

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

Last week I wrote about the Jesus Prayer, and how the Pilgrim was taught to use it in pursuit of the ideal that St Paul speaks about, to “pray without ceasing”. Thomas Merton, as a Monk was a man of prayer. He spent much of his time each day in the chapel doing the Opus Dei, the Work of God, the daily cycle of prayer from morning to night. Over the years this had sunk into his soul and became a part of his deep spiritual life. When he went to live in the hermitage on his own, it was the daily cycle of prayer, learnt in the monastery chapel that sustained him.

Those words from the psalms and the scripture, repeated daily, became like the Jesus Prayer, a means to quieting the mind and allowing us go deep into the life of God. They also hold us in those times when God seems to have gone on holiday and we can only repeat the words and wonder what has gone wrong. Nothing has gone wrong, either with us and definitely not with God. It is, like everything else that needs practice, we are having a bad day. I listen to an amazing pianist and wonder if he or she had a bad rehearsal day yesterday. I know in the choir I sing with we always say if we have a bad rehearsal, as we all say, it will be alright on the night. But our prayer is not a performance or revising for an examination, it is our life. God’s advice is simple, persevere. In Paul’s words, run the race to the end. Perhaps running is a better metaphor than a pianist, but the question I asked above is still the same, does Mo Farrah have bad days? I’m sure the answer is yes.

Merton was an honest teacher of prayer, it’s not easy. We can fool ourselves that we are great people of prayer, but that is what Merton would call our False Self responding. That is the creation I have made for myself that I want other people to see and know. The True Self acknowledges our struggles and failures and says “I am not perfect”. Merton was only too well aware of his failures and his weaknesses, but anyone who had him as a spiritual director attests to how he could see with the eyes of God and help the Christ in each one of them to grow.

Pray, persevere, be honest before God, take into prayer what Merton has called “the shipwreck” of our lives and our world, and God will teach you to pray. In one of his poems he wrote this:

*But all our thoughts lie still, and in this shipwreck
We’ll learn the theory of prayer:
“How many hate their own safe death,
Their cell, their submarine!”
“How many hate Your Cross, Your Key, the only one
To beat that last invincible door
That will surprise us, Peace, with your invasion
And let us in those soundless fathoms where you dwell.”*