

# SACRED PLACES

**Talk given at SCP Conference: Henderson Hall,  
Newcastle upon Tyne 7.7.09**

*Begin with whole conference singing verse to  
'Morning has broken'*

**Christ be beside me,  
Christ be before me,  
Christ be behind me,  
King of my heart.  
Christ be within me,  
Christ be below me,  
Christ be above me,  
never to part.**

*(St Patrick's Breastplate, C 8<sup>th</sup>, adapted by James  
Quinn: Gaelic Traditional melody)*

***Then as prayer at beginning of talk:***

**Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,  
Christ all around me, shield in the strife.  
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting,  
Christ in my rising, light of my life**

**Christ be in all hearts thinking about me,  
Christ be in all tongues telling of me.  
Christ be the vision in eyes that see me,  
in ears that hear me Christ ever be.**

I live in a small down-at-heel fishing village.  
It straggles beside the single track road that  
runs along the Ross in the south of the Isle of Mull.  
While I was writing this it was a typical morning  
on the Ross. A few sheep, with their lambs, wandered  
along the village street.  
A boat was unloading creels at the old jetty.  
A blackbird was singing on a chimney pot.  
Two neighbours had stopped to talk, half-way across  
the road. Small boys were kicking a football against  
the fire station door. Suddenly,  
round the corner, came a tour bus, and another, and  
another. The sheep scattered.  
The neighbourly chat was broken off.  
The boys picked up their ball and ran.  
*Vroom, vroom, vroom* – raising the dust.  
Ten buses. Travelling westward.  
Then they'd gone on their way.  
The sheep came back. The ball was in play again. The  
blackbird went on singing.  
We could hear ourselves talk. Life went on.

Where were they going, those buses?  
They were carrying pilgrims and tourists to Iona.  
And the name of the village – the handful of houses  
they barely noticed, because as ordinary as the homes  
they'd left to make this significant journey – the name  
of the village is Bunessan.  
Which is also the name of that tune we just sang.

We'll come back to Buessan.

Before making my home there, I worked in Iona for six years: Deputy Warden, based at the MacLeod Centre, then as Warden of the Abbey. Iona is a 'holy place', a sacred site, a place of pilgrimage. Pilgrims come in many ways and for different periods – some disguised as day-trippers, in the buses I've just mentioned.

*Story: People arrive in Iona for a very brief visit, but take time to light candles, pray before leaving... may not claim the name, but they are pilgrims too.*

There is a pattern I can discern in almost all visits to the island, which I think holds good for other 'holy places' – a three-fold pattern (suitably Celtic!) and so I'm going to follow that pattern in my talk, as I'm going to draw on my Iona experience – not because it's definitive, but because I think it will help us to think about other sacred places with which we may be more familiar – or which we may be visiting during this conference.

And to think about what makes any place holy....

Since we're meeting here, let's listen to what Bede has to say about Iona:

*Columba arrived in Britain in the ninth year of the reign of the powerful Pictish king, Bradius, son of Meilochon (Maelcuin); he converted that people to the Faith of Christ by his preaching and example, and was granted the island of Iona on which to found a monastery...his successors hold it to this day...it was*

*here that Columba died and was buried at the age of seventy seven, some thirty-two years after he had come into Britain to preach. Before he came to Britain, he had founded a noble monastery in Ireland known in the Scots language as Dearmach (Derry)...from both of these monasteries Columba's disciples went out and founded many others in Britain and Ireland; but the monastery on the isle of Iona, where his body lies, remains the chief of them all.*

The life and mission of Columba, and his burial there, made Iona, where he reached what he would have called 'the place of his resurrection' a holy place. Columba's relics were, in fact, taken away from Iona after the time of Bede, when the Celtic monks, at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, were repeatedly attacked by Viking raiders, and many were massacred. The remnant made their way back to Ireland, with some of the things they treasured most, including a great Gospel Book, to a daughter foundation called Kells.

But even during those difficult times, people were still making their way to Iona. Because of Columba and his followers it had become a place of pilgrimage.

