



St John's Anglican
Cathedral, Brisbane

SERMON

Ordination (St Andrew)

3rd December 2022

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Deuteronomy 30.11-14
Ps 19.1-6
Romans 10:8-18
Matthew 4:18-22

Attending with Authority: The Art of Prophecy

In the Summer of 1963, the trappiest monk, Thomas Merton, wrote *Letters to a White Liberal*. They were published, with an additional introductory note, in 1964 as part of a larger work, *Seeds of Destruction*.

The introductory note was added, in part, because in the intervening year, JFK had been assassinated. In the introductory note, Merton suggests that if JFK had been more aware of the dynamics at play in the US at the time, dynamics which Merton describes in the *Letters*, JFK might have taken greater precautions when he went to Dallas. In *Letters to a White Liberal*, Merton states that race riots in the USA are inevitable.

People scoffed.

In a review, the historian of Christianity, Martin Marty, criticised Merton, questioning how he, 'hiding behind his monastery walls' could have any idea of what was unfolding in the wider community. He dismissed Merton's suggestion that the Civil Rights Movement would fail due to the white liberals' paternalistic approach to the suffering of black Americans.

Three years later, in August 1967, Marty published an open letter to Merton apologising. Over a four-day period from July 12 to 17 that year the City of Newark had been subject to riots that lead to at least 26 deaths. A few months later, in April 1968, Martin Luther King would be assassinated and the race riots would begin in earnest.

People became fascinated by Merton's prophetic capacity, asking him how it was that he could read the future. Merton replied that he was just reading the signs of the times; he was noticing that which was there for all to see.

It was there for all to see, and yet most others were blind to what Merton declared to be obvious; blinded by busyness, by ideology, and by the false comfort, and ephemeral stability the status quo always offers.

These past few days the ordinands and I have been reflecting on two, of what I believe to be, essential disciplines for effective ministry; 'to attend' and 'to exercise true authority'. Merton is one who embodied both of these.

Attending.

One of the practises that was built into Merton's life was *Statio*. *Statio* is Latin for pause. In many monastic communities the members pause when moving between one activity and the next. They pause before entering the chapel for prayer or the refectory for a meal; the pause allowing them to intentionally cease one activity in order to be fully present to the next.

The practice of *Statio* helps them to learn to be truly present, to honour the sacrament of the present moment; to observe what is, rather than dwelling in a regretted past or an imagined future.

Merton deeply schooled in the practice of *statio* was enabled to notice what was going on and what was emerging in the world outside his monastery walls. He could see the consequences that the unjust status quo would deliver.

Learning how to attend unlocks the gift of prophecy, which is no more and no less than recognising the consequences of the present way of doing things. The prophet sees what is there for everyone to see; that which so many do not see. Attending also allows for effective ministry because by attending one is more likely to recognise what the Spirit is up to and, having recognised it, choosing to join in.

In the Scripture readings for today, the writers of Deuteronomy and Romans declare that the word is near, that it is in our hearts¹. Those who practice attentiveness know this and respond accordingly. And those who like, Thomas Merton attend to that presence, find that it is also on their lips.² They speak a life-giving and transformative word.

As so to speak of authority.

Merton spoke with true authority, which is why we read him still today. True authority has nothing to do with Father or Mother knowing best; or with Jim or Jane knowing best. Don't be fooled by those who drop titles and trappings but still exercise authority in destructive and coercive ways. And remember that the seducer can be as debilitating as the aggressor.

The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) document, *The Gift of Authority (Authority in the Church III)*³ states that those who exercise authority in the church gain that authority through the one who is the author of life. It is a gift. Gifts are meant to be good for us.

Through that statement, The ARCIC commissioners are reminding us that the word 'authority' shares its origins with the word 'author'. The root they share means 'life-giver'.

To be an author or to exercise authority is to be a life-giver. The hall mark of true authority is that those over whom authority is exercised are enlivened. This means that the one who exercises authority is a midwife of the Spirit, attending to and safeguarding the work of God, in the community and beyond.

¹ Deuteronomy 30.14; Romans 10.8

² Deuteronomy 30.14; Romans 10.8

³ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-ii/fr.html>

Communities in which true authority is exercised, are flourishing communities. They are collaborative spaces where people live into their baptism and where the church finds its prophetic voice.

Sometimes the exercising of authority means saying 'no' with some force, to ensure that the weak and the vulnerable are given life, but it never results in coercive control. Bullies need to be called to account; keeping open the option of redemption without allowing them to abuse that openness. We deal with complexity in our common life on a daily basis.

Merton's authoritative critique of white liberals was unyielding because he knew that they would inevitably support the status quo once they realised the true cost of the transformation required if the US was to be set free from racism.

He reminds us that the Status quo always contains the seeds of destruction; an uncomfortable truth for us given the ease with which we are living with increasing economic disparity, the escalating effects of climate change, and in our church, the debilitating status quo we impose on gender and sexuality diverse people.

The voice of authority speaks truth to power and seeks to unmask the powers and principalities that bind and disempower. We need to speak with authority into each and every status quo.

So, let us attend as the Archbishop charges the ordinands to take up the authority they are to exercise as Deacons and Priests, and let us all reflect deeply how we all might enable the whole church to live into the call to speak a life-giving word.

+Amen