

a public witness

Matthew 10:32-33

June 25, 2017

Bay of St Columba

*In the Bay of St Columba on the Isle of Iona,
The stones remember Columba and the monks
Who followed him in trust to work and pray.
With the constant arrival and exit of cold salty waves,
Which daily invade the beach and flee back out to sea,
Smoothed rocks covering the sand sing and chant,
“Where have you gone, dear friend?
Long ago you came in prayer
And left without return.
Won't you come back, O Columba?
Visit again our stony home!
Return to us and teach the sacred stories,
Of Christ's love from death to life eternal.”*

*The stones repeat day and night the endless cry,
With the coming and going of each tide,
Longing for their lost friendship
With the saint and his blest companions,
Who by simple faith in God
Left everything,
Home, family, possessions and security,
To serve the Lord of every dance.*

*The seas who have long visited the coast,
Comfort the mournful rocks still waiting,
“Old friends! remember, Columba, like all flesh,
Long ago passed into peace and glory,
After faithfully following his holy call,
At the last fulfilled a chosen destiny,
Our brother can't return to your shores again,
Until the promised Second Coming
When he walks at our Savior's side.”*

*Yet, by sun or moon, restless pebbles in the sacred bay,
Rolling with ceaseless currents on the weathered isle,
Sadly continue singing their love song,
“Where have you gone, dear friend?
So long ago you came in prayer
And left without return.
Won't you come back, O Columba?
Visit again our stony home!
Return to us and teach the sacred stories,
Of Christ's love from death to life eternal.”*

david walters
Spring, 2015

Listen again to the stones' lament ...

*“Where have you gone, dear friend?
So long ago you came in prayer
And left without return.
Won't you come back, O Columba?
Visit again our stony home!
Return to us and teach the sacred stories,
Of Christ's love from death to life eternal.”*

It is a lament, a song full of sorrow, but David also calls it a “love song.” A love song? Are stones, inanimate objects, capable of love? Of love for a man and love for his stories?

Columba came to Iona in 563 AD, landing on this beach bordering the bay now named for him, Columba Bay. Legend has it that he landed in a coracle, a small boat, with twelve companions. He is supposed to have climbed the hill at the edge of the beach and looked back over the ocean toward Ireland, the land from whence they had come, and seeing it no more, he decided to stay.

What was he leaving behind? Was he running away? Did fear or threat or sadness or loss drive him from his home to Iona? Or did he come hopefully, with ambition and purpose, and a sense of God's calling?

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter why you are where you are or what has brought you here. What matters is what you do here, who you are here.

Once he landed on Iona, Columba told stories. He told and retold -- and lived anew -- the stories of Christ's love, the love that brings life out of death, the love that brings people, and stones, to life.

Almost 1500 years later, Iona still seems filled with life and light, a “thin place” as George MacLeod called it, a place where the divide between the spiritual and the material, between heaven and earth, seems tissue paper thin. I have experienced the power of this island, as have David and Debbie, and Lynne, and Sue, and John, and Craig and Nancy, and Cliff and Diane, and Steve and Liz, and Greg and Anne, and Dale and Evie, and many like us from every corner of the globe.

What makes it so? What makes this island a “thin place?” It is not merely rock and ocean and moor, as beautiful as the place is. It is rock and ocean and moor and stream and grass and sheep and birds imbued with story, imbued with centuries of telling and retelling and living the story. Iona is a place where the divorce between body and soul is healed. We need to be healed of that divorce. Our churches need to be healed of that divorce.

After a visit to the United States, George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, wrote:

What frightened me was the main trend of Protestant religion: that the purpose of the Faith is to adjust a person to life as it is ...

[But] is the Bible's main purpose to adjust a [person] to the world as it is? Is not peace rather found in a commitment to adjust the world to God's purpose? "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven" is the first petition Our Lord asked us to make after the adoration of God's Name. If indeed our world in God's purpose, be a brotherhood -- a companionship, a sharing of the loaf -- and if we ponder ... the gross disparity existing between East and West -- have we any right to peace?

What has gone wrong in American religion is the terrible cleavage between Church activity -- never more prosperous than today -- and any realistic sense of God's sovereignty in history and His demands upon us in His now unified world.

And then he quotes the prophet Jeremiah:

Stop believing those deceitful words, "We are safe! This is the Lord's Temple, this is the Lord's Temple, this is the Lord's Temple!"

Change the way you are living and stop doing the things you are doing. Be fair in your treatment of one another. Stop taking advantage of aliens, orphans, and widows. Stop killing innocent people in this land. Stop worshiping other gods, for that will destroy you.

