

The Sacrament of Advent: Thomas Merton's Lessons and Carols

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Merton's 1952 essay 'The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard' opens as follows: 'Advent is the "sacrament" of the PRESENCE of God in His world, in the Mystery of Christ at work in History through His Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of His Kingdom'¹ (capitalizations Merton's). In this, Merton reminds us that Advent is a season of hope. God has not abandoned us. Through Christ and in Christ's Church, God is still at work in history which moves inexorably toward the Divine moment of its consummation. For Christians, Advent is a 'sacrament', the outward and visible sign, presence and action of inward and spiritual, but no less real for that, grace and power.

In the Church, if not in the world where it is characterized by an annual round of crass consumerism and bogus *bonhomie*, Advent is the time of new beginnings. Indeed, because of the incarnation it is *the* time of New Beginnings. And so it was for Thomas Merton who began his monastic journey in earnest in

Advent, 1941, when, on St. Lucy's Day, December 13, 1941, he became a postulant at the Abbey of Gethsemani. How fitting that in a season of darkness and waiting in darkness, when even the smallest lights seem bright, Merton entered Gethsemani under the patronage of St. Lucy, the candle-crowned bearer of light. Merton had made a retreat at Gethsemani in April of that year. His journal entry of April 7, 1941 begins, 'I should tear out all the other pages of this book and all the other pages of everything else I ever wrote, and begin here.'² In early September, 1941 he visited Our Lady of the Valley Trappist monastery in Rhode Island. In Advent, he executed his great *metanoia*, he returned to Gethsemani to undertake what Advent promises us all: the possibility of beginning again.

It is little wonder that in the first decade of his monastic profession Advent would be of great spiritual significance to Merton. A powerful journal entry in November, 1941, immediately followed by two poems, 'Advent' and 'Carol' (both published in *A Man in the Divided Sea* in

1946), the poem 'A Christmas Card' (published in *Figures for an Apocalypse* in 1947), the essay 'The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard' (1952) attest to this fact. Ten years further on, in an article which first appeared in the December, 1959 issue of *Worship* as 'The Advent Mystery', the changed title of the essay anthologized in *Seasons of Celebration* (1965) as 'Advent: Hope or Delusion?' indicates, I think, something of the changed Merton, the Merton well beyond the first flush of monastic enthusiasm.³ But that is another Merton for consideration at another time.

What I propose to do here is to examine briefly some Advent material from Merton's first monastic decade, an entry in the just pre-monastic, Advent, 1941 journal, three early poems, and the 1952 essay on Advent in St. Bernard. This gives us 'lessons and carols'. In the Anglican tradition into which Merton was born on his father's side of the family and in which he was educated at Oakham School (later, rather unfairly, I think excoriating it in *The Seven Storey Mountain*), since the First World War when it was first devised, a service of lessons and carols (a liturgy which opens with prayer and alternates scripture reading and hymns/carols) is traditional (and, incidentally, was made famous by its broadcast from Kings College, Cambridge every Christmas Eve).

Lesson One: The Journal Entry for November 29, 1941⁴

June, 1940 through December, 1941, with a few absences, Merton was teaching English at St. Bonaventure's University in Olean, New York and was in the process of clarifying his monastic vocation. Many of the entries of November and very early

December, 1941 weigh the relative merits of going to work in Friendship House in Harlem or going to the Trappists. In this journal entry, Merton articulates that this Advent is, for him, a new beginning. He writes as follows:

O Holy Lord God! What a wonder and what a gift, that with the beginning of the liturgical year, I should be allowed to feel that there was even the mere possibility of my becoming a Trappist! With the birth of the new liturgical year, I am born new, too! ... this Advent has begun like a real Advent!

The entry is full of energy and excitement as witnessed by its six, short opening paragraphs, two of which begin by addressing God ('O God' and 'O Holy Lord God!'), and by many exclamation points and dashes, so often literary indicators of emotion. It is full of the imagery of the early winter season (darkness and quietude), of the liturgical season of Advent and of the *Salve Regina*, particularly the word *dulcedo*, 'sweetness'. Merton writes: 'Advent opens out like a night full of mystery and brightness and wonder, in which Christ is coming.' ... 'The darkness before morning, when it is quietest and brightest, and Christ comes to be born!' ... 'In the long quiet night of Advent, (*dulcedo*) sweetness falls from the skies of Time's darkness like a radiance that is just beyond our vision! O Holy Grace!'

I don't think it overstates the case to say that these images speak to Merton's own circumstances. In what he now perceived as the 'darkness' of his adult life to this point, a light had begun to dawn. Just when it was darkest, 'light shines in the

Bonnie Thurston

darkness' (John 1:5). From the bitterness, a sweetness emerges, and its name is 'Grace'. Certainly these images re-appear in two poems which apparently almost immediately followed it.

