

CHRIST AND ECOLOGY

Thomas Cullinan

Abbot Aengus was abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Portglenone in Northern Ireland. A man of gentle wisdom and great experience of the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas and the skills of cattle farming.

He had invited me to share the monks' annual retreat. Two days into the week he came to see me. "Well Tom I think it's going to be all right after all." "How do you mean?" I asked. "Well you've got two things against you. You're English. And we suspect the English. And you are Benedictine. And we Cistercians find you Benedictines are a bit intellectual eggheads. But in spite of that you seem to be coming across OK." "Thanks!"

We talked on, and eventually he said, "As I grow older Tom life seems to become simpler. It focuses on one theme which Thomas Aquinas (or was it St Bernard?) expressed as Consentire Est Salvari." "Sorry, Aengus, I'm a dim Benedictine. Can you clarify?" "It means: *To consent is to be saved*. To discern God's will at any moment, is to live and be saved."

"Give me an example." "Well, before I came to see you I was replying to a letter from a Sister in Belfast. I get quite a few such letters, and know that I should discipline myself to reply on just one side of the page. But I signed off after two sides. That is not Consentire Est Salvari."

I was just pondering that was very like what we call: The Sacrament of the Present Moment, when he looked at his watch and said, "Oh heavens! I'm meant to be peeling potatoes with my shift!" With a flurry of monastic habit, he swept out of the room – then looked back through the door with a big smile, "And that's not Consentire Est Salvari either, Thomas!"

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The sacrament of the present moment can be a formula for trivial expecting God to bless whatever I get up to. But it really invites us to a profound discernment of the reality of what I am involved in rather than my felt interest in it. Jesus often warns us to be wary of the way we see things, to have eyes that see beyond our conditioned self-interest.

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A friend turns up and says, "Sorry I'm late: the traffic was awful." And a still, quiet voice of wisdom asks, "The traffic? Do you mean the cars in front of you, of which you are the innocent victim, and that the ones behind you don't exist?" Why do we prefer to be the innocent victim of things, and not acknowledge our own involvement in them? What is it in the human psyche? I do that on many occasions.

I go shopping: I am in a hurry, and anyhow cash is a bit short. So I start taking things from the shelves as though they started their existence on the shelf. And a still, quiet voice of wisdom says, "Tom, I thought you were going to use your L.O.A.F. when you went shopping." You know the [Christian Ecology Link] mnemonic: **L**ocally-produced goods, **O**rganically-grown, **A**nimal-friendly and **F**airly-

traded. None of them are precise sciences. You can argue this way and that; but as a general principle we have in us the ability to see behind the immediate experience of everything we do in life, to ponder the greater issues in this world we're part of.

I come home and find on our car park five aluminium cans, and I'm just about to chuck them out, when the quiet voice asks, "What about that programme on Radio 4 the other day about the appalling conditions in the aluminium mines in South America, where those who can get work are on starvation wages? And the father of one of your contemporaries is a Director of The Metal Box Company earning the accepted salary. Why is it that in the capitalist economy people at the beginning of the production line live on the edge of poverty, and those who live at the other end do so well?"

My escape route is, "Ah, I can't do anything about that. We're all in it. It has gone so far that it's beyond any of us."

And the quiet voice says, "It's important to be able to locate issues and live with them, and not switch off. I'm not asking you, Thomas to save the world. I'm asking you to do what you can do – and don't judge others! I'm asking you to think global and act local."

It always starts with people themselves, in their own lives. I heard of a family which meets together every month, to see how much of their income they can give away, the charity beneficiaries being named by the children. It means going to school, not having the latest trainers, and learning that they may be laughed at.

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When I look back on my early years, I realise there were questions I carried, to which, when I grew up I thought I would know the answer. And one of the questions was, if Jesus spent so much of his time, trying to share the sense of God being an intimate Abba-father, not a God that is demanding sacrifice of us in order to appease him; that what he's asking of us is goodwill, openness, humility, and a willingness to journey out of our own egocentricity, and the grace of the Holy Spirit will do all the rest – then how does such a God, in the end story, become a God who wills the death of his own son?

Thinking it through: I realise that when we refer to the Paschal Mystery, it is usually isolated from any context at all. So in the Creed we jump straight from "...born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate," conveying the impression that the time in between is of no significance. And our Eucharistic Prayers call to mind and make present his death and resurrection with no reference to his life before. We get the idea that what Jesus stood for in his life is not what gives meaning to the end story.

