

ADVENT 3

During this last week I spent some time reflecting on the Season of Advent with the writings of Thomas Merton the forty-first anniversary of his death was on December 10th. Merton had a tremendous influence on a whole generation of young people in the second half of the twentieth century. He entered the Cistercian monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky on the feast of St. Lucy (December 13) 1941. Lucy means “light” and for Merton it was where he left what he saw as the darkness of his undoubtedly dissolute life to live a changed life. Advent was for him a time of new beginnings and indeed for us all Advent is a time of change or conversion. Initially Merton saw this change as a one off event so that he could now settle down to live this constantly. But His inner Spirit did not allow him to settle down into a nice cosy rut. His journals give testimony to the fact that his life was to be one of change and growth- a time of new beginnings. He discovered that life was really a constant living of the mystery of Advent – a life of ongoing conversion. In the opening paragraph of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* first published in 1947 he writes;

I came into the world free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless a prisoner of my own violence, of my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born.

His life like ours was to be lived in the constant paradox and tension of these two images. The mystery of Advent reminds us the startling fact of Advent is that Christ has come to dwell within us to free us from ourselves. Or to put it into the words of St. Bernard who founded the Cistercian Order of which Merton was a member:

Advent does not merely commemorate the Incarnation as an historical event, nor is it a mere devotional preparation for the Feast of Christmas, nor an anticipation of the Last Judgement. It is above all the “sacrament” of the Presence of God in the world and above all in his presence in our own lives.

Fr Patrick