

A Pilgrimage to Iona

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Saint Columba

IONA IS A THIN PLACE WHERE
ONLY TISSUE PAPER SEPARATES
THE MATERIAL FROM THE
SPIRITUAL

GEORGE MACLEOD



THE CALL OF JESUS

Why are you going to Iona? Is the expense really justified? What if the experience yields no fruit? Aren't you placing an unfair burden on Julie and the children? How long will you be away?

These are some of the questions that accompanied me to Iona. It is difficult to know where questions originate. Questions have a way of uncovering our hidden motives and attitudes. Sometimes the devil uses questions to expose our fears or to encourage our doubts, but we are responsible for the answers we give. We should not resent questions. Jesus often used questions to challenge the misconceptions and prejudices of his hearers, to facilitate further thought and debate, to draw His audience nearer the kingdom of God and the rule of love.

My going to Iona was in response to the call of Jesus. The word "Iona" came to me, unexpectedly, during a time of prayer. It was as though a seed had been planted in my heart. The word brought with it no conscious associations, but as the seed germinated and my knowledge of Iona grew it became clear that this was God calling.

There is much confusion in Christian circles as to how we can arrive at the will of God. Some would suggest that guidance is a corporate affair, that the mind of God is perceived as we learn to submit our lives to one another. The danger in this approach is that the individual becomes overly dependent on his spiritual leaders or advisors and forfeits the right to think for himself. Others would maintain that guidance is strictly personal, that the individual is in the best position to keep all factors in proper equilibrium. The danger here is that when difficult choices must be made, we can opt for easy solutions and so perpetrate an illusion of saintliness.

I believe it is possible, indeed desirable, to harmonise these differing stances. In the first instance, the believer must accept full responsibility for the word the Lord addresses to him. The word cannot be ignored or avoided without serious implications for our spiritual life. However, while weighing up an appropriate response, it can be helpful to seek the advice of someone with the spiritual maturity, to better understand the complexities of all that the Lord might be saying.

As I shared with friends how God's word to go to Iona had come alive for me, there was an acceptance that this was the Lord's will, even if His purpose in my going wasn't clearly spelt out.

There are three major components to be found in the call of Jesus.

- 1. The call of Jesus is always decisive.** "Come!" "Go !" "Stay here !" When Jesus approached Simon and Andrew he said, "Come with me, and I will teach you to catch men." At once they left their nets and went with Him. The call I received to go to Iona left no room for bargaining. It was a command to be obeyed.

2. The call of Jesus inevitably draws us out on a limb. The Lord leads us into situations that are beyond our ability to manage, to control, or to manipulate in such a way as to serve our own interests.

While waiting in the departure lounge at Tullamarine Airport I was aware that the road ahead offered no guarantees. It was necessary that I put my trust in God whom I had always found to be faithful.

3. The call of Jesus asks that we abandon our false securities and be willing to risk losing what is dear to us for love of Him. I have no doubt that some people saw my going to Iona as a crazy adventure.

In this regard, it was my reputation that was under scrutiny. Was I deluded or had the Lord gifted me with the ability to discern His will? The outcome of my journey would be a confirmation one way or the other. I knew that Jesus asks for uncompromising obedience and that He promises to go before and make a way. With this assurance I knew that I wasn't an aimless wanderer. I had a destiny which was to be found in Jesus and Him alone.

THE PLACE OF DIVINE APPOINTMENT

My going to Iona was to meet with God. The question was posed, "Can't you meet with God anywhere?" The answer is obviously, "Yes!" But as I read my Bible, I could see that God was mindful of time and place in addressing Himself to those He had chosen. The Lord came to Abram at the sacred tree of Moreh and showed him the country that he would be given. God gave the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Samaritan woman met Jesus at Jacob's well. The encounters were instrumental in setting new directions. It was with this expectation that I looked to Iona. I was eager to discover what the Lord wanted to reveal to me and His direction for our life. But that was not all. I was seeking a blessing from Him.

In 2 Kings we read about the healing of Naaman the leper. This incident highlighted for me the importance of being in the place of blessing. The prescription for Naaman's healing was communicated to him by the prophet Elisha. Surprisingly, Naaman's response was one of dismay rather than delight. He complained about the inconvenience he was being asked to endure rather than submitting to the word of the prophet and receiving his healing from the Lord. How foolish to question the wisdom of God's ways. Naaman's arrogance and stubbornness nearly robbed him of that which he truly desired. For Naaman, the river Jordan was the place of divine appointment.

As I pondered the significance of Iona, which incidentally is also the Hebrew word for dove, I began to appreciate that this was the place God had chosen to reveal Himself to me, to speak His word into my life, and to equip me for the task ahead.

In Iona of my heart, Iona of my love,

Where monks' voices were shall be

lowing of cattle.

But ere the world shall come to an end

Iona will be as it was.

A prophecy of St. Columba.

TO BE A PILGRIM

Our life is a journey but the society in which we live poses many dangers. It is easy to get caught up in the hectic pace of life which forces our thinking to become event orientated. It is this perspective that wants to put everything in a compartment. When Jesus calls us, He asks that we advance a step at a time, with our eyes firmly fixed on Him, the author and finisher of our faith. He sets the pace at which we move, bringing meaning to all that we experience, and the inner assurance that He will complete the good work that He has begun in us. When we walk with Jesus there is no cause to look back. In the words of the apostle Paul,

“The one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So, I run straight towards the goal to win the prize which is God's call through Christ Jesus to life above.” Philippians 3: 13, 14

- **To be a pilgrim we must know where we are going.**

On the 11th of September I boarded international flight GA 889 for London. Thirty-two hours later I touched down on English soil having stopped for refuelling or passenger intake at Sydney, Bali, Djakarta, Singapore, Abu Dhabi, and Zurich. From Gatwick Airport I caught the express to Victoria Station where I bought a coach ticket to Glasgow. Departing London at noon I arrived in the northern industrial city of Glasgow at 7.30p.m. I stayed the evening in a hotel and early the following morning I caught a coach to the delightful fishing village of Oban. A forty-minute ferry trip brought me to the island of Mull. After a wait of two hours, I left Craignure and travelled by coach across the island to the little village of Fionnphort. The last leg of the journey was a short ferry trip to Iona. I was welcomed at the Abbey around 6.30p.m. on Thursday, 13th. September. I had achieved my goal, but this was merely the end of the first phase of my journey.

Having a destination is crucial to our walk of faith. Jesus set His sights on Jerusalem. Paul 's desire was to go to Rome. Here I was on the sacred isle of Iona.

- **To be a pilgrim we must patiently endure.**

Overseas travel isn't all glamour. There are many experiences that test your level of endurance. Whilst the thirty-two-hour flight to London had its enjoyable moments, it was also something of an ordeal. Sitting for long periods produces a variety of aches and pains. Sleep becomes elusive, particularly if you happen to be seated near the noisy server. The options are few. It is a case of sitting it out. The only consolation is that the discomfort you are experiencing is temporary. It won't last forever. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us,

"Endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as sons." Hebrews 12:7

- **To be a pilgrim we must travel light.**

In travelling to England and Scotland I chose to take a large case thinking I wouldn't be moving about much. Such wasn't to be, and I regretted having such heavy luggage.

If we are going to follow Jesus, we cannot afford excess baggage. He demands that we rid ourselves of all that would weigh us down. When Jesus sent out the twelve, He gave them instructions to take nothing with them for the journey: no stick, no beggar's bag, no food, no money, not even an extra shirt.

In Acts we read about a storm which threatened the life of Paul and all those on board the ship. To lighten the vessel and improve their chances of survival all the cargo was thrown overboard. We are called to take similar drastic action to ensure that we are found to be walking worthy of our calling.

"Do not store up treasure here on earth where moth and rust destroy ... Where your treasure is there will your heart be also." Matthew 6:19-21

- **To be a pilgrim we must live with an attitude of praise and thanksgiving.**

Life has its moments of deep anguish. Sometimes we feel betrayed, rejected, or used. We wonder whether there is any justice in our world. We grow weary and tired. We find that even the simplest task drains us of all our energy. Beware! The pit of despondency is very deep. Rise up as on wings of eagles. Clap your hands. Shout hallelujah. Be of good cheer. Jesus is the overcomer. He has triumphed. We must celebrate His victory. To remain glum is to deny the greatness of our God. Joy is the song of the redeemed. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. We are His chosen ones, His dear children.