### **Pilgrimage – one mark of a Sacred Place.**

For Columba himself the journey  
that brought him to Iona was a pilgrimage.  
Celtic Christians believed that the witness they  
offered to God included several kinds of martyrdom.  
There was the red martyrdom – of dying for one's  
faith – like the monks who came empty-handed,  
in peace, to meet the Vikings with their swords,  
on the white sands of Iona.  
Some say there was a 'green martyrdom', the choice  
to follow a simple, austere life –  
relevant to our 'green' concerns today, maybe.  
But – more relevant to ur present theme –  
there was also 'white martyrdom', a little death,  
leaving behind all that was familiar, safe, loved (what  
we might call our 'comfort zone') – home, family,  
culture, and going into exile, into the unknown.  
Many of the saints set out on such journeys.  
We have accounts of the voyages of Brendan, the first  
Irish monk to travel among the Inner Hebrides –  
being celebrated just now  
at the Atlantic Isles Festival I've just left.  
Or St Barr, whose journeyings took him to Barra,  
or St Molaig who arrived in Lismore –  
things associated with these holy men were  
themselves revered  
*Describe the Bell-Shrine and bell at present on  
display at Kilmartin. Play the track Adomnan's Bell  
from the CD **The Kilmartin Sessions: The sounds of  
Ancient Scotland***

There's much that we don't know about Celtic  
Spirituality. Some soft-focus nonsense written,  
romanticising it. Life was hard, and we have to guess  
at their sense of what and where was holy...  
and why...like the symbol of the Wild Goose  
*Tell George MacLeod and Ron Ferguson story*

### **The Bell (JSP)**

At first, I guessed  
that its clangour was the cry of wild geese,  
lifting off wet meadows,  
resonant in the raw air  
of a grey midwinter Sunday;  
  
then I heard it was the dissonant beat  
of the Parish Church bell,  
rusting on its outdoor perch  
at the gable end;  
  
and I thought how it lacks the charm  
of a chime of bells from a steeple  
or the sonorous tolling of the Abbey bell,  
ten minutes to each appointed hour;  
  
but how, as it echoes from the crags,  
uncompromising in its demand  
that the people come –  
with no promise of comfort or beauty –  
we maybe hear  
the gathering bell of a much older church,  
the strange certainties of saints,  
the urgency of the wild geese.

The very places where the saints had walked were also seen as sanctified by their footprints – literally – at the South End of the Mull of Kintyre there is a stone which is said to bear the imprint of Columba's foot, on one stage of his journey. *Story of the journey – and the reasons given for his pilgrimage: white martyrdom, penitence, mission, colonial expansion...*

After Columba and his followers had settled in Iona, others began to make the same journey – travelling also by sea in those days (the buses came later). They came for advice, for blessing, in repentance, for prayer, for healing – and for burial. Each of these journeys when undertaken confirmed, in themselves, for their community and for the wider world, the specialness, sanctuary and sanctity of the place they were seeking.

### **Places of pilgrimage...**

Which continued through the Middle Ages, when the Benedictine community came to Iona and built the Abbey Church so that pilgrims could join in the pattern of worship in the monastic day, and then, after the reformation, when the Abbey was in ruins, pilgrims still came, or rather Romantic tourists: Walter Scott and Wordsworth and Keats, and Mendelssohn, and before them Boswell and Johnson, whose take on Sacred places was as follows: '*...We were now treading that illustrious island, which was*

*once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion. To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible....That man is little to be envied, whose...piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona.'* (Dr Samuel Johnson)

At the end of the 19C there were still groups of pilgrims arriving and wanting to worship, and so the Duke of Argyll, the landowner, had the Abbey Church rebuilt, and gave it to the people of Scotland, as a place of worship for all Christians (a remarkably ecumenical vision, ten years before the Edinburgh Conference). And then the rebuilt church stood magnificent but under-used amid the ruins of the cloister, refectory, chapter-house etc until in 1938 George MacLeod brought a group of unemployed craftsmen from the shipyards of Govan, along with trainee ministers to rebuild the rest of the Abbey – and, yes they did it, and it took 30 years, and in the rebuilding of what George called 'the place of the common life' this unlikely group also discovered and practised community among themselves. For them this place was sacred because it was where prayer and politics came together, work and worship were one. And the prayer of the Iona Community is that this may still be so today. So that is another sign of Sacred Space:

## **Where Community happens and reveals God.**

This may seem strange to you, if you are thinking of retreat, of spending time simply in the presence of God, of the hermit with his 'nine bean rows, living alone in the bee-loud glade.' I myself value solitude, and am profoundly aware of God in silence and in isolated, wilderness, places.

But I also believe we encounter God in others.

Every week during the season, March to October, it's not only day trippers who travel to Iona but also, each week, volunteers to work and folk – individuals and groups – who come to stay as guests in the Iona Community's centres.

So the pattern of a week on Iona, which begins with a pilgrimage – to get there – then continues, at the jetty, then in the Refectory or Community Room, with a welcome.

For those working in the Iona Community's centres the hospitality of Abraham is a text to which we often return – a reminder not only of how important welcome is in many cultures and all the world's great religions, but also that many 'have entertained angels unawares', that a space is blessed by the gifts of those who enter it; God's presence becomes more palpable through the faith of others.

The Community in Iona today welcomes pilgrims just as the Benedictines did: 1200 - Reformation,

just as the Columban community did from 563 for two and a half centuries until the Vikings came, and just as the islanders of Iona have done all along, in between these intentional communities, offering welcome of various sorts to visitors as various as Dr Johnson and a bus tour in the rain.

There's a prayer attributed to Columba, which gives a glimpse of the rhythm of life in a Celtic monastery:

*That I might bless the Lord*

*who orders all;*

*heaven with its countless bright orders,*

*land and strand and flood,*

*that I might search in all the books*

*that would help my soul;*

*at times kneeling to the heaven of my heart,*

*at times singing psalms;*

*at times contemplating the King of Heaven*

*Chief of the Holy Ones;*

*at times at work without compulsion,*

*this would be delightful;*

*at times plucking dulse from the rocks*

*at other times fishing;*

*at times distributing food to the poor;*

*at times in a hermitage.*

There is a balance between solitude and community, and the active and the contemplative, of which the Benedictine community also recognised the value. The pattern of their day included prayer, shared meals, meeting together, work such as copying out the scriptures, welcoming the stranger, the pilgrim. The well-trodden cloister became holy ground.

When George MacLeod and his crew were working on the rebuilding in the first half of the last century, they learned about community by sharing food round a table, and sharing their stories, through controversy and laughter, through hard physical labour and worship in the language of working men. And when they committed themselves to remain a community when they dispersed, by sharing a common rule of life, then they took the name of the place where they had come close to God by being close to each other: called themselves Members of the Iona Community.

And a taste of community – of shared life (which is counter-cultural in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) is what Iona can offer modern pilgrims. I mentioned the hospitality of Abraham, and of course Rublev's ikon is also a glimpse of the Trinity – the three figures in relationship with each other – the different aspects of God as a paradigm of community.

## **A sacred place is where community happens.**

That doesn't mean that a sacred place can't also be mysterious, numinous, challenging, a space that changes us. Every week the Community takes the best part of a day traversing bogs and moorland, taking in St Martin's Cross, Martyr's Bay, Columba's Bay, the Hermit's Cell, the Relig Oran – the graveyard – and other places in which we can find significance for our life's journey. I remember the leader of a pilgrimage in Iona describing it as 'A liminal experience'. What did he mean? Liminal – on the doorstep, on the threshold; on the edge; between stages of our life; between earth and heaven. *George MacLeod quoting the claim that Iona is 'A thin place' – the separation between heaven and earth only a tissue.*

### **A thin place (JSP)**

Before it fades –  
remember, wonder, fumble for words –  
what happened the other night?

Aurora Borealis,  
the Merry Dancers,  
the Northern Lights,

began with a smudge of light –  
like a cloud on the night sky –  
as we walked home

on a cold and windy night.