**The Carols: 'Advent', 'Carol',
'A Christmas Card'**⁵

In an email to me Professor Patrick O'Connell suggested, I think correctly, that 'Advent' is almost certainly the last pre-monastic poem and that 'Carol' reworks a lot of the same motifs—if not the first poem from the monastery it must be one of the first.⁶ Merton says that the poems in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946) appear more or less in chronological order. In that volume 'Advent' precedes 'Carol', further strengthening O'Connell's conviction. They are lovely poems; the first focuses on light from darkness, and the second is a great procession to the stable of all the traditional *dramatis personae* of the Christmas-Epiphanismystery.

Many of the images in 'Advent' seem to be taken directly from the journal entry for November 29, 1941 just previously discussed. The poem's 'refrain' is 'Charm with your stainlessness these . . . nights.' It is composed of a series of images nearly all of which are of light in darkness, particularly heavenly lights in the dark, winter sky. The poet speaks of starlight, of meteors 'in the fiery dark' and 'of the starry universe'. He asks the moon to 'be slow to go down', and that 'your darkness and your brightness' be poured 'over all our/solemn valleys.'

The third stanza is central to the poem's meaning and moves it beyond a series of traditional, although lovely, images of a winter night.

Charm with your stainlessness these
nights in Advent,
 holy spheres,
While minds, as meek as beasts,
Stay close at home in the sweet hay;
And intellects are quieter than flocks that
 feed by starlight.
(Collected Poems, p.88)

Documented here is the crucial shift from 'head to heart'. Mind becomes 'meek as beasts', intellect 'quieter than flocks that feed by starlight'. Ironically, the faculty which distinguishes human from animal (mind, intellect) has become docile as a

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contented beast. One cannot enter the 'sacrament of Advent', the mystery it proclaims, via intellection. One enters via the monastic virtues subtly present in the poem in the following words: quiet, silence, humble, wakeful, patient, meek, 'Stay close at home' (stability?), gentle, quiet. These words also apply to the Blessed Virgin who is introduced at the very end of the poem and who travels 'Toward the planets' stately setting.' Ironically, Advent is the 'beginning of the end' of the created universe here repre-

sented by the lights in the winter night sky. It is a remarkable assertion an irenic and pastoral poem and, appropriately, reminds us of the apocalyptic implications of the incarnation.

The poem 'Carol' (CP p.89) which immediately follows 'Advent' in *A Man in the Divided Sea* reminds me of a Christmas pageant or old-fashioned tableaux as the stage is set and all the traditional characters of the story parade in and assemble. The poem, one of Merton's most frequently anthologized and translated⁷, is composed of five stanzas, the third being central. The first two 'set the scene', appealing to hearing and then sight. Stanzas four and five are responses to the event narrated in stanza three, in stanza four, the historical/then and in stanza five, the now/'we' response.

The scene opens in stanza one with 'flocks' and aural images: 'a noise of whispers./In the dry grass of pastures' (note the sibilant 's' sound) and 'weak bells'. It continues with a clever allusion to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' by inviting the reader to 'Look down' and see 'The little towns upon the rocky hills.' It is not humans, but these towns that 'have seen come this holy time.' What they 'look down upon' is the central frame/stanza of the poem.

God's glory, now, is kindled gentler than
 low candlelight
Under the rafters of a barn:
Eternal Peace is sleeping in the hay,
And Wisdom's born in secret in a
 straw-roofed stable.
(CP p.89)

Jesus' presence is personified by His attributes (Peace, Wisdom) to which, in

stanza four, the *dramatis personae* (happy angels, shepherds, flocks, three kings) are invited to respond. What is depicted is the picture on a very traditional (and not terribly biblical) Christmas card into which, in stanza five 'we unnumbered children of the wicked centuries' are invited. In this great procession to the 'secret...straw-roofed stable' (perhaps a pun for that which is hidden—secret—and enduring—stable?) we are invited to bring 'our penances and prayers./And lay them down in the sweet-smelling hay/Beside the wise men's golden jars.'

By the end of the poem, not only are all the elements of the Incarnation-Epiphanism narratives in evidence, but four of the reader's bodily senses have been evoked: hearing, sight, smell, touch, and she has been summoned to join the great procession to the stable and to offer her own greatest 'treasures', her penances and prayers. It is this last stanza, which moves with a challenge from historical past to the reader's present that saves 'Carol' from being a nativity 'set piece'.