How can we seek peace for our souls while the earth lays dying? Our faith is not about getting our souls to heaven. It is about bringing heaven to earth: "Your will be done on earth!"

George MacLeod continues:

I simply argue that the cross should be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town's garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek (or shall we say in English, in [Bosnian] and in [Burmese]?)

What is needed from the church, from each of us individually and from all of us together, is a public witness.

Iona is a place of public witness. In front of the abbey on Iona stands the high cross, St. Martin's Cross, carved from stone, standing in the same place it has stood for more than 1300 years. It stands along the highway, along the main thoroughfare of the island, making public declaration that Christ is present here. But the most powerful public witness to Christ and to Christ's way is not made by crosses or abbeys, but by flesh and blood, not by the pilgrims who go to Iona, but by the pilgrims whom come from Iona.

Columba's most important work was not among the monks who lived with him on the island, but among the Picts, the kings and soldiers and common folk, who lived on the mainland. The modern Iona Community is a dispersed community, made up of a few hundred members and thousands upon thousands of friends, like us, who come from the island and return to our own places of work and community life to bear witness to Jesus.

These are some of the key elements of the Iona Community's public witness:

1) Affirmation of a global community of faith

People are drawn to Iona from all around the globe, and worship materials used at Iona, collected by John Bell and his team, celebrate the songs and worship styles of many different cultures and languages.

2) Advocacy for ecological stewardship

And not merely for reasons of scientific warnings or of human survival, but for spiritual and theological reasons, for the sake of the sacredness of the earth itself. This is God's creation, God's good creation, the earth and all of creation is imprinted with God's own image, imbued with God's own glory.

3) Advocacy for justice, for the fair distribution of the earth's resources

We are called into community, a community of mutual responsibility and mutual love, caring about the well-being of souls and bodies. This is the root passion from which the Iona Community was born. George MacLeod was appalled by what he saw in the aftermath of World War I, the terrible and ever-growing inequality between rich people and poor, between rich nations and poor, and he was appalled by a church that didn't seem to care.

4) Advocacy for peace

George MacLeod fought in the trenches in World War I, and it made him a pacifist. Pacifism may not be the only faithful response to a world overrun with war and violence, but peacemaking -- making peace, relationship by relationship, people group by people group, nation by nation -- is the only faithful vocation for followers of the way of Jesus.

5) Providing resources for vitalized worship

A worship that is vitalized because it connects faith to life, church to marketplace, belief to politics, spirit to body, heaven to earth, person to person, culture to culture, using the language of the public square, not insider language, to put faith back where it belongs -- in the public square!

This is the public witness of the Iona Community. What is our public witness? What happens when you push open the glass doors outside crossroads and walk out into the parking lot and back into the rest of your life? What happens when you do your job, talk to your friends and neighbors, listen to the news, raise your kids, invest your money, dispose of your trash, vote? To whom or to what does the world think you belong? Does the world know, do your neighbors know, you belong to Jesus? How will they know?

It won't be a bracelet or a "T" shirt or a cross around your neck that will tell them. It will be your words. It will be your life.

When I think of a person who witnesses publicly that they belong to Jesus ...

I think of a person who stops in their tracks, who pauses to listen, who hesitates before speaking, a person who makes careful consideration before deciding or before doing.

I think of a person who is daunted, grieved, heartbroken by what they see and hear, but not enough to be brought to despair, because they believe in prayer, because they believe in God.

I think of a person who is not too afraid to not fit in, a person who pledges allegiance to no cause or party or nation, but only to God.

I think of a person who is not too afraid to act, to stick their neck out, to say what needs to be said, to tell the truth, to do the truth, to make sacrifices, because they believe in God, because they love Jesus more than anything else.

I think of a person who may not be outspoken or demonstrative about their faith, but a person you know you can trust, a person you know you can count on, a person you know is invested in doing the right thing because it is right, a person who can be changed, a person who is changing every day, paying attention to the winds of the Spirit and to the voice of the God who is still speaking.

Those who declare publicly that they belong to me, I will do the same for them before my Father in heaven. But those who reject me publicly, I will reject before my Father in heaven.

That's what Jesus said. It's not so much a warning as an invitation. We have freedom. We have a choice, a choice to whom or to what we will belong. And it is a choice we make in public. Faith is personal, but it is not private.

The rewards of belonging to Jesus, of saying and living out loud that we belong to Jesus, are eternal, quite literally eternal. And the cost of rejecting him? The cost is dear.

And yet ...

And yet, what became of the man who declared publicly "I do not know that man!"? What became of Peter? Did Jesus reject him? This is the One to whom we witness, the One to whom we must witness, the One who is full of truth and grace!