

# Lockdown, Solitude and Thomas Merton

## A Personal Reflection

Jill Robson

### **Introduction**

I must admit right at the beginning of this reflection that I have long harboured a slight feeling of envy for Merton's hermitage – where he could live alone, in solitude, in the woods, where he could write and pray. My fantasy is not a cinderblock hermitage in Kentucky – but perhaps a summer cottage in Iceland, miles from anywhere and anyone, with a warm thermal pool beside it. As I said, a fantasy. But we need to be careful what we wish for.

In my time in lockdown I found myself thinking about Thomas Merton and solitude. My experience of being socially isolated has highlighted a number of facets of the particularities and the deeper inwardness of being alone for protracted periods that came as an unexpected bonus from the pandemic.

### **Locked down in Hope**

The first thing to say is that I am very lucky – I live in Hope – Yes really – my home is in the Peak District in the village of Hope. So I am surrounded by a lovely valley with beautiful hills all around and country walking from my door. I have a large garden with a river at the bottom of it. So being 'shut in' was no hardship. I live alone so I am used to a degree of solitude anyway. I am 76 so I needed to self-isolate. Due to my health I might have been on the shielding list, but the NHS never told me. Our village community rallied around and set up ways to support its older population with shopping and collecting prescriptions, etc. So I was very well locally supported.

My family – my partner who also had to self-isolate, children, grandchildren - all live at various distances away from me, from 16 to 250 miles. I was firmly told, 'Mum your job is not to get the virus.' Nevertheless I spent some time thinking about what treatment I would and would not want if I did catch the virus, and then writing it down and sharing that with my family. After which, having 'set my affairs in order', I gave myself to the experience of solitude.

At a personal level I loved it and found it a rich experience in ways I hadn't expected. For me, unlike many others, this cloud had a silver lining. I am a writer working on a book so I had plenty to do, to occupy my mind and to give life a structure and purpose. I already live a fairly

silent life because I have *no* electronic devices beyond a telephone and a radio. In lockdown I made 2 telephone calls a day – one to my partner and one to a friend in lockdown, or one of my grown up children. I listened to some Radio 4 in the evenings and the News once a day - that was quite enough! I saw my gardener once a week at a distance and had my weekly shop done for me. Sometimes I encountered a neighbour taking their daily exercise at the same time as me and we passed the time of day across the lane from each other.

### **The Fruits of Solitude**

In the first days of Lockdown, in Lent, approaching Holy Week I contemplated my own death, looked it straight in the eye, did all that was necessary, and then just got on with enjoying the solitude. We had wonderful Spring weather, the garden was bursting with bulbs coming into flower in a succession of wonders: snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils, primroses, tulips, fritillaries, violets. On Easter Saturday I walked up the valley side to a cherry tree '*wearing white for Eastertide*'.<sup>1</sup> It was a glorious warm sunny day, clear, bright visibility, and silent. So unlike a Bank Holiday when usually the village is full of visitors, walkers, mountain bikers, campers, etc. As I came down from the hill, looking at the quiet and beautiful valley I thought: 'If these are my last days what wonderful ones they are!' It was Easter in ordinary.<sup>2</sup>

The village was quiet with almost no traffic, no planes going in and out of Manchester Airport, and hardly anybody about. But it was not silent for there were many noisy spring birds, sheep on the hills, the wind in the trees and the river's voice. The quiet and the lack of human interaction meant my senses became sharper. I noticed more things and in greater detail, and with the brilliant Spring light of clear warm sunny days beauty was to be seen everywhere, oftentimes jumping out of a primrose straight into my heart to move it with its simple loveliness, and at other times to dissolve my emotions with memories.

### **Memories**

The Spring, and particularly the month of May is for me full of anniversaries: of births (all of my children, a grandson and a close cousin); a brush with death when I survived a pulmonary embolism 18 years ago; and of deaths, of my father and of a number of close friends including Fr Celsus Flynn OCSO, a Cistercian of Mount St Bernard's Abbey whose wise and loving friendship I still miss 40 years later. Hardly a day of May goes by without a significant date. As May's flowers come out it feels as if I am almost physically assaulted with memories, both happy and sad. The memories are of *past* events, but the people – the living and

the dead – feel very *present*. This year without other people's presence to dissipate the memories it was a much stronger experience than any previous year. It was like living with those people almost present. I realised that this was an experience of being inside the Communion of Saints. It didn't stop with those I had known in the flesh – others who I had met in print along the way came bustling in too. Thomas Merton was one of those for he has been a companion on my journey since I first met him 60 years ago as a rather pious teenager drawn at that time to a contemplative religious life.