Breathless, we watched the stars fade,  
as the cloud, white as wool,  
grew and became luminous,  
moving minute by minute,  
lightness on darkness, unsettling,  
shot with subtle iridescence –  
whispers of colour...

happening, rose higher in the sky.

I walked out from the shelter of the building,  
feeling the full force of the north wind

and then forgetting it,

as I found myself

standing within a great tent,

veils of light billowing down from the zenith

on every side, moving delicately and yet powerfully,

blown by an unearthly wind,

dancing to unheard rhythms.

How long did I stand there  
insignificant and blessed,  
seeing creation in a new light?

Everything connected.

In a thin place, I stood in God's presence –  
knowing myself fully alive –

frozen to the spot

yet dancing to music that will never end.

\* \* \*

A sacred place may be the destination –  
reaching it the purpose of the pilgrimage –  
but it is also the place where you will be  
challenged and changed by what is going on there  
(anyone who has been on a retreat will know  
about this – and even more so if you have  
opened yourself to the company of other people,  
other pilgrims).

A sacred place is also a starting point.

It is where the next journey begins.

The pattern of a week in Iona today

starts with welcoming people on pilgrimage

encourages them to live, work, worship,

in community, but right from the start

is getting ready to send them away.

Not because they've overstayed their welcome.

But because that's what sacred spaces do.

They're liminal –

they're doorsteps to the next stage of our lives.

So one of the things that is very important in Iona is not to forget the rest of the world.

If time, I'll share two poems which look back to the days of the Celtic saints and scholars, to show that connectedness.

### **Ultramarine (JSP)**

*(When the Book of Kells was written, there was only one known source of the lapis lazuli that was used in its decoration: a mine in the mountains of north-west Afghanistan)*

Ultramarine:

blue from beyond the sea –  
rich blue, of Hebridean seas  
which range from indigo to jade,  
inlaid with rock and kelp, reflecting summer skies;  
here the sea colours play upon a page  
as white as sand,  
where even waves fall on a distant strand  
beyond the sea.

Ultramarine

was never meant to be a colour scheme.  
The sea meant all that severs *us* from *them*,  
and sometimes us from God:  
remoteness, mountains, deep mines, desert plains,  
warfare and trade, babel and otherness;  
conjuring up camel trains and chartered ships  
to carry, over land and over sea,

mineral wealth bought at a human price:  
the ore of distant mines, a fist  
clenching what was most rare – lapis lazuli –  
blue from beyond the sea

Ultramarine, lapis lazuli –  
colours playing upon the page –  
flickering blue like driftwood's salty flames,  
in borders interlaced like fronds of kelp,  
singling out angels, saints, fantastic birds,  
and here the cloak of an evangelist.  
The makers of this book  
took blue from far beyond the world they knew  
to hint at heaven.

\* \* \*

*Tell story of Adomnan and Arculf*

### **A world away**

*(for Adomnan) (JSP)*

Stones you never trod  
cried out to you  
as you paced these cobbles.

The winter gales brought a new order to the shore –  
the pebbles sang together,  
clattering like prayer beads.

As you chanted psalms on the sea's edge  
your mind was turning over  
names of far cities like incantations.

An unexpected guest, driven off-course  
and storm-stayed on Iona,  
Arculf brought this gift from the sea:

the story of his quest, his pilgrimage,  
and of the Holy Places: his words  
rare and precious as ultramarine.

And though the busyness of the day  
came at you from all quarters,  
you had no choice but to set this down:

at second hand, your language intricate –  
common words would not do –  
imagined shrines glittered like mica.

So, a whole world away,  
compelled by faith, you shared  
the urgent message that the stones cried out.

\* \* \*

Adomanan, like Columba, did travel away from Iona,  
in his life-time, not as far as the Holy Land,  
but into mainland Scotland, or back to Ireland,  
on mission, to encourage what we would call  
'outreach', encourage new Christian communities, to  
meet with scholars and law-makers,  
in Columba's case to travel as far as what we now call  
Inverness, to convert Brude, king of the Picts.

