Reflections on the 4th Week of Advent – by Fiona 23rd December 2020



Photo: Fiona's Family Advent wreath, icon and Crib

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer regularly providing video resources. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone we usually meditate at 7.30pm every Wednesday (in our own homes at present). The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer, which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: Poem from the journal of Thomas Merton

The day Our Lady, full of Christ,
Entered the dooryard of her relative
Did not her steps, light steps, lay on the paving leaves
like gold?
Did not her eyes as grey as doves
Alight like the peace of a new world upon that house, upon
miraculous Elizabeth? (Thomas Merton) [1]

Lighting of the Advent wreath (at Home or reflecting on the picture above)

My soul sings in gratitude: I'm dancing in the mystery of God. The light of the Holy One is within me and I am blessed, so truly blessed. This goes deeper than human thinking. I am filled with awe at Love whose only condition is to be received. The gift is not for the proud, for they have no room for it. The strong and self-sufficient ones don't have this awareness. But those who know their emptiness can rejoice in Love's fullness. It's the Love that we are made for, the reason for our being. It fills our inmost heart space and brings to birth in us, the Holy One….' Based on the Gospel of Luke (1:46–55)[2]

Reflection*:* The 4th Sunday of Advent and up until Christmas Eve, our reflection is on the Gospel of Luke. The text of the above is a contemporary version of the canticle (Luke 1:46–55), usually known as 'the Magnificat.' The canticle is sung by Mary upon being told by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive the son of God. The pregnant Mary goes to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth, called "Miraculous" in the closing verse by Thomas Merton because Elizabeth was pregnant in her old age, a pregnancy also announced to Mary by Gabriel. In the narrative, Mary greets Elizabeth, the unborn John the Baptist 'leaps for joy' within Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognises, that Mary is pregnant with 'her Lord' and praises Mary's faith. Mary responds with what is now known as the Magnificat or 'Song of Mary.' "My soul magnifies the Lord…"

When we reflect on the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, we usually recall Mary's journey to visit her older cousin (Luke 1:39). There are different ways of looking at this text, each with its own value for us, depending on our own life circumstance. The first is perhaps helpful for the marginalised. Here we can imagine an unmarried teenage mother from a conservative Jewish community wondering who she could turn to, no status, no financial resources, and possibly shunned by her community. Mary remembered the words of Gabriel, who told her that her cousin was pregnant; Mary turned to the one safe person she knew and that was Elizabeth. I have often wondered if Mary's parents, or her fiancée, Joseph, sent Mary to Elizabeth to protect her, or to hide the shame of Mary's pregnancy from the community. Mary listened to Gabriel, believing that, "Nothing is impossible with God." She must surely have realized that if God could make an elderly woman pregnant, the work of God could protect her now. Mary was completely affirmed by Elizabeth, staying until the birth of John.

There is another way to read the text. Mary was pregnant with Jesus who is God, her long journey to Elizabeth was therefore God journeying to visit His people. The Catechism of the Catholic Church succinctly explains the story like this: "John was 'filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb' by Christ Himself, whom the Virgin Mary had just conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary's visitation to Elizabeth thus became a visit from God to his people." (717). It is helpful to perhaps reflect on this as the first sending of Jesus as a mission of God (Missio Dei); how near or far from God might we feel? Here, carried by a young girl, God was trekking up country to visit his people! For sure, in conceiving John the Baptist, Elizabeth had a special calling, and a reason for God to visit…so do we all…

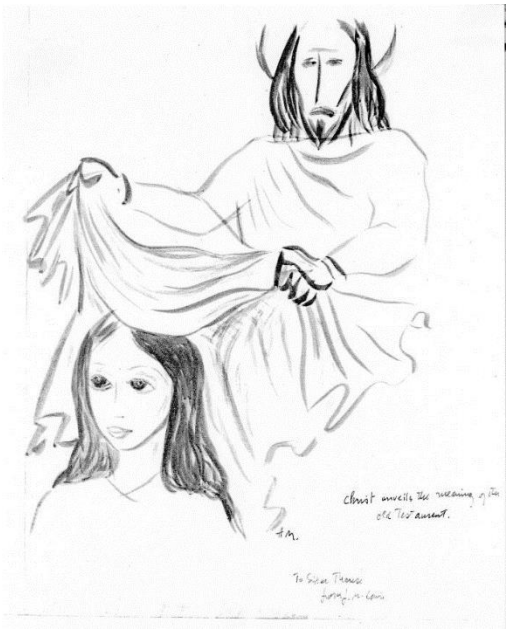
The third way of reflecting on the passage is that Elizabeth recognised 'Divine Wisdom' in Mary. Here, Wisdom is the second Person of the Trinity. Jesus Christ is embodied in the womb of Mary, as witnessed by Elizabeth. Mary, as we know from her intimate encounter with the Angel Gabriel is totally receptive to the Wisdom of God. Incidentally, the Catholic Litany of Loreto names Mary as the 'Seat of Wisdom'. This does not make Mary herself 'Wisdom', Mary is a carrier of Wisdom. Mary's 'Here I am' in Luke 1:38 showed how she emptied herself to contain the living Wisdom of God, the true Wisdom.

