

Time on our hands

Traveller, your footsteps are the path, and nothing more.

Traveller, there is no path, you make the path by walking.

Antonio Machado (Spanish Poet)

Do you remember the words of Thomas Merton, “if you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying.” Machado says the same thing in part of a poem, you create the path by walking, you learn to pray by praying. It seems so simple but the journey is not so easy. That journey of prayer has been taken by everyone who is serious about their life of faith, and the metaphor of a journey has been used by so many people throughout the centuries.

Walk where you will.

Seek what you will.

And you will never find a higher road above

No surer road below

Then the pathway of the Holy Cross.

The Imitation of Christ, Thomas a Kempis

The road of prayer and the road of the cross come together in our lives as we journey towards God. In prayer we can face ourselves as only God sees us, but with the promise of Jesus to be with us we can face ourselves and rise again to new life. When we look at the world around us and see the many crosses that people carry, war, famine, homelessness, refugees, and the list gets longer each day, we bring them in our prayer to the foot of the cross on which Jesus died and leave them with him.

Poetry and prayer appear to go hand in hand, and it goes back centuries. The Book of Psalms is a poetry book of prayer, some joyful, some sad, some angry and some questioning. Merton, as we have seen was able to put his prayer into poetry, not always with success but he tried. He tried to put into language the inexpressible. Being a poet and a contemplative monk, he brought the two together and out of that comes an amazing insight which again is so simple:

The poet turns inward to create,

the contemplative turns to God to be created.

He is not “other-worldly”, he is not on a different plain, he is one of us trying to walk his journey of faith wherever God calls him, and he gives us all an insight into his journey in the hope it will help us on ours. He had his crosses, they are there in the journals, and he used them well:

What is the good of trying to teach people to love God without preaching through these wounds?

All who met him were astounded at his ordinariness, Henri Nouwen remembered one of the world’s greatest teachers of prayer sitting drinking a beer and talking about the ordinary day to day lives of the community he was part of; Richard Rohr remembered watching a little lady dressed in white (Mother Teresa) talking together with Merton walking along a footpath. Whatever the memory they all remember a man of love.

Love is the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other.

John O’Donohue, Anam Cara