When I arrived in Glasgow it was 7.30p.m. The coach trip from London had taken 7 hours. The sky was grey, the rain pouring down. I was feeling tired, not having slept much since leaving Australia. I wondered where I might stay. The first hotel I came across had no vacancies, and the second was far too expensive. I wanted to be near the coach terminal as I was keen to make an early start the following day. I strolled the streets thinking how lonely life can be when you are denied the warmth of

friendship or somewhere to go. After two unfruitful hours of searching my hands and shoulders were aching. My luggage was proving to be a burden. I leant against a stone wall wondering why the Lord had brought me all this way to endure Glasgow by night. Despite feelings of desperation there came a desire to praise the Lord. Praise is the perfect remedy for heavy burdens and feelings of dejection. Praise re-establishes our hope and confidence in God.

Not long after, I came across a Tourist Information Bureau which was open, had all the relevant data on what accommodation was available, and could even make bookings. I had somewhere to stay the night. Praise the Lord!

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

The isle of Iona has been described as a precious jewel. When you board the ferry at Fionnphort and look out over the stretch of water before you, the view of Iona is captivating. Iona stands apart - beautiful, charming, and discreet - patiently awaiting all who would grace her shores. Her welcome is warm and assuring but tinged with reserve. This is not the place to escape the inner conflicts and uncertainties that we are forced to contend with in working out our salvation. The harsh, changeable environment mirrors something of this struggle. The abbey is prominent, set apart from the village but not detached. Here on the edge of time is a place with a long history of a Christian presence dating back to the sixth century, a place of spiritual formation, a place of encounter, a place where you are free to seek God with all your heart, and soul, and mind.

On a mild Sunday afternoon, I went for a stroll along a pathway which brought me near the water's edge. I rested awhile, choosing to sit on a flat piece of rock. The following thoughts came to me.

"The sun is shining, and I feel warm. I marvel at the love of God in bringing me to this place. Surely here, more than anywhere I know, is the mystery of God most evident. As I look across the surging water towards Mull, I can see the rocky terrain. The pink granite, the patches of green, and the darker shadows denied sunlight. Beyond, there are taller mountains veiled in mist. I can see an outline but no detail."

My journey to Iona has brought me nearer to God and yet my God is too small. I see the Lord but what do I really see? The Pharisees observed Jesus and concluded He had a demon. I see Jesus sitting by the sea, watching, and listening. He knows what lies in the ocean depths. On many occasions Jesus inquired of His disciples, "What are you seeing? What are you hearing?" Surely our calling, above all else, is to know Jesus."

But our knowing can never be complete. For Jesus to be God there must always be that element of mystery, of surprise, of unveiling, of life eternal.

The followers of Jesus could never be sure how their Lord was going to respond to a situation. His actions reflected a deeper consciousness of the divine will. He wasn't bound by the expectations of those who were dear to Him. His love knew no limits. He understood the universality of sin and our need of personal redemption. Jesus is the door of the sheep fold. He is the bright and morning star. He is the first and the last. He is our hope and salvation. In Jesus all the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily. Jesus makes the Father known. He is the Word made flesh. The Father calls us into relationship, a covenant relationship, but we must never assume an arrogant stance. Presumption is evidence of the sin of pride. As was revealed to the prophet Jeremiah – 'He is the potter, we are the clay.'

We often want a God who is predictable, a God we can tie down, a God we can dictate to. My God won't be boxed in. He is always breaking out, doing the unexpected, revealing Himself at the most unlikely times. My God is full of surprises. His love is fresh and energetic, like a babbling brook, bringing comfort and healing. My God has often cause to remind me, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." Isaiah 55:8

God forbid that we should ever imagine that we know all there is to know about Him. Let us remember the words of the psalmist,

"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" Psalm 8:4

I will walk with you my Jesus,

Along the sandy shore.

Where waves are gently lapping,

The sound is evermore.

For here is the eternal,

The end of land and sea.

You stand, O Lord, transcendent,

Of time and eternity.

LIFE AT THE ABBEY

The following extracts are taken from letters I wrote to Julie.

"The resident community at the abbey consists of three families and six young children and several singles. There are also voluntary helpers, mainly young people, who take on different tasks - cooking, cleaning, gardening, maintenance work, music, serving in the coffee shop or bookshop, driving the minibus, and so on. They stay for varying lengths of time from two weeks to several years.

