

# SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY 12TH DECEMBER IN ST. LAWRENCE'S CHURCH, WINCHESTER, ENGLAND

(Thomas Merton Conference)

by **A. M. Allchin**

---

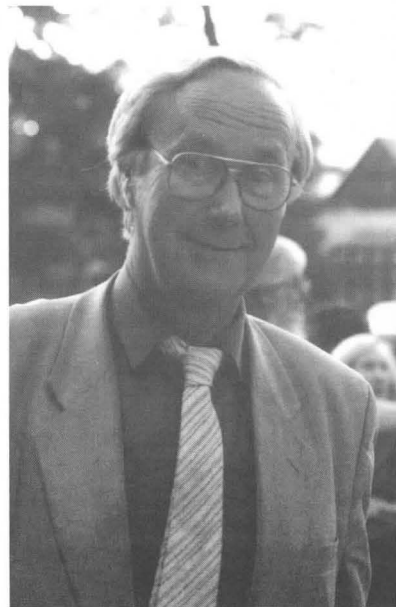
As they went away Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John, "What did you go out in to the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in king's houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes I tell you, and more than a prophet. [Matthew 11:7-9]

The gospel for this Sunday focuses our attention on John the Baptist, the prophetic figure who prepares for the coming of the Christ, the voice who cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.

There can be no doubt in the gospels about the importance of the Baptist. It is underlined in many places. As St. John says, "He is the one sent from God to bear witness to the light." In the Eastern Orthodox Church he is given prominent place on the icon screen which separates the sanctuary from the body of the church. There and in other places the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin can be seen, sometimes depicted in prayer to the Lord for the needs and healing of the world.

In the last two days some of us have been thinking together about the life of a twentieth century John the Baptist, Thomas Merton, a monk from the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky who died twenty five years ago on December 10, 1968, after a life the first part of which had been spent in France and England and America and the second half in the stability of the community in Kentucky.

Isn't that rather exaggerated, you might say to compare Thomas Merton with John the Baptist? Maybe you will feel that there is something incongruous in comparing a man of our own times about whom we know a great deal including his limitations, his weaknesses



A. M. ALLCHIN

---

Canon **Arthur MacDonald Allchin** is Director of the St. Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality at Oxford University in Oxford, England. He is a former adviser to the International Thomas Merton Society and was chosen Honorary President of the newly formed Thomas Merton Society (of Great Britain and Ireland). He was a friend and correspondent of Merton's. He is the author of several essays on Merton including his General Session address at the Second General Meeting of ITMS in 1991, "The Worship of the Whole Creation: Thomas Merton and the Eastern Fathers."

and his failings, with one of the great figures of the Bible? Isn't that a bit out of proportion? Well, all I can say is that it doesn't seem so to me.

Merton is a genuinely prophetic figure for our time, one who bears witness to the light for us now. He was a man who in his lifetime saw deeply into the things of God and deeply into the nature of the times we are living in. He was a man who had received great natural gifts as a writer and a communicator and who used these gifts altogether at the service of the gospel.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? . . . To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in king's houses.” A prophet is not going to be a comfortable man, a man of convention. He is not going to be a smooth man saying smooth things. He will be a person who God has pulled out into some kind of separation from the world, into a desert place in order to hear a word of the Lord and then to come back and proclaim that word to his fellow men and women.

Merton was for our time such a man. His long years of prayer and silence in the monastery blossomed in the last period of his life into an extraordinary kind of prophetic utterance. He found himself called to speak and write on a great variety of topics. He wrote on prayer and meditation and its meaning for our own day. He wrote on the way of letting the Bible come alive as a text which can change us. But he also wrote on social, and political issues, supporting those who were working towards social and racial justice in the United States, and supporting those who were working for peace and reconciliation in the international sphere.

At the same time, he found himself more and more drawn to study the traditions of prayer and contemplation in the other religious traditions of the world, in Judaism, in Islam, in Hinduism, and in Buddhism. God is the God of all creation. The Word of God is at work in the hearts and minds of women and men at all times and in all places, for he is the true light which lightens everyone coming into the world. The holy and lifegiving Spirit is everywhere present and filling all things, a principle of life at work in all creation.

As he explored the other religions, he continued to read and study the heart of the Christian tradition. He discovered modern theologians who greatly attracted him, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alexander Schmemmann. He went more and more deeply into the spiritual tradition of the fathers of east and west alike. He was fascinated by the history of Celtic monasticism in Britain and Ireland.

At the same time he was carrying on an active correspondence with people in all the continents, scholars, poets, monks, social workers, members of his family, friends from his college days, school girls who had read his books. How could one man have done all that? Having worked for a few days on his papers at Bellarmine College in Louisville, I find it quite an enigma. There was a kind of non-disintegrating explosion of energy going on, an energy both of love and knowledge.

It is not surprising to me that during these last years he had quite a number of minor illnesses. I think his body must have been at work preventing him from burning himself out altogether in a flame of enthusiasm and desire.

Here was a man greatly gifted by nature whose gifts had been wholly offered to God, and had been integrated and transformed by God's grace in unaccountable and wonderful ways.

A prophet yes; a prophet for our own times; a man full of the spirit, given words to say; words which disturb and which comfort, words which startle and confirm us, words which are sometimes crystal clear and sometimes tantalizing in their opaqueness.

At the heart of it all, both of his secret life with God and of his open life with his friends, the life which he shares with all of us through his books which make us his friends, there was not judgment and condemnation, but forgiveness, freedom and joy. He was before and above all a man of great joy, joy in God, joy in his friends and companions, joy in all God's creation.

He was himself not surprisingly fascinated by the figure of John the Baptist. In one of his poems he meditates on the moment of visitation when Mary, having received the angel's message, hastens to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. The child in her womb, the Baptist to be, leaps for joy at the approach of the Christ child.

Merton sees us all as hidden in the womb of this world, the womb of time, living in the darkness of faith, not yet able to bear the bright glories of eternity, but overthrown by joy at the presence of good things to come. These are things which no eye has seen, no ear heard, which have not entered into the human heart, those good things which God has prepared for them that love him.

Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire  
Washed in his gladness like a vesture of new flame,  
We burn like eagles in his invincible awareness  
And bound and bounce with happiness,  
Leap in the womb or cloud, our faith, our element  
Our contemplation, our anticipated heaven  
Till Mother Church sings like an evangelist.

May we find here our forgiveness, our freedom and our joy, here at this altar. May we find here our anticipated heaven as Christ the conqueror of death, the risen Lord who hears in his body the marks of his self offering, comes to meet us in the sacrament of his love. Amen.