

Reading Thomas Merton's journals we see a great struggle as he seeks to find and clarify his own identity or self-understanding vis á vis others; what, in particular, the Church is making of him, focussed especially on his relationship with his Abbot. He knows that love is central to it all but it's one thing to argue this out intellectually and quite another to practise it; to argue it out in the daily practical demands of others. This is his struggle – and ours, too.

Madeleine Bunting puts her finger on it in a recent article in the Tablet where she explores the meaning of Care, especially in the light of Covid 19 and the NHS. And she finds, as we also have discovered, that it's the personal qualities of the nurses and doctors and, indeed, all the NHS staff which have shone through; that they're not in it for the money but for love (or most of them – there is no perfect body of people). Free Care at the point of access necessarily demands this, for each day a stream of strangers turns up at the hospital door and also attracts the carers themselves, many from abroad. But that battle to love freely which was at the heart of Thomas Merton's struggle is at the heart of the present crisis in the NHS and in our society, generally, too; and in us, always, in the particular demands of each day. Madeleine Bunting understands this as the failure to understand that Care is not only for some, the children, the elderly and the sick, but vital for us all: a hidden cost and a hidden benefit in any measure of society with the result as:

One nurse told me, that the reference to nursing tasks such as washing and feeding as 'basic' was absurd; during such tasks it was possible to build relationship, develop trust and gain knowledge of a patient's condition. Yet such tasks are now routinely allocated to healthcare assistants with minimal training, while nurses find themselves tethered to a computer screen orchestrating test results and diagnostic procedures.

And one can see this process at work in many other professions: this distancing and alienation from one another, aided and abetted by technology, and people who have never really known real care for themselves (I'm thinking of the half-formed men and women who presently govern us) And this is where Jesus steps in to remind the Pharisees of something they all know intellectually but fail to implement in their daily lives. And he will demonstrate his care for them, not only in words and in the realm of ideas, but in the surrender of his life as so many strangers to us have done in the NHS, and perhaps Thomas Merton, too.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour