity.

He wrote "whatever I have written, I think it can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ".<sup>12</sup> When he left the monastery to live in the hermitage, he still concerned himself with the issues of his fellow man. He was intensely concerned about oppression, aggression and poverty. He supported movements and individuals who worked for peace, for the homeless, for justice. We learn there is no point in praying for solutions we impose. It is necessary to understand the issues and then, he says, there is still a gulf and you can only genuinely pray for what is closest to the heart of the oppressed. We learn that prayer cannot be palliative.

"It seems to me the most absurd thing in the world to be upset because I am weak and distracted and blind and constantly make mistakes! What else do I expect! Does God love me any less because I can't make myself a saint by my own power and in my own way? He loves me more because I am so clumsy and helpless without Him - and underneath what I am He sees me as I will one day be by His pure gift and that pleases Him, and therefore it pleases me and I attend to His great love which is my joy."<sup>13</sup>

"Yesterday Father Macarius and I went out and blessed the fields. Out in the calf pasture we blessed some calves who came running up and took a very active interest in everything. Then we blessed pigs, who showed some interest at first. The sheep showed no concern and the chickens ran away as soon as we approached. The rabbits stayed quiet until we threw holy water at them, and then they all jumped."<sup>14</sup>

A man prayed "May I always want to want to want'. He was thinking about his desire for God. How did Thomas Merton feed his desire for God? Solitude was central for him, and he would seek God's manifestation by witnessing the dawn. Quietly waiting, and listening. He also treasured the communication of the icon: "the sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us".<sup>15</sup>

And he tells us about an awakening he witnessed in Scripture. He describes his recognition of the Holy Spirit in the Psalms. The Holy Spirit is the poet and is also the poetry of the psalms. "But the Holy Spirit besides being the artist, is also the spectator. He is at the same time the poet, the poetry and the reader of the poetry .... The peculiar mystical impact with which certain verses of Psalms suddenly produce this silent depth-charge in the heart of the contemplative is only to be accounted for by the fact that we, in the Spirit, recognise the Spirit singing in ourselves."<sup>16</sup>

Merton found God in nature and the unification of all things. He saw the interrelated parts of the whole. He writes, "In solitude, one is entirely surrounded by beings which perfectly obey God. This leaves only one place open for me, and if I occupy that place then I, too, am fulfilling His will. The place nature "leaves open" belongs to the conscious one, the one who sees all this as a unity, the one who is aware who offers it all to God in praise, joy, thanks."<sup>17</sup>

At the end of his life on earth this intuitive conviction of unity was reaffirmed when he encountered Buddhism, and he provides the bridge for us into what this tradition has to teach us.

Finally, the tool he has given us is the song of the mystics. It sings about the

freedom of the Spirit and it is an exposition developed from the words of St. Augustine. In this song we are dancing with God. "Once we live in awareness of the cosmic dance and move in time with the Dancer, our life attains its true dimension. It is at once more serious and less serious than the life of one who does not sense this inner cosmic dynamism. To live without this illuminated consciousness is to live as a beast of burden, carrying one's life with tragic seriousness, as a huge incomprehensible weight ... The weight of the burden is the seriousness with which one takes one's own individual and separate self. To live with the true consciousness of life centered in Another is to lose one's self important consciousness, and thus to live life as a 'play' in union with a Cosmic Player. It is He alone that one takes seriously. But to take Him seriously is to find joy and spontaneity in everything, and everything is gift and grace. In order words to live selfishly is to bear life as an intolerable burden. To live selflessly is to live in joy".<sup>18</sup>

This talk was given by Lindsay Nevin as part of the Space in the City programme at St. Lawrence Church, on May 4, 1994.

#### Notes

1. New Seeds of Contemplation (1961) Ch.6.
2. New Seeds ch.15, p.104.
3. The Sign of Jonas Oct 7, 1949, Part 5.
4. Bread in the Wilderness ch.4, p.97.
5. New Seeds ch.10, p.75.
6. New Seeds ch.4, p.25.
7. Merton's Contemplative Vision. A talk given by Esther de Waal, at the Winchester Conference, quoting Merton.
8. The Cell, an essay collected in Contemplation in a World of Action. merton is quoting from an apothegm published by Nau, Histoire des Solitaires Egyptiens, Revue Orient Chrétien, 13 (1908), 278.
9. New Seeds ch.3, p.15.
10. New Seeds ch.1, p.3.
11. Bread in the Wilderness, ch.5, sect.1, p.118.
12. Quoted in Esther de Waal's Reflection, delivered at the Winchester Conference.
13. Sign of Jonas p.98 April 28, 1948.
14. Sign of Jonas p.99 May 6, 1948.
15. The Hidden Ground of Love, p.642, Letter to June J.Yungblutt, March 29, 1968. The whole letter is an extended description of the Christ of the Icons.
16. Bread in the Wilderness ch.3 p.68
17. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander p.269, pt.5.
18. The Asian Journal p.350, Appendix IX, The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita.