

Time on our hands

The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is to pray.

Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was a prolific writer. It was as if he had to write, to get down in print everything he was thinking. For us, his readers, this is a huge corpus of work that makes us ask, "where do I start?".

Merton loved to write journals and then they became some of his most revealing writings about his own life, and his own spiritual journey. For many people the story of his journey through life that finally brought him into the community at Gethsemei was the way into his writing. "The Seven Story Mountain" is that book, when it was printed in the UK it became "Elected Silence". It is a wonderful way into his writing and also an insight into his inner life, as God leads him from no religious affiliation to conversion into the Roman Catholic Church and the struggle and entry into the monastery.

He continued to write journals and have some published. "The Sign of Jonas" is an amazing book. It follows on from the Seven Story Mountain, and is his journey within the monastery to a contemplative life. It moves from "the sublime to the trivial", from moments that "will fill the reader with a sense of awe and wonder to others that will amuse and intrigue". A critic wrote, "I am sure there has been no other book like this". It is what you get when someone writes their life story, warts and all, their inner life and their daily routine. A journal is the place where someone writes their innermost thoughts, but also records events, conversations, laughter, frustrations, rows, and joys. Merton does just that, and by doing so he allows us into that life to learn from the master about his life of prayer and find there something to inspire and deepen our own.

In "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander" Merton talks about one of the incidents that changed his view of the world and his life.

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, and that we could not be alien to one another though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness." It was an experience that he had at other times, that he belonged to something and someone bigger than himself, and he was part of something vaster than he could imagine. We are all a part of each other and we are all God's children.

I think Merton allows us into his life and we are nosey, we want to be drawn in and by entering we allow Merton to gently teach us that God is loving, merciful and bigger than we can ever imagine. We can think to ourselves, if he can do it so can I. God has used his journals to lead so many people to a commitment, or to a deepening of their spiritual life and they open the door to his other books that lead us on in our journey of faith.