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When St Paul talks of "the Cross", I think that he – as a young man in Jerusalem, he saw the life story unfold – means the whole of Jesus' life ending in that crucial moment: we don't understand that end mystery unless we understand what led to it. It is not the will of the father that his son should die: it is their combined will that he should see through, to the end, that which he lived for.

And we don't understand what he lived for if we don't understand something of the socio-economic conditions in which he was living: why, what he termed as the good news was such a threat to the vested interests of so many people in his day.

It's always worth remembering that, for ninety per cent of Jesus' time among us, he was an unknown sort of carpenter in Nazareth. Something was developing and growing in him all during that time: through hearing the word of God in the synagogue, through reading the signs of his times (what was going on around him), and through his own profound life of prayer.

The crucial moment of decision in the desert was what led him to see his way forward, not as the triumphal Messiah figure, leading his people into freedom and glory, but as the suffering servant, entering right down into the depths of people's experience in order to lift things from, as it were, below.

Jesus comes out of the desert with a very clear commitment to that way, but the first stages are a vigorous healing and preaching ministry in Galilee. There is what I think of as a charismatic enthusiasm: by and large, civil authorities love that sort of religion, because it keeps people happy and organised, but doesn't threaten anything.

So there must have been something else then going on in Jesus's life, which became the final threat to the vested interests of his day. And it was, I think increasingly, that he critiqued the power, and in a sense the naivety of the learned people, the wealthy people and those in authority: his criticism being that they used those gifts given them from God – and they are *gifts* from God, not sinful – for their own ends and their own security, instead of using them for the common good, and especially for the poor.

There is something about what Christ increasingly confronted the authorities with – that these powerful gifts from God are not ends in themselves for those who possess them, but they are always for the common good and for service. Yet they have a tendency to build up their own domain, their own kingdom.

You remember when Jesus said, "[Woe to you who are rich now...](#)"? Some Christians would finish that off, "... because you are filthy sinners." Jesus would never have said that. In effect he said, "...because you have your kingdom already, and therefore are impervious to what God is really doing." Now I think that "kingdom" is the tendency for anybody who is gifted, powerful, influential, to create a language of interpretation which becomes self-justifying. You see it today in the top echelons of our banking and business worlds, when they're talking about executives' salaries – or what's paid to sportsmen and women. It might be a very simplistic self-justifying ("Well, if everybody else does it, we have to as well..."), or it might be slightly more sophisticated ("But (s)he's worth that to the company...").

You can generate all sorts of well-intended language to justify things, which – if you stand back and look at it from the point of view of the social order as a whole, and not just its own world – everyone knows is nonsense. What Jesus was saying is, "You may think there's no alternative, but there is." I think it's what Paul really meant by saying that we've got to learn to be fools for Christ's sake – not fitting in with the norms and the accepted language of our society; but allowing the still, small voice of wisdom to stand us back and make us ask what's really happening.

In Jesus's case, it involved reading what was going on in the social, political, economic world he was part of, seeing those who had taken hold of God's gifts and made them into their own power base, instead of taking them as gifts for the common good.

My suggestion to you is that what we're invited to do is to allow our understanding of scripture to do the same in our age as he was doing in his age: although there are similarities, they are not the same. Neither Jesus nor his contemporaries knew anything about global warming, the population time bomb and its implications for food production, the crisis of water supply or threats to species. If you said to Jesus's contemporaries, "You know you're planet people, you're part of a limited world," they wouldn't have understood what you were talking about, because this understanding is a thing that has grown up in most of our lifetimes.

We mustn't be naïve scripture people. There are plenty around who are trying to live in the world of 2,000 years ago: this lets them off the hook of being responsible today, as they're in a pretend world. But we need to allow that which God brought about in Christ's ministry (and the mystery of his cross and resurrection) to reproduce itself in our age. In other words, we need to become extremely aware of the conditions we are living in; of the social order we are part of, and of what's happening on our planet.

All of us have vested interests in things, and part of the work of the Holy Spirit in us and among us is to get us to stand back and acknowledge where our vested interests are.

It's crucial to recall that, in accordance with our theological tradition, life does not divide itself into virtues and vices, sin and good things, so that as long as you keep to the virtuous bit, you're OK. The greatest evil is done in our world by the perversion of that which, in itself, is the greatest good. This goes right back to [Genesis](#), where Lucifer says to Adam: "Tell me lad, did God really say that you're God-like?" And Adam says, "Yes, we are made in God's image." "Well why not play God?" In other words, take your strongest gift, and make it, not what the gift is for, but in fact destructive of what the gift is for.