The final 'carol' to which we shall listen is 'A Christmas Card' published in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947) (CP pp.184-185). While it evinces many of the images from the two earlier poems (stars, hills, night, stable, bells, winter, 'His Lady Mother', straw, shepherds, stable), consonant with the title of the collection, this is a less placid, irenic poem. It evinces edginess, hardness. It opens conventionally enough with 'the white stars' and 'the winter hills' and 'the freezing night', but moves immediately to the jarring image 'one window/bleeds like the brown eye of an open forge' (CP p.184), which first introduces the critical element of fire in the poem and is mir-

rored in the 'small Heart' which 'bleeds with infinite fire' (CP p.185). 'Carol spoke indefinitely of 'the wicked centuries' (CP p.89). This 'Christmas Card' speaks of 'our hateful century' (CP p.185), in which, after the horrors of the Second World War, images of rapiers, fires, sufferings, holocaust are desperately appropriate.

The image in stanza four of Jesus and Mary fencing with rapiers of love is particularly arresting. Here, Jesus is not the 'gentle Child of gentle Mother' of the children's hymn, not the fat, little cherub of bad devotional art, but the Christ of the pierced, incendiary Sacred Heart. This child is associated with fire, the archetype of destruction, purgation, and rebirth. From the beginning his 'small Heart bleeds with infinite fire', a fire which reappears in stanza five.

Here in this straw lie planned the fires
That will melt all our sufferings:
He is our Lamb, our holocaust!

(CP p.185)

Literally, fire ignites straw. However, this is not an accidental fire, Old Lady O'Leary's cow kicking over the lantern in the barn! It is 'planned (presumably by God as per Ephesians 1.8-10) fire', manifested in the life/death/and resurrection of Christ the Lamb, the Perfect Offering, 'our holocaust'. In its context in a 'hateful century', the reader has hardly recovered from the shock of the brilliantly chosen 'holocaust' before being transported in the next and final stanza back to the opening of the first century, the dirty stable and shepherds shaking snow from their clothes, kneeling 'down to look upon their life' (CP p.185).

Stanzas depicting elements of the traditional Christmas narrative open and close 'A Christmas Card' and frame the central four stanzas which focus on the relationship between the Child and His Mother (characterized by the sharply brilliant image of fencing) and, most pointed, on the purpose of the child's incarnation. This is the most theological of the three poems, focusing more on the effect of the Incarnation than narrating its occurrence in history. The poem is an appropriate 'figure' for 'apocalypse', seeing in the infant Jesus the crucified Christ.

All three of these poems on the Incarnation invoke the skies/stars/heavens/moon, luminaries of night's darkness and representatives of the cosmos, to attend to the events transpiring below them. To 'look down' (CP p.89, p.185) is to see what is most highly exalted. The great lights of the heavens are eclipsed by the 'small Heart' of 'infinite fire' (CP p.185). The poems remind us that 'The "last things" are already present and realized in a hidden manner. The Kingdom of God is thus already "in the midst of us". But, the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it...'.⁸ As Merton writes in his essay on Advent in St. Bernard, they invite us 'to meet the transforming action of God in our souls.'⁹

Lesson Two: 'The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard'

So, in closing, we turn from carols to a last set of 'lessons' provided by Merton in this essay, published originally in French in *Dieu Vivant* (Paris, 1953)¹⁰ and anthologized in *Seasons of Celebration* (1965). In nine sections it discusses the Advent sermons and homilies of St. Bernard. Giving special attention to the im-

portance of Paul's thought on Bernard's theology of Advent, the essay opens with the reminder that, 'The twelfth century Cistercians place a special emphasis on the coming of Christ by His Spirit to the Christian Person. ...they contemplate His hidden birth in our lives...'¹¹

St. Bernard teaches that, in fact, there are 'three Advents' of Christ. The first is His entrance into the world 'in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary' through which 'He comes to seek and to save that which was lost' (SC p.75). The second is Christ present 'in our souls now' through 'our present recognition of His *pascha* or *transitus*, the passage of Christ through our world, through *our own lives*' (SC p.76, italics Merton's). The third Advent is Christ's return to judge at the end of time, what theology calls the *parousia*, when Christ '... comes to take us to Himself' thus fulfilling the promise of the 'first' Advent (SC p.75). Thus we see the appropriateness of Merton's apocalyptic thinking and images vis-a-vis Advent. A large portion of the essay, sections 4, 6 and 7, is devoted to the 'second Advent', what I think of as the 'personalization of the Advent mystery'.

The second Advent mystery is the working out in time of the fact that, as St. John says, God first loved us, 'loved us and sent his Son' (1 John 4:10). 'This is most important in the mystery of Advent—God's descent to our lowliness out of pure love, not for any merit of our own' (SC p.68. Note the Pauline emphasis). The 'personalization of the Advent mystery' is the reality that God's desire is that Christ advent in each one of us. 'We do not have to travel far to find Him. He is within us' (SC p.68). Merton suggests

a crucial Advent 'agenda' is to 'learn to recognize the present Advent that is taking place at every moment of our own earthly life as wayfarers' (SC p.76), '... the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously *gone out*, in order to make room for [God]' (SC p.71, italics Merton's). The startling fact of Advent (a point made in St. John's gospel in 8.31-36) is that Christ has come to dwell within us to free us from ourselves, to untangle the nefarious knots into which we are prone to tie ourselves. Merton describes this as 'a liberation of our-

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selves' which 'lets us *out* of ourselves from the inside' (SC p.70).