### **Merton's Solitude**

I found myself thinking about what Merton's solitude was like, for although it is said that he became a hermit in his last years, his solitude was not that of living far away from people with no contact.<sup>3</sup> His life in his hermitage was supported by the infrastructure of the Abbey, which was a relatively short walk away. He wrote copiously: books, articles, letters, and kept a substantial journal; he was involved in the Peace Movement and was in regular correspondence with many of those involved. He answered letters from all sorts of people who wrote to him, only having the support of Brother Patrick Hart as his secretary in his final year. Relieved of the post of Novice Master on moving to the hermitage, he still gave the novices a weekly conference. Even if he was living at a distance he was still a member of the community. He had many visitors at the hermitage, and occasionally travelled to give talks and lead retreats, also going off with his camera out of the Abbey's lands to look at the world with new eyes.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, despite all of that, his inner life grew and flourished in the solitude of his hermitage where he was able to be more in touch with the natural rhythms of the seasons, the liturgical year and with the natural world around him. Yet for all of this he still craved a more eremitical existence.<sup>5</sup>

After he had been living full time in his hermitage for 20 months he wrote, on 18 April 1968:

The problem of real solitude: I don't have it here. I am not really living as a hermit. I see too many people, have too much active work to do, the place is noisy, too accessible. People are always coming up here. I have been too slack about granting visits, interviews, etc., going to town too often, socializing, drinking, all that. All I have is a certain privacy, but real solitude is less and less possible here. Everyone now knows where the hermitage is.<sup>6</sup>

This was written shortly before he left for his journeyings to California, New Mexico, Alaska and Asia. One of the aims of these journeys was to see if he could find a place for a more secluded hermitage where he could *really* live the solitary life that he longed for. But perhaps Merton's vision of radical solitude was an impractical fantasy. There were some Catholics that he met in the wilds of Alaska who had some interesting personal observations: One said 'that for a monk who has taken a vow of silence, Merton sure had a hard time keeping his mouth shut'; and another felt that he wouldn't be up to looking after himself and subsisting in the Alaskan wilds, remarking, 'Merton may be a Trappist monk, but he didn't know a damn thing about trapping.'<sup>7</sup>

But, as we all know, it was not to be. Following his death in Bangkok in December 1968, his body came back to the Abbey and was laid to rest alongside his brethren in the community cemetery.

### A Personal Reflection

The thought which stays with me is that Life, and the ordinary workings of Divine Providence, doesn't always pan out as we imagine; indeed it rarely gives us what we hope for and expect — whether on an individual scale with events such as Merton's accidental death in Bangkok, or on a much wider scale with our lockdown in the Covid 19 pandemic — events demonstrate that precariousness in no uncertain way. But reading Thomas Merton's journal shows that for all his compromised discontent the solitude did give him a space in which to grow in his inner life in some remarkable ways. Yet it is his very human failures to live out his hopes and ideals which make him accessible to us, for he fails in such human ways, and in his writing he has left an account of that stumbling journey.

For me the solitude of lockdown gave me a chance for thinking deeply about my writing, and about dying. It was also a time of unexpected beauty. The fruits were a deep contentment; an increased joy in the wonder of the natural world; and a deeper awareness of the passing of the seasons. All of which lead to an experience of deep transcendence lurking just below the surface – what could perhaps be called '*inscape*' or '*seeing into the life of things*' – together with a fresh appreciation of the 'community' I live in of my neighbours, friends and family: the living and the dead – and all their kindness and practical loving.<sup>8</sup> The physical lockdown unlocked a deeper inner space in me, which facilitated a more concentrated listening, to the natural world and to others, often only on the telephone. And, there was an opening of a deep dark inner vault, which I was just preparing to take courage to explore as lockdown ended. Then, when more face-to-face contacts restarted, life moved up from

those deep places of solitude. But, I am glad of the glimpse I got of them. If we have a 'second wave' in the coming winter I may need to hang on hard to those insights in what could be a dark time ahead.

Rereading what Merton wrote of his journey through solitude I am struck that it is never all you expect of it – but in the humdrum and everyday ordinariness there can still be a way to a deeper way of being.<sup>9</sup> That is a bright thought in a dark time.

### Notes

1. From the poem 'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now' in *The Shropshire Lad* by A E Housman.
2. From the poem 'Prayer' by George Herbert.
3. For an account of such a life see: Verena Schiller, *A Simplified Life: A contemporary hermit's experience of solitude and silence* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010).
4. See Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness - The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1979).
5. The story of Merton's years in the hermitage can be traced in the last 3 volumes of his journals. In more succinct chronological form, and covering the major themes of his life, see *The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton's Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, (Oxford: Lion Books, 2002).
6. *The Intimate Merton*, p. 390.
7. Kathleen Witkowska Tarr, *We Are All Poets Here: Thomas Merton's 1968 journey to Alaska* (Anchorage, Alaska: VP & D House, 2017), p. 290.
8. 'Inscape', the word of Gerard Manley Hopkins; 'seeing into the life of things' is from the poem '*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*' by William Wordsworth.
9. Anyone who wants to read Merton's philosophical and theological *ideas* about Solitude could start with Bonnie B Thurston's book *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota 2020, which is an excellent short introduction with a useful bibliography. [See a review of the book on pp. 39-41]

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