The abbey takes up to fifty retreatants who generally come for a week. Each week has a separate theme which is advertised as such or adapted to the needs of the groups on retreat. The breakdown of a typical day goes something like this - Rise 7.30a.m. Breakfast 8.00a.m. Morning Prayers 8.40a.m. Chores 9.00a.m. Session 1. 9.45a.m. Coffee 11.00a.m. Session 2. 11.30a.m. Lunch 1.00p.m.

Afternoons are generally free. Wednesdays are an exception. Members of the community lead a trek around the island visiting such landmarks as Loch Staonaig (the water storage), the Marble Quarry, St. Columba's Bay, the Hermit's Cell, and Dun I the highest point on the island). Dinner 5.30p.m. Session 3. 7.45p.m. Evening Prayers 9.00p.m. Supper. Social events.

The Morning and Evening worship follows a liturgical approach with set themes for each day. The liturgy has evolved over a period of twenty years. A worship group revise the format and prayers regularly. There is a Healing Service on Tuesday night, a Youth Service on Wednesday night, and a Communion Service on Friday night. Throughout the day there are shorter times set aside for specific issues. There is a ten-minute Peace and Justice Service at 2.00p.m. each day and a silent vigil at 9.15p.m. on Sundays.

There is structure but also flexibility. The leadership is shared amongst members of the community, but certain occasions require leadership with specialised gifts. We celebrated communion tonight. The warden, Ian Galloway, preached a powerful message on the story of the rich, young ruler. The layout of the Abbey is such that you sit facing each other. We shared the bread amongst ourselves, and the wine was distributed in three huge communion cups, the lip being the circumference of a bread-and-butter plate. The music included traditional hymns, folk melodies, and African tunes. The acoustics in the Abbey are exceptional and non-accompanied singing sounds rich and full.

There is a good library. I am reading "The Way of the Pilgrim" by R.M. French. It tells the story of a Russian pilgrim who lived during the latter part of the nineteenth century and how he learnt to 'pray without ceasing.'

I'm in a room on my own at present which has double bunks, two writing desks, and a little alcove where I can sit and look out over the courtyard. The doona keeps me warm at night. The weather is cool but not cold. The sky is generally cloudy, but the sun has been out on occasions. Tonight, a beautiful calm evening greeted me and the pink granite outcrops on Mull were rich in colour.

The first two nights I shared a room with a fella called 'Bungie'. His life was changed dramatically when he came to Iona four years ago. He is deeply involved in the peace movement having been arrested for being a member of a worship group who entered one of the American bases. The charge of trespassing was dropped when it was found they were celebrating the eucharist.

This morning, he led a session on peace. We had to choose a picture which conveyed peace and share our thoughts with one other person. I selected a photo of a husband and wife and their little baby. If we could accept the reality of child-like dependence, then we would have no enemies. The lady I shared with is sixty and has no family. Her picture, which may have been a United Nations meeting, conveyed to her the importance of dialogue, of listening, of being open. She was saying how minority groups are often over-protective of themselves for fear that they might be consumed. The institutional church is often guilty of this, of hiding behind our traditions, of resisting the wind of the Spirit.

We watched a video of the Iona Community last night which featured a visit to the abbey by Queen Elizabeth II. The Community has 180 members with more people wanting to join all the time. There are two members in Australia, residing in Brisbane and Perth. Membership has been heavily weighted in favour of ordained clergy, but this is changing with a growing number of lay people wanting admission. Whilst the community is ministering in poorer areas, they freely admit that they are essentially middle class.

Women are playing an increasingly important role and now make up 25% of the membership. Kathy Galloway preached on Sunday, affirming the giftedness of each person in the body, even those who have died. I found the latter point a further confirmation that a fruitful ministry continues beyond the grave e.g., Peter Marshall, David Watson.

The principle of affirming giftedness finds a healthy expression in the life at the abbey. At the welcoming meal community members give a summary of their responsibilities. This sense of belonging is very important. Similarly, guests have an opportunity to share a little of their story. There are some good traditions. They conclude each meal with a period of silent prayer.

The Iona Community sees itself as a prophetic voice, primarily to the Church of Scotland. Despite having members overseas, the community is realistic about its reach.

