

While 'watching with Christ' early on Good Friday I came across this quote from Thomas Merton. He says "Despair is the absolute extreme of self love. It is reached when man (sic) deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost. In everyone there is hidden some root of despair because in every one there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self pity as soon as our own resources fail us. But because our own resources inevitably fail us we are all more or less subject to discouragement and despair. Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great...that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that God is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves"*

There you go. The way I read this to myself is that self pity comes when I come up against what I am not able to do. So offering up the responsibility for the future into the hands of God is a recipe for happiness, because God is ultimately responsible, not I.

I remember feeling this about the idea of being a 'creature' of God. I used to hear these words as 'negative', in that it was putting us down in order to magnify God as the creator. But I came to see that there is freedom in being a 'creature' because then I don't have to be responsible for everything.

This recognition of my limits is the humility that Thomas Merton is thinking about here. But to him in reply there are a number of things to be said. First of all, I do not know what I am properly responsible for and what

I am not. For example, I used to think I was responsible for the future of the Church in the place where I was stationed. This meant trying my best to implement the 'Easter Journey' and to help members of the congregation to grow enough to be effective witnesses to the gospel, such that it could be passed on, and we could keep being the Church.

My colleagues used to say 'Well I am not responsible for this. It is God's Church, God will 'guide the future, as he has the past'. So they presided over genteel decline without trying to strike a blow for doing something different.

I remember a professor at a conference talking about 'The mission of God' He was saying that the Church is not fundamentally responsible for its own future. He told the story of a Chinese girl whose grandmother hid a New Testament in her 'Little Red Book'. The daughter found it and read it, and then came to the Gregorian Institute in Rome to hear his lectures about Christianity. I asked this professor 'Where the next generation of Christians is going to come from?' He said 'It's not my problem.' I thought that if we are going to use the model of the Chinese girl as a 'norm' we are not going to have many Christians!

On the other hand, there is the model that we get from the hymn 'Be Thou my Vision.' This hymn depicts a co-operation between my own soul and God's soul. Having been formed in God's ways, I learn to see with God's eyes. So God becomes not opposed to me as 'over' me, but 'heart of my own heart.' Here I employ all my energies in co-operation with God.

As I come up to my last job, I am wondering how much I will be able to

do, and how much I should take on as my responsibility. I am a bit 'battle weary' and am happy to say to the new congregation 'The main responsibility for what happens here will be yours, because priests come and go but you will stay.'

As I reflect on my time here, I am a bit sad about what I have not been able to do. It is as if my imagination runs away with my capacity to put it into operation, so there is always a big gap between where my imaginings go, and what can be made to happen.

It may be that the future of the Church looks very different from the kind of Church that nurtured me. This new Church will have its weaknesses. This new Church will have its strengths. Perhaps it will be no more or less 'church' than any other incarnation. It will just not be the 'church' for which I have devoted my life. This is sad.

Coming into contact with this sadness is not the same as despair. Coming into contact with this sadness is part of the necessary process of adjustment to what is possible with me, and what is not. This is 'Godly sorrow' because it derives from an engagement with the unknowns of the world, in hope.

Thomas Merton goes on to say some other things in this article which help me in coming to terms with being faithful, and being trusting in God. He goes on '*A humble person can do great things with an uncommon perfection because he is no longer concerned about incidentals, like his own interests or his own reputation and therefore he no longer needs to waste his efforts defending them. For a humble man is not afraid of failure. In fact, he is not afraid of anything, even of him-*

*self, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of god, before whom no other power has any meaning and for whom there is no such thing as an obstacle***

*Thomas Morton, *Seeds of Contemplation* Anthony Clarke books, 1961 p.140Cf.

** Morton, p148

It is not surprising that the process of finishing up a ministry beings with it a review of what has been done, and the accompanying joys at accomplishments, and sadness at failures. What Thomas Morton reminds me of is that all that happens, happens in the bigger context of God's love for me and for us all. It is not for me that success is nothing and failure is nothing, but that underneath all is god's love. Like Job, who refused to accept that, just because things have gone wrong, God was punishing him, so I seek the kind of faith in God's leading. About the meaning of things, about who was right and who was wrong, I have to be agnostic. As Jesus said to the disciples who were asking 'What about him' Jesus says 'what is it to you? Follow me.'

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest



Paul Dalzell.