A Medieval Benedictine Abbot of Battle Abbey reflected that Philosophy is the Pursuit of Wisdom, "Mary is, therefore, the philosophy of Christians for whoever desires to find true Wisdom must direct his/her love and endeavour to Mary."[5]

The first 'O' Antiphon for the 17th December was 'O' Wisdom and the final, one on 23 December is O Emmanuel (O With Us is God). When we think about it, the 'O' sounds like, and looks like a limitless empty

God shaped space, the womb of Mary, the enlarging of our own capacity for the hospitality of Christ who is to come. Mary in her willingness to be empty enabled the Christ Wisdom from "before the ages, in the beginning" to come forth. (Sirach 24:9).

Wisdom goes by several names, Wisdom, Sapientia (Latin), Hagia Sophia (Greek). Around 1952, The Cistercian Monk, Thomas Merton, in one of his early drawings, described as "Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament." alludes to both Christ's Mother Mary and Wisdom (Hagia Sophia). God's Son Is God's Wisdom. It is interesting that 'Wisdom' stands in front of Jesus in this image, but at the same time depends on Jesus to be known. Wisdom herself could be coming forth from the pregnant womb of Christ (and now I am getting fanciful!). In the verses that bring about Merton's sketch, Lady Wisdom self identifies as one whom the Lord "possessed…at the beginning" in "the first of his acts of old";" She was "brought forth" when "there were no depths" and "before the mountains had been shaped.." "before [God] had made the earth" (Proverbs 8:22-26).



Of Wisdom, Merton said: "It is she who guides all true artists," and "without her they are nothing." But with her, in Merton's allusion, the artist comes forth, the creator, the innovator.[7]

It should also be considered that God's Wisdom is the pattern of Redemption. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, when Paul proclaims that Jesus is "Christ the power and wisdom of God," his declaration comes in the middle of a passage about the wisdom of the world versus God's wisdom. Earlier in this reflection I gave an example of a Benedictine monk who said that Wisdom was to be found by Mary. The Founders of the Daughters of Wisdom also teach this. The Magnificat "My soul magnifies the Lord…" shows Mary as a pattern of the Wisdom of Christ and thus redemption.

The emptiness of the antiphon 'O' Wisdom is also reflected in Merton's poem *The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window*, an explanation of this metaphor can be found in his 'New Seeds of Contemplation.' The full text of the poem forms the close of our meditation at the end of this reflection.

"Mary, who was empty of all egotism, free from all sin, was as pure as the glass of a very clean window that has no other function than to admit the light of the sun. If we rejoice in that light, we implicitly praise the cleanness of the window. And of course, it might be argued that in such case we might well forget the window altogether. This is true. And yet the Son of God, in emptying Himself of His majestic power, having become a child, abandoning Himself in complete dependence to the loving care of a human Mother, in a certain sense draws our attention once again to her. The light has wished to remind us of the window, because He is grateful to her and because He has an infinitely tender and personal love for her. If He asks us to share this lover it is certainly a great grace and a privilege, and one of the most important aspects of this privilege is that it enables us to some extent to appreciate the mystery of God's great love and respect for His creatures"[3]

In his prose poem "Hagia Sophia," Merton expands on Mary's empty completeness: "There is…a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, Natura naturans. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being…This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom"

Merton writes in the last section of the poem, "Now the Blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia. Because of this she can be said to be a personal

manifestation of Sophia, Who in God is Ousia rather than Person. Natura in Mary becomes pure Mother. In her, Natura is as she was from the origin of her divine birth. In Mary Natura is all wise and is manifested as an all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure person: not a Creator and not a Redeemer, but perfect Creature, perfectly redeemed, the fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy."[4;5]

Beginning Meditation: Let us prepare now for our meditation. Notice any tightness in your shoulders and neck and allow any tension in your muscles to relax. Allow your back to rest upright. Be conscious of where your body is touching the chair. Allow your breathing to settle, allow your body to slow down. You may wish to silently repeat a sacred word, bring to mind an image or simply focus on your breath as an aid to mediation.

25 mins silent meditation

Post Meditation Poem "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window."

Because my will is simple as a window
And knows no pride of original earth,
It is my life to die, like glass, by light:
Slain in the strong rays of the bridegroom sun.

Because my love is simple as a window
And knows no shame of original dust,
I longed all night (when I was visible) for dawn my death:
When I would marry day, my Holy Spirit:
And die by transubstantiation into light.

For light, my lover, steals my life in secret.
I vanish into day, and leave no shadow
But the geometry of my cross,
Whose frame and structure are the strength
By which I die, but only to earth,

And am uplifted to the sky my life
When I become the substance of my lover,
(Being obedient, sinless glass)
I love all things that need my lover's life,
And live to give my newborn Morning to your quiet rooms.[4] (Collected Poems, pp. 46-47).

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**
Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources:

(1) On the Contemplative Vocation, The Quickening of St. John the Baptist by Thomas Merton (1949)
(2) 'Modern Magnificat' by Joy Cowley at https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/modern-magnificat/
(3) New Seeds of Contemplation. p. 172
(4) Collected poems of Thomas Merton. pp. 46-47; 363; 369-370.
(5) https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/s/seat-of-wisdom-meaning-of.php
(6) http://www.merton.org/itms/Annual/5/Voiles297-310.pdf
(7) https://www.hopesingssobeautiful.org/2020/12/05/the-advent-of-hope-in-a-beast-of-a-year/comment-page-1/
https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-proverbs/



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.