Prior to the morning tea break, we were talking about 'community' and 'celebration.' George, the leader of the group, served as a missionary in India for 3 years. In the context of mission, he maintains that we must be truly Christian. This implies an acceptance of our neighbour and a respect for the journey he is making. He argues that our attempts to plant Christianity in Asian soil have been frustrated by our inability to perceive the essential nature of the gospel and have clouded the issue with our many cultural trappings. He asked the question, "Would Jesus be a 'Christian' if He were to enter our modern western world?"

BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

While sitting in the transit lounge at the Sydney International Airport I was approached by a middle-aged man who noticed my wooden cross and assumed I was a Christian. He related to me how he was brought up a Muslim but had been converted to Christianity through reading the bible. He was working now as a writer with Mobilization Evangelism in Morocco.

At one point in our conversation, he declared that he saw my time away as a 'self-emptying' in order that I might be equipped for a new work.

The apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, "Be filled with the Spirit". This is a command. It demands the removal from our life of all that pertains to self-centredness. We are called to put aside all that speaks of sin and death. Jesus takes us and refines us as if by fire. He is committed to our purification.

While staying at the abbey I considered the possibility of staying on in some other capacity. I observed the work the volunteers undertook and could imagine myself being useful. I thought God might have more He wanted to reveal to me, and I was reluctant to let go of this unique opportunity.

I shared these thoughts with the Bursar but was informed several days later that this was not possible. I felt sad that my time on Iona was ending. I felt let down that there wasn't an opening for me. I felt an emptiness and entertained the thought that I had disappointed God. I was reminded of the word of the Lord spoke to a despondent Elijah on Mount Sinai.

"Elijah, what are you doing here?" 1 Kings 19:9

During periods of desolation our prayers are real. We feel the force of each statement. We look for recognition, a sign of God's love.

"I feel like a pebble on the beach. I feel my aloneness. I have a story to tell but no one to tell it to. I feel vulnerable. I'm not as composed as I might appear. My heart is breaking. I'm crying out for comfort, for understanding. The dear Lord is like the sea. Each succeeding wave of His love washes over me. His love shapes me, taking away the rough edges, making me less abrasive. I have so much to say and yet I have nothing to say. I fear being left on the beach discarded. I want to be a living stone, to know where I fit. I don't want prominence. I want to be part of a whole. I want to be useful, a bridge, a fence, a wall. I don't want to be something that causes others to stumble. Dear Lord, have mercy on me."

Deep within I had a consciousness that the life of God was mine to guard and to enjoy. I knew God was with me and for me. I was not discouraged but assured by the revelation that 'the habitation of God is with men.'

"I feel like a reservoir gouged out of the ground. The substantial rains have filled me to the point of overflowing. I await your time O Lord. "

The evening worship in the abbey was led by a family who were wanting to celebrate the life of their loved one, Brian, who had died on Iona the evening after I arrived. It was a joyful experience, a song of victory, as members of the family, both young and old, shared in the prayers, the readings, and the songs.

At the conclusion of the service those who had ministered left leaving other worshippers behind. A holy quiet settled on the congregation. You could sense the Holy Spirit was hovering over us. I was aware that the service wasn't finished. Could it be that God wanted to speak a word to His people? My heart took up the burden of this question. Immediately the words, "Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted" filled my being.

As I wrestled with my responsibility to share this word the presence of God came over me and pulsed within me. The anointing was very strong, like a heavy, crushing weight. My body vibrated with His life. I opened my mouth, and the words pierced the quiet. Tears began to flow. The Lord was bringing healing and comfort to those who had been wounded by the death of someone they loved dearly.

People began to quietly file out of the abbey. I was left trembling. I felt wrung out.

The word of God is poured into our life in order that we might declare it. It is important that we be a clean vessel, an empty vessel, receptive to all that the Lord would want to give, a willing communicator of His words of life.

While in London I spent a night at a Guest House in St. Albans city. The accommodation was very comfortable and included a colour television. After dinner, I settled down to enjoy my first taste of English television. About 9.00 o'clock I switched the set off as I was conscious the Lord wanted me to reflect on some of my more recent experiences. After a while I grew weary of introspection, preferring some light relief.

