

12/06/15 2 Advent C

-- When Pope Francis spoke to the U.S. Congress in September, he highlighted four Americans who contributed to our country's moral and spiritual heritage.

-- The first two were Abraham Lincoln and MLK, Jr. One, of course, was a President. If we'd put him in today's gospel (adjusted for 19th century) he would be like Tiberius Caesar. MLK would have been like one of the more prominent religious figures (adjusted, of course, for the 20th century).

-- The other two Americans he mentioned were Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. During their lifetimes, they were not so famous. People who knew about the Catholic Worker movement would have known Dorothy. She protested against war (even WWII and Vietnam) but many more famous people did.

-- Thomas Merton, like Dorothy Day, was not born Catholic. He converted and eventually became a Trappist monk, living in a community in Kentucky. Several years after joining the community he wrote a book about his journey to God called *The Seven Story Mountain*.

-- But he wasn't that well-known, outside certain religious circles. He was more like John the Baptist would have been in the first century. Their personalities also seemed to be similar in some ways. Both were types of gadflies. They weren't "traditional" in their preaching.

-- Merton died 47 years ago at this time of year (1968). I was a junior at Holy Spirit Seminary. We may have had a couple of his books in our library, but he was not mentioned in class. Most of his notoriety came after his death.

-- Luke mentions the movers and shakers of his time at the beginning of this gospel. But the Word of God was not sent to them. It came to a backwater preacher with strange habits. John called people to reform their lives.

-- Merton was not an evangelist in the sense of going out to many places to preach. He lived in a cloistered monastery. He did travel a bit, typically with the grudging approval of his superior. His premature death (53) took place when he travelled to the Far East to explore spiritual connections with Eastern religions.

-- But he touched many people and led them to a deeper faith in Christ. He motivated people to change their lives, just as he had changed his own earlier in life. He continues to do so years after his death, as our Holy Father has acknowledged.

-- Like John the Baptist, Merton was a controversial figure, even after his death. As late as 2006 there was an argument over whether to include him in the U.S. Catholic Catechism. (He was left out, while Dorothy Day was included)

-- God's work of conversion is not usually done by the famous and powerful, but by those attuned to his word. John the Baptist channeled that word in his day. People like Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton have done it more recently.

-- But God's word touches all of us, if we are willing to be attuned to it. We don't need to write a book about it; we only need to tell people we encounter how that word has changed us.

-- That is the work of repentance, healing and forgiveness we are all called to do. May we take up that work with vigor and joy this Advent season.

-- If we do that, then God, who has begun his good work in us, will certainly bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.