

Signs of God in Our Midst

Homily Commemorating the Anniversary
of the Death of Thomas Merton
December 10, 1999
Cathedral of the Assumption
Louisville, Kentucky

By **Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO**

Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I the Lord, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go. If you would hearken to my commandments, your prosperity would be like a river, and your vindication like the waves of the sea; your descendants would be like the sand, and those born of your stock like its grains, their name never cut off or blotted out from my presence [Isaiah 48:17-19].

To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in market-places and call to one another, "We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, "He is possessed by a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, "Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is vindicated by her works [Matthew 11:16-19].

Our readings today are pure Merton, something Father Louis could have gone off on with a wonderful exegesis that would have an obvious immediate application. The children are playing their game and as children are wont to do, they are not satisfied with what is offered. They want something else, a dirge when a joyous tune is played and a lightsome melody when a dirge is played. Does that sound familiar? As Jesus explains it: you thought John (the Baptist) mad because of his ascetic practices and Jesus appears in the midst of a society that's not all that obviously religious and he was cast out. Whether what is taught is liberal creativity or conservative stability we are never satisfied. We always want something else. That really says it all. "Our hearts are restless until they have been found by thee," as St. Augustine said and Thomas Merton often quoted.

Advent and John the Baptist were very much a part of the spirituality of Thomas Merton. He arrived to enter the



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monastery in the midst of the Advent season on the tenth of December 1941. It was the tenth of December 1968 that he went forth to the fullness of life. The themes evoked by Advent and in particular one of Advent's major personages, John the Baptist, were themes that are the thread of continuity throughout the Merton works. Hope, authenticity, the real, the presence of Christ in our world and time are Advent emphases and the structure of Merton's spiritual teaching.

In an essay on Advent entitled "Advent: Hope or Delusion,"¹ Merton presents a meditation on the human situation in the light of the expectation of Christ's coming in history, in our daily lives and his final coming in the fullness of time. These are basically themes that were present in the monastic Fathers of the twelfth century, the founders of the monastic life that Merton lived. One of Merton's great gifts was to grasp the truths in the ancient texts and give them an interpretation that was relevant for our time.

Merton's words can still give us perspective for the Advent we are celebrating. He reminds us that "the Church in preparing us for the birth of a 'great prophet,' a Savior and a King of Peace, has more in mind than seasonal cheer. The Advent mystery focuses the light of faith upon the very meaning of life, of history, . . . of the world and of our own being. In Advent we celebrate the coming and indeed the *presence* of Christ in our world. We witness to His presence even in the midst of all its inscrutable problems and tragedies. Our Advent faith is not an escape from the world to a misty realm of slogans and comforts which declare our problems to be unreal, our tragedies inexistent" (89). So Merton.

Merton presents the text about John the Baptist's question in the prison – is Jesus the one who is to come or should we look for another – with a great deal of pathos that is a real encouragement to each of us. John who had recognized Jesus at the River Jordan and to whom he had sent his disciples, now finds Jesus a stumbling block to his own faith. Not so much a fear that his mission was wrong, but that much more profound question: if Jesus is not the answer, is there an answer? It is a bit disconcerting to have one of the stature of John the Baptist suffering the emptiness of doubt not too long before a dancing girl would demand his head. It is a harsh and terrible love to be a disciple of Jesus.

Merton reminds us that John's question should not surprise us but that the question underlines the difficulty of finding a simple, comprehensive, once-for-all answer to the fundamental question of reality. John was able to point to Jesus in a moment of fulfillment that gave his life meaning. That was not enough – he was called to live the response in the darkness of the prison cell, in the face of death, in the midst of seeming failure. This points to an important element in a person's witness to Christ. It must be a seeking and a witnessing to the presence of the Savior in our lives as they are, not in some ideal way that we think they should be. The fact that things are not as they should be does not change the truth that Christ is still present in life. All is being done according to his will. Our Advent hope is not so much a response to the uncertainty of the coming of the Lord, but the uncertainty concerning our ability to receive him. Like John we are called to recognize Jesus in the midst of contradiction, failure, the absence of assured presence.

John's question whether Jesus is "he who is to come" has that strange relation to time. The question being asked in the present is about the future and comes from an experience of the past. We not only believe that Christ will come but also that he has come. This makes us aware of the present – is there evidence that he has already come? Is there a sign that he will come? We believe the Lord is very present now but we find that the question about "he who is to come" is very disturbing in our

lives since it implies a questioning of ourselves, of our lives, of our place in history, of the meaning of the mystery of Christ in his Church. But if we do not ask the question of ourselves, society around us asks about the kingdom of Christ, the Prince of Peace. The outsider simply says the presence of the kingdom is not all that evident to him!

Merton says, “Advent for us means acceptance of this totally new beginning. It means a readiness to have eternity and time meet not only in Christ but *in us*, . . . in our life, in our world, in our time. . . . The beginning, therefore, is the end. We must accept the end, before we can begin. Or rather, to be more faithful to the complexity of life, we must accept the end in the beginning, both together” (96-97).

What does such a reality look like? Again in Merton’s words, “The victory of Christ is by no means the victory of my city over ‘their’ city. The exaltation of Christ is not the defeat and death of others in order that ‘my side’ may be vindicated, that I may be proved ‘right’” (97). It is a radical transition for each of us. It becomes obvious in the fulfillment of what Christ told John’s disciples the sign of authenticity was: “the poor have the Gospel preached to them.” Here the signs of life become obvious because they proceed from love. Evil ends and gives place to good in a physical and visible way: blindness ends, sight begins. Sickness ends, health begins. Death ends, life begins. All these are signs of God in our midst.

1. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 88-100; subsequent page references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.