I returned to the television and switched it on but instead of a picture there was a loud pop. I tried to rationalise what had happened, why the television had shut down, but the fact remained that I had been disobedient, and disobedience has its consequences.

When we consciously step out of the Lord's will and purpose, we place ourselves and others at risk.

The Lord disciplines His children when they ignore His word. As I made my confession it became clear that I should communicate what had happened to the proprietor and offer an amount of money toward the cost of repair, even though it was probably minimal. This I did the following morning and whilst I found it a humbling experience, I knew within the deep joy of repentance. It seemed fitting that my destination that day should be the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary who are known for their teaching on repentance, that repentance is at the heart of a joy filled life.

Repentance opens the way for the Lord to act in our life. The proprietor offered to drive me to the station. On the way he mentioned that his son attends a Catholic school bearing the name St Columba.

My last Sunday in London provided me with an opportunity to attend a local Christian fellowship. There was a Baptist church nearby that seemed suitable. The morning service wasn't until 11.00a.m. so I had time to go for a walk. As I made my way along the quiet streets of London, I had a growing conviction that there would be an opportunity to share a testimony. I began to go over in my mind all that the Lord had been teaching me about being filled with the Spirit. A picture of a teapot came to me. Our lives are like a teapot, beautiful, fragile, perfectly shaped. But the teapot I was seeing was filled with stones.

If we are wanting to be useful to God, we need to be clean on the inside. God is not so enamoured by an external show of piety. The stones, perhaps a symbol of a hardened heart, must go. Their presence threatens our safety and undermines our potential. If the stones are allowed to remain, they will damage the teapot and their lingering presence will prevent the teapot from being useful.

Jesus emptied Himself. Paul, writing to the Philippians says,

"Of his own free will he gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant." Philippians 2:7

Jesus chose the way of suffering and rejection and ultimately the cross. The mystery is that joy awaits all who enter the reality of God's kingdom. It is there we discover the eternal principle that death gives way to life.

"I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains." John 12:24

Having walked for half an hour I noticed an Assembly of God church nestling amongst some run-down shops. It was as though a magnet were drawing me to this place and I must go in. Here was a small multi-racial fellowship simmering with the Spirit of God. During the service the pastor invited all those who were visiting to share a five-minute testimony. The Lord's word was within me, and I gladly shared the insight I had been given.

At the conclusion of the service, I was greeted by a young Australian man who came from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. He said he would pray that I might receive the filling I was seeking.

The following day I was hoping to return home to Australia. God had given me specific instructions concerning my travel arrangements. I was to walk to Paddington station, which was some distance away, certainly not the closest station, and catch the underground to Victoria Station. From there I was to travel to the airport via the Gatwick express in preference to a bus, thus ensuring an early arrival.

When I stepped off the train at Victoria Station my Australian friend was standing there to greet me. I wondered how this was possible. He told me that he worked full-time but had every second Monday off. He had been praying that morning and God said to him 'Go to Victoria Station.' When he arrived at the station, which is major commuter hub, and is accessed by thousands of people every day, he didn't know what to do. He decided to return home. God spoke to him again and told him to go back.

We both recognised God's hand in bringing us together. I told him I felt that it was time I returned to Australia but wasn't certain of getting a seat on the flight. When I last spoke with Garuda Airline there were no vacancies. While standing on the platform we stepped to one side. He laid hands on me and prayed that the blessing of the Lord might be upon me and that I would make the flight despite the apparent obstacles.

This was a fitting conclusion to my pilgrimage - a commissioning and a sending forth to accomplish all that the Lord had planned for me. The circumstances surrounding our

meeting were miraculous. Some months earlier the Lord had called my friend to travel overseas to experience the life of Jesus more fully.

We agreed that the Lord is looking for a people who will be obedient to Him in all things, a people whose primary concern is to serve the living God and Him alone, a people who are emptied of all selfish desire, a people who are hungry to know the Lord and be filled with His Spirit.

STREAMS IN THE DESERT

"I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water ... the hand of the Lord hath done this." Isaiah 41:18, 20

A desolate waste is land denied the water it so desperately needs to sustain life. A desolate waste is also a description that can apply to our walk with the Lord. We have all known periods of dryness. For no apparent reason the Lord's blessing is withheld. We are left wondering what it might all mean.

My first contact with the Iona Community