It's very important that wealth and riches are seen in themselves as a beautiful gift from God, but that they become an enemy of their own good once they turn in on themselves. Believe it or not, there is nothing in our social teaching which names private property as a right. If everything is given by God for the good of all people, then what comes our way in particular is, first for what our reasonable needs are, but anything beyond that already belongs in justice to others who are in need.

If you were to try and preach that, though, the people who would hear it are the people who don't need to hear it, and the ones that need to hear it would laugh you out of court. Because the entire capitalist system works on another basis: what's mine is mine, and I'm very generous if I give a bit away. You're not being generous at all! You're handing over what's in excess of your needs.

Remember how often Jesus says in effect, "Be very conscious of the way you see things." Let your pondering and your prayer, and your intimacy with God, he's saying, show you what's really going on in a way that is free of your own reading of it and your own vested interests, because all of us tend to generate a language that justifies our own interests. Then when the prophets come, they're treated as nutters, when in fact they may be speaking the only truth that anyone's spoken for years.

Jesus saw what the powerful of his day were doing – ignoring the poor and the weak, while self-justifying themselves by devout Temple worship.

Right at the end of the First Century, you get John on his island writing the extraordinary Book of Revelation. (How on earth did that ever get into the New Testament?) What he's arguing there is that the Beast, the Roman Empire, saw itself as the final solution of human living and dominated the mind-set and the economy of the whole Mediterranean world. And he came to see that if it carried on the way it did, it was not some external force that would come and destroy it; but it held within itself the seeds of its own destruction. That's the true prophetic voice.

I didn't see this till a few years ago, when I came to appreciate what was beginning to happen in the whole consumer capitalist world. That also sees itself as the final solution, but in fact holds within itself the seeds of its own disintegration – a profound theological understanding. Three decades ago a missionary priest friend of mine was urging our Community to make a foundation in Africa.

"People in our European countries, Thomas, will not be able to hear what Jesus meant by the good news as good, until the idols of secular capitalism begin to disintegrate. Go to Africa. The monastic tradition is much needed there." At the time I didn't understand. Now I do as we see consumer capitalism imploding.

I like to tease my CAFOD friends: 50 years ago, we saw ourselves as the developed world, the ones who'd arrived, and our helping hands could get other nations to develop also, hence the **CA**tholic **F**und for **O**verseas **D**evelopment. We can now see that it in fact stands for **CA**tholics **F**acing their **O**ver-**D**evelopment. Out of the disintegration will grow something more valuable, but I'm afraid it's the next generation that will suffer most for what my generation has assumed to be normal. If you try and re-understand the whole mystery of Christ's rejection somewhat as I suggest, it does not reduce the mystery of that Good Friday to a one-off historical event. But it does need the gift of hindsight faith to realise its universal salvific nature. Perhaps each of us needs to journey from "the one who was in our midst whom we knew not," to the omni-present, universal Christ.

So my advice to anybody in the next few days, in the light of the Feast of the Ascension, is to read the opening chapters of Ephesians and Colossians and ask yourself, how is it possible that, within a decade or two, those who had been present during Jesus's lifetime (and were still expecting him to be a national saviour right up to the end) – how did that failed prophet figure come to be seen by the early Church as the one at the heart of the whole of creation, right from the dawn of time all the way through to the final end? How did they come to move from that very historical Jesus to this universal Christ figure?

This is the most extraordinary mystery. I don't think many of us ever really understand what it is to be Christians.

May I share three final reflections with you?

First, I heard the announcement of A Year of Faith, and then I heard that it was also going to be A Year of Food amongst the aid agencies. Do you know, none of the quotes to do with faith that we have had (in Liverpool) have addressed reading the signs of our times where we are today! And when I was invited to the opening of the Year of Food, although there were Christian organisations, there was no reference whatever to the mystery of Christ, or what it means to be Christians in the

deep sense. I just felt that there were two languages going on here, and they need to hear each other.

Secondly, it's become very important for me that we shouldn't take being apostles as normative for being disciples. Some writers give the impression that we should all be apostles. But what matters for most of us is to learn the art of being disciples, which may not involve preaching or teaching: it does mean being faithful.

Finally, Jesus during the Last Supper used the language of up and down, going away and coming back: it gives the impression of Jesus at the Ascension going back up to the Father, just beyond the stars somewhere, sending in his place the Holy Spirit.

That's not how the Trinity works: the gift of the Holy Spirit is making the Risen Christ universally present throughout our world. It's not replacing him, but making him present in a new way. I love to believe that the ascended Christ is more present here, this evening, in this room, than he was at the Last Supper or during his ministry.

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Tom Cullinan, May 2013
