

Iona, sacred island of pilgrimage

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands
And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.

So begins Chaucer's Canterbury Tales brought together toward the end of the 14th century over 600 years ago.

Human nature has not changed!

People come from all over the world to Iona, and from all over England, especially the south of England where it takes a whole day to get there.

Nearly a third of a million every year to this tiny island on the west coast of Scotland, which is very hard to get to.

So where is it? How do you get there?

Why do they go?

Why did I and Rob go?

Who else here has been there?

And finally.

What is the Iona Community?

Iona is a tiny island 1.6 km wide at its narrowest point and 4.8km long. Helen, you could run across it in 10 minutes, long ways is trickier; there are big rocks at one end. I flew from Sydney to Dubai and then straight to Glasgow.

Iona is on the west coast of Scotland 3 hours north by bus or train from Glasgow, then 40 minutes on a big car ferry from Oban to the island of Mull, Then 1 hour by bus to the tiny village of Fionnphort where you have to leave your car and go on the tiny ferry for ten minutes to Iona. No pilgrims' cars are allowed on Iona.

And on the island you walk everywhere. On a single road and path ways that have been there for 1500 years. And when you go to the abbey, as I did everyday, you pass the largest standing cross in England which has been there for over 1200 years.

So why do so many go there?

For many reasons:

- Bird watching: from April to August there is a great breeding ground for puffins on the island of Staffa which is 45 minutes away by boat and includes Fingal's Cave where Mendelssohn went and was influenced to write his Hebridean Overtures
- There are masses of flowers, all catalogued.
- It is an essential Celtic place for all Celtic tours to visit,
- And it is the home of 90 people on small farms of mainly sheep and some cattle; it has a one-teacher school and 13 children, including the current leader's 3 children. The older children go to Oban for school throughout the week and come home at the weekends. A doctor comes from Mull once or twice a week.
- There are two hotels and one pub, all of which close down from the end of October to mid-March. The houses have electricity, but there is no road lighting so you walk around at night with torches, except in summer when it does not get really dark till after 11pm.
- There are also seals and otters and other small animals

There are lots of pilgrims wanting to see these things.

I did not go there for any of these reasons — but all these things made the time there richer and more fun!

I applied to go as a volunteer to work with the Iona Community. I wanted to go at the end of the summer season and be there when it closed for the winter. I was accepted and worked for 6 weeks in the book and gift shop from 22 Sept till the 7th November, when all the volunteers left the island together.

I went because I admired what the Iona Community had done to make church worship relevant and meaningful. what John Bell had done to make music and singing engaging for the ordinary person and the professional musician. I valued their commitment to peace and justice issues and I wanted to experience what it was like to live in an ecumenical Christian community.

What I especially loved was the insistence that there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular.

Everything we do, everyday we live,
we honour or dishonour our God
and our profession of faith
every moment we are awake.

This is the very essence of so called Celtic spirituality and many other spiritualities. The world of the spirit is part of every part of our lives, part of nature, part of the ordinary life of the world.

And also to be honest — lest I should seem to be more holy than I am to those who don't know me—I wanted to go because it was an adventure to get there and live there. All pilgrimages have that sense of adventure and challenge in them!

The Iona community which has given us the service today started in 1938 when a star Scottish minister called George MacLeod from a very venerable family of ministers felt called to rebuild the monastic buildings of the 13th century Benedictine Abbey on Iona.

He had left a prestigious church in Edinburgh (where he was the glamorous and brilliant minister and single — so that the many women who came to hear him preach each Sunday were fondly called the 'Band of Hope') — to minister in a poor area of Glasgow, but remained dismayed that the church seemed to have no understanding or involvement with the poor

working men and women and their families, especially in the depression.

He had a vision of rebuilding the abbey with the help of unemployed tradesmen and young ministers in their training acting as their labourers. to teach them about real work and living in community. He thought it would be a temporary task, in fact it took 30 years — during which he was leader and travelled extensively getting funds and promoting his vision of what the church should be which he saw as the true gospel of Christ.

It is a wonderful, inspiring story of courage, bravery, stubbornness, exasperation, about one man's vision which was communicated to others so that the Community continues to this day.

At first it was very primitive, with no running water, no electricity, makeshift accommodation, suspicion and outright hostility from the islanders. MacLeod surely identified with his great predecessor, St Columba, or in Gaelic, Colum Cille, who left Donegal, Ireland and landed on Iona in a coracle with 12 disciples in 563. Both men were the same age, 42 when they came to the island to live out their faith in new ways.

St Columba was born into the royal household of Kingship in Donegal, indeed his grandfather was a pagan high king of Ireland before Christianity got there. St Columba was educated in Europe to become a priest, although he had a passion for politics and king making as well. He could have become a High King of Ireland. If we have another Iona service, I would love to tell you more about him and George McLeod, they are both truly exceptional men.

His feast day is June 9, Rob if I agree to preach at both services, can I preach on him?

What I can say now is that because of St Columba's work on Iona, which included sending monks as missionaries out into Scotland, including Lindisfarne, and developing monasteries in Ireland. It is believed that the book of Kells began on Iona and was then completed at the sister place in Kells in Ireland after it was taken there for safety because the Vikings kept coming down and raiding the monastery and killing the monks.

When you sing our final song, Be thou my vision, note that the High King of Heaven was referring back to the pagan and high kings of Ireland, not just God up in the sky!

There is so much to tell.

For now all there is time to say is that the Iona community is alive and well.

It has three places, the abbey and McLeod centre on Iona, Camas a restored fishing station — a place for young people on Mull, and Glasgow, where its offices are and Wild Goose publishing, and members, friends and associates around the world. You can find out more on the internet: www.iona.org.uk. or come and talk to me, and like a true pilgrim I will encourage you to go!

On the island the hospitality season is from Easter to the end of October, the community of about 25 residents who stay for 1-3 years, and 25 volunteers who come for at least 6 weeks and sometimes longer, through cooking, cleaning, laundering and conducting daily services in the Abbey, as well as a Ceilidh on Monday nights, give the residential guests the opportunities for learning, and living in community and spiritual growth. So going as a volunteer is certainly not like going on retreat to reflect on God and life.. but you are warned about this in the Volunteer Handbook. We got accommodation and food and 30 pounds pocket money a week.

Now the National Trust of Scotland owns most of the island and Historic Scotland calls Iona 'the cradle of Christianity in Scotland,' the abbey is also called St Mary's Cathedral of the Isles and George Macleod and others called Iona a thin place which means that the spirit world and the natural world seem very close together.

That's not being pious or sentimental. That's the believed truth. And this believed truth is what the Iona Community have tried to make known throughout the world.

That's why they publish their work, and John Bell, who is also an ordained minister of the church of Scotland, gives workshops and Kathy Galloway, the current leader of the community, travel around the world. Kathy was here in Canberra for 3 days two weeks ago as guest speaker at the bi-annual gathering of an Australian community called Wellspring set up in which draws its inspiration from the Iona Community. I met her at the Cotter. She too is very inspiring.

I'd like to close with a real example of the way the community tries to show how the sacred is found in every aspect of our lives.

Today's reading told us of the extravagant action of the woman towards Jesus. John Bell and Graeme Maule have written the words and music of a song about it.

The words are on your song sheet. Don't read them now, but listen as Pat and Colin bring them to us.

See if you find God in it. Amen.