

## How did Tom listen to hope on the margins?

I want to rephrase the question. How did Tom **live** on the edge, the margins? And **why** did Tom live on the edge, on the margins?

Clearly he made a deliberate choice – Tom came from a privileged background, was educated at Ampleforth, where he returned to be a monk soon after his national service in the Navy. After a couple of decades of study and teaching, scouting and getting to know Oxfam, and serving on the Justice and Peace commission, finally Tom got permission to move to Little Crosby with a small group of fellow monks, to live a simple, radical, open monastic life... on the edge of the city, on the margins of monasticism.

Incidentally that's where I first met Tom – at Little Crosby, 2 or 3 monks living, praying, working, welcoming others, on the edge of Liverpool. What they were living and looking for, connected with my own search – prayer, in (before Cafod used the phrase) a simple community that lived sustainably and in solidarity. At that time, when I didn't know Tom very well, the Falklands war was on. Many people here were thinking of British soldiers and sailors, but Tom, who had been to the Falklands with the Navy, was deeply worried for the Argentinian conscripts being forced to trek across the island to face gunfire. That made me think!

But the monks didn't stay at Little Crosby – and the other monks didn't stay at all. It was austere and two went back to Ampleforth. One older monk died. Father Aidan stayed until building had begun at Ince Benet then he too asked to move. Tom was left alone with a not even half built house in the woods. Very much on the edge.

This was big decision time. It was not just that Tom's choice of a radical life on the edge was too tough for others. It wasn't easy to live with Tom! He knew that, painfully. And relating to other people on the edge didn't come easily. A group of young men from an approved school came to help with the building work. Father Aidan got on with them – but Tom felt awkward. And he loved l'Arche, he 'got' l'Arche, but often found it difficult to relate to people from l'Arche. Tom was very loving, actually gregarious in a way – but not easy in relating. It can be uncomfortable on the edge!. He often talked about being 'tough minded and tender hearted' (and it wasn't great to be on the receiving end of some of his tough mindedness!) After Fr Aidan left Tom discerned, with the help of others 'on the edge', and decided to carry on building and living at Ince Benet, alone.

Tom would not have liked some descriptions on website - especially 'prophet'. Yes, he was a teacher. But essentially a monk. He often said monks didn't **do** much, didn't contribute anything particular. Not like those on the 'front line'. As he got older all this bewildered Tom, he often prayed 'Teach us Lord to read the story you tell in our lives as the best for ourselves, for the church and for the world'.

We've filled up Tom's pages on the website with talks and profound articles. But he didn't spend all day writing talks. He built the house, he lived at Ince Benet. He made soup, worked, with others in the woods, but work and welcome revolved around **prayer**. Prayer was the core of Tom's life. He was in chapel 6 times a day. Prayer

isn't obvious – any of us who try know it's a struggle. And he invited us to pray. Ora et labore.

But why the margins, why the edge? Not just to be heroic – or to show up what's going on at the centre. Why did the Desert Fathers and Mothers go to live in the Egyptian desert after the emperor Constantine made Christianity main stream? Why have so many people, not just monks, tried to live on the edge? Why was Jesus' ministry in Galilee and not all in Jerusalem? What goes on in the 'liminal' space? What do we see there that we can't see in the middle? (think of standing on the edge of an excited crowd, rather than in the midst of it...)

In **Presence** Tom gives us a clue: Tom wrote '**Presence**' for the Ecumenical World Development Consultation and Cafod published it in 2004. It's all on the website, in the section 'Acting with justice'.

When the intense holiness of God incarnates itself in human affairs by and large two things happen. One is that **as God becomes increasingly present, he also becomes increasingly hidden**. In many ways, God is more hidden in the presence of Jesus than he is in the glory of creation. The second thing that happens **when God's holiness incarnates itself in human affairs** is that **it creates a crisis**, which would not have happened if he had not come.

This is the clue about the margins:

*(Wealth)*... "*Blessed are you poor*" is saying that **you who are in the margins and you who haven't been recognised are discovering what God is truly bringing about in our world** – what is on offer. In a sense you're in touch with the real story.

It's so important to ponder these things in a prayerful and in a deep way. Not just in our lives, of course, but in the economic processes and structures of our times. Because within each of these '**bubbles**' we become extremely defensive.

The 'bubbles' Tom speaks of are the bubbles of wealth, learning, and power:

Jesus is more than a prophet because he personifies, literally, that which God is working among us. In so doing he discovered there were three areas where people had enormous blockages in appreciating what he was about – blockages that prevented them entering what he was generating. I think of these as the '**bubble**' of **wealth, the 'bubble' of learning, and the 'bubble' of power**. All of us are trapped in forms of these bubbles...

we've just seen wealth ... on learning Tom quotes Jesus:

**(Learning)** ... But Jesus often found that such exquisite learning becomes its own 'bubble' of expertise and is then used as a weapon against people rather than as an instrument of God's truth and mercy.

***"I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to the little ones... No one knows what the Son is about except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to make him known."***

...and power, where our own defence mechanisms blind us to what might be different:

**(Power)** ... All sorts of defence mechanisms retain power and inside the power bubble it becomes impossible to see where alternatives and new things are happening.

...so **wealth, learning and power** each create their own virtuous 'bubble' from which **we can be set free to know where the real action is happening, only by a profound conversion, a freedom from the demand of the ego and from those comfort zones of security.**

In '**Presence**' Tom goes on to talk about the mystery of the Cross and the book of Revelation:

In Revelation the question being worked out is: **who holds the true story of our world**, in and out of all the appalling suffering, who holds the key?

It is **no easy journey to be free enough to see through the eyes of Jesus or to love truth as he did.** Yet truth is the thing Jesus said he came to bear witness to.

I won't go on because we can all read all of this in the text on the website; I find this paper '**Presence**' is a distillation of Tom's searching and thinking – and a call to move out of our comfort zones, to the edge.

I realise, 3 years after Tom's death, that if I hadn't met the monks at Little Crosby, and then been so much part of the life of Ince Benet for very many years that I couldn't have grown in my own commitment, prayer and life. But it makes me think that we're not here to idealise prophets, priests, disciples, teachers... we're here today because we've received much from these 3 – we're challenged, invited, to be disciples too, to live, work, pray on the less-than-comfortable edge – to try to see who holds the true story of our world.

Sitting at home as a storm battered my house the other night I was reminded of a poet, a poem, very important to Tom, that illustrates the insecurity, the fear, and the

wonder, the hope, of being on the edge: This is from Kathleen Raine's 'Northumbrian Sequence IV' and we read it every year, in Advent:

*Let in the wind  
Let in the rain  
Let in the moors tonight,*

*The storm beats on my window-pane,  
Night stands at my bed-foot,  
Let in the fear,  
Let in the pain,  
Let in the trees that toss and groan,  
Let in the north tonight...*

*...Let in the fire,  
Let in the power,  
Let in the invading night.*

*Gentle must my fingers be  
And pitiful my heart  
Since I must bind in human form  
A living power so great,  
A living impulse great and wild  
That cries about my house  
With all the violence of desire  
Desiring this my peace.*

*Pitiful my heart must hold  
The lonely stars at rest,  
Have pity on the raven's cry  
The torrent and the eagle's wing,  
The icy water of the tarn  
And on the biting blast.*

*Let in the wound,  
Let in the pain,  
Let in your child tonight.*

(Hilary Wilson, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022)