And, in the words of Bede:

*...it was from this island, and from this community of  
monks...that Aidan was sent, when he had been  
made bishop, to preach the Faith of Christ to the  
English people...the highest recommendation of his  
teaching to all was that he and his followers lived as  
they taught...*

*(Bede: A history of the English Church and People)*

### **A sacred place is a space that sends us out**

This was true for the Celtic Christian community –  
both in Iona and in Lindisfarne – for, of the many  
who made their way to these islands, only a few  
stayed on, for sanctuary or solace, or following a  
vocation. The majority went back (often a long and  
dangerous journey) to the life God had called them to  
elsewhere. And the members of these communities  
did not live in safe seclusion either. They were often  
on the road.

Similarly in the middle ages, the pilgrim guests  
of the Benedictines received strength and bread  
for the journey, then returned home.

So, in Iona today, the faces and thoughts of the  
pilgrims are already turning to what's next for them.  
They're on the doorstep. And when the time comes to  
leave, they will be blessed at a leaving service, and  
waved off with warm good wishes at the jetty, by the  
community who remain for a time,  
they are sent out: commissioned, you could say.

One way of describing it is to say that Iona  
has a centrifugal force.

Or, as a volunteer once said

*'People come to Iona looking for peace and quiet,  
and go away looking for peace and justice!'*

While I was in Iona I experienced that.

On one occasion the power of being in a place where  
we pray, daily, for the peace of the world,  
got me arrested. A colleague and I felt impelled  
to go to Faslane, the nuclear submarine base  
only 50 miles from Iona, as part of the peace witness  
of the Community to which we belong.

### **At the gates (JSP)**

We shared Communion at the gates of Faslane:  
one of the places in a broken world  
where breaking bread and drinking bitter wine  
is most relevant.

We shared it to remember  
security – not of barbed wire and missiles –  
but of God's love  
that risks all and gives life.

We shared, in a warm circle of believers.

But later, when we sat down on the cold road,  
we found that the bread and the cup  
had escaped, and were still out there in the crowd,  
being shared, carefully, among people of all kinds:  
this paradox  
of pain and promise  
being passed from hand to hand  
in a broken world.

\* \* \*

And of course you will see that what we discovered is  
that this ugly and frightening place  
is also potentially a sacred place:  
because all the earth is God's creation,  
and there is nowhere God is not;  
because Christ is particularly present  
in places of pain and death;  
because of the faith of God's people  
and the Holy Spirit drawing us into community.

Later, when I finished my contract in Iona,  
I went further – I volunteered to serve with EAPPI.  
I was a peace monitor on the West Bank.  
And discovered these things all over again:  
And when the security man at Ben Gurion Airport  
asked, as I left, why were you here, where have you  
been, I told the truth when I said 'I am a pilgrim.  
I have been to the Holy Places.'  
I remembered the Palestinian households  
where we were offered hospitality  
and the grim Separation Barrier  
where we watched and prayed, asking God 'Why?'.  
I said 'I've been to the Holy Places, where I prayed'  
Then I came back to live in Bunessan.  
And found that it is also a holy place,  
with its people who struggle with unemployment  
unaffordable housing, with aging and crises of faith,  
and anxiety about making ends meet, as they live  
alongside the road that takes pilgrims to Iona.  
It's a local community like those you've left,

full of good people, God's people, a place  
known to most people as a hymn tune – a hymn  
written by a local woman 150 years ago: one of a  
group of Baptists who lost homes and jobs for  
preaching their faith, but kept on stubbornly  
worshipping – in a schoolroom, on the seashore –  
who knew that these too can be sacred spaces.

**Holy places, sacred spaces:**

Those we will visit in the next few days  
and those I've used as my examples.

What do they have in common?

**Pilgrimage** – the journey that opens us to change

**Community**, where we're welcomed and meet God

**Sending out** – the next step on our journey.

Amen

*\* Poems quoted in text as **JSP** are from  
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