

## Time on our hands

“They should value nothing whatever above Christ himself and may he bring us all together to eternal life.” *Rule of St Benedict*

Those words have inspired men and women down the centuries in their journey of faith. Many of our great people were monks and nuns who influenced the generations around them. One of those men was a young man who was born in France in 1915. His mother was from New Zealand and his father from America. His mother died while he was still quite young and his father took him to various places around the world as he pursued his career as an artist. In the end they settled for some time in England and Thomas went to Oakham School in High Oakham, Rutland. Later, he went to Cambridge but, sadly, he had to leave and returned to America where he went to Columbia University and, whilst there, he had a conversion to Roman Catholicism. Until this happened he had largely ignored or avoided any faith or religion. He was persuaded to go to the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemane in Kentucky and found his spiritual home and that was where he spent the rest of his life. In 1968 he was at a conference with monks from other religions, because he had been more and more drawn to what united those who became monks of any faith. Whilst there he had a tragic accident and died. His body was returned to the monastery where he now rests in peace.

That’s a very brief biography of Thomas Merton, who became Brother Louis when he joined the monastery but who wrote in his given name, Thomas Merton. There is so much that has been written about Merton, and he, himself, has written so much about his life that we can get to know him in a very deep way. He wrote a biography, *Elected Silence*, which takes the reader on a journey with him through his life and the struggles that brought him to become a monk. There are some excellent books written about him by others, *Merton – A Biography* by Monica Furlong; *Divine Discontent* by John Moses; *Thomas Merton* by M Basil Pennington; *Thomas Merton* by William Shannon. They will all give insights into the man and his writing, but it is by reading his books that we are taken by Merton into his inner life and so are led into our own deeper inner life; because that is what he does best, he is a teacher of how we live our lives valuing nothing above Christ.

Because he allows us into his inner life we meet someone who is flawed, struggles with his faith, struggles with his fellow monks, struggles with his Abbot and the Church Hierarchy and yet walks closer and closer to Christ who is the most important person in his life. His fellow monks found him difficult, and yet they always went to hear him speak, even though he told them they were not contemplative a lot of the time. He became a hermit within the grounds of the monastery, but continued to write, pray and teach, whether in the monastery or outside. He knew himself to be a flawed monk and a flawed person, which is what makes him a great teacher, he learned to get it right by getting it wrong, to quote Richard Rohr.

For now, a quote from Merton that I have found helpful for many years:

“Good Shepherd, you have a wild and crazy sheep in love with thorns and brambles. But please, don’t get tired of looking for me! I know you won’t. For you have found me. All I have to do is stay found.”