On so many levels, we are our own jailer. We are imprisoned by our own prejudices, presuppositions and projects. The incarnation for which Advent longs can give us a larger life, a freer life. But we must consent to it, and, unfortunately, many of us find it easier and more comfortable to be slaves than free persons. 'What is uncertain,' Merton wrote some years later in 'Advent: Hope or Delusion?', 'is not the "coming" of Christ but our own reception of Him, our own response to Him, our own readiness and capacity to "go forth and meet Him"' (SC p.91). As part of God's primacy of love, a model of 'going forth', of consent, is available in the Blessed Virgin Mary who

plays 'a central part in the Mystery of the Incarnation and of our Redemption' (SC p.83). God 'willed that the salvation of the world should depend on her consent' (SC p.83). 'The Word comes into the world through the doors of Mary's silent and hidden prayer' (SC p.85).

Conclusion

It seems fitting that Merton's 'lessons and carols' should close as the reality it proclaims began, with Mary. She is the constant figure in the material we have examined, the golden thread that holds it together. She was present in the meditation on the *Salve* in Merton's Journal entry of November 29, 1941, as 'the gentle Virgin' in the poem 'Advent' (CP p.88), the

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silent, unspoken presence 'in a straw-roofed stable' in 'Carol' (CP p.89), and as 'His Lady Mother' in 'A Christmas Card' (CP p.185). Merton's essay on the Advent in St. Bernard closes, 'This presence of God in Mary is itself the secret of Advent, the heart of the Mystery, for it is in Mary herself that the Son of God gave us the admirable *Sacrament* of Advent...' (SC p.87, italics Merton's).

By this particular service of 'lessons and carols', Merton calls us, as, indeed, the Church calls us, men and women, to imitate Mary whose *fiat* set incarnation in motion. Advent calls all Christians to be Christ bearers. And that means we've got to clear away the infernal junk in the caves of our souls to make room for Christ, to sweep away a lot of egoistic dust. It's a stark but liberating idea that, as Merton writes in 'Advent: Hope or Delusion?', 'The Advent mystery in our own lives is the beginning of the end of all, in us, that is not yet Christ' (SC p.95).

Our predicament, I think, is not unlike that found in Merton's poem 'To the Immaculate Virgin, on a Winter Night', a poem first published on August 6, 1948 in *Commonweal* (48) and which appears in *Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949).¹² Lines from that poem read, 'Lady, the night is falling and the dark/Steals all the blood from the scarred west.' 'Where in the world has any voice/Prayed to you, Lady, for the peace that's in your power?' 'Where in the world has any city trusted you?' (CP p.218). 'Lady, the night has got us by the heart/And the whole world is tumbling down' (CP p.219).¹³ In this dark, tumble down world, Advent is the best news going. As St. Bernard taught in the twelfth century:

...Advent does not merely commemorate the Incarnation as a historical event, nor is it a mere devotional preparation for the Feast of Christmas, nor an anticipation of the Last Judgement. It is above all the 'sacrament' of the Presence of God in the world and in time in His Incarnate Word, in His Kingdom, above all in His

presence in *our own* lives as *our* Savior.

(SC p.64, italics Merton's)

Thanks be to God!

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965) p.61.
2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain, the Story of a Vocation* (Journals, Volume One 1939-1941) (Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., ed.) (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) p.333.
3. In *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (ATLA Bibliography Series, NO. 55, Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2008, p.96) Patricia Burton provides this publication history. In *Seasons* the essay concludes with the date 1963, perhaps the year Merton revised it?
4. Unless designated to the contrary all quotations in this section are from *Run to the Mountain*, p.459.
5. All cited poems are from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977). Page numbers in the text are from this edition.
6. Email to me from Patrick O'Connell October 14, 2008.
7. See Burton pp.95-96.
8. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p.64.
9. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p.70.
10. According to Burton, p.158 the essay was 'originally published as "*Le sacrement de L'Avent dans la spiritualite de saint Bernard*," tr. by Pierre Bastard. *Dieu Vivant* (Paris 23 (1953): pp.23-43.'
11. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* p.61. Unless otherwise noted, references in this section of my text are to

Merton's *Seasons of Celebration* (SC).

12. Burton p.169.

13. Something of Merton's great devotion to Our Lady in 1949 is movingly evident in his journal entries of May 5, 1949 and June 10, 1949 both of which speak of devotion to Mary as a 'prayer practice' of Merton's. These entries appear in *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Two 1941-1952*, Jonathan Montaldo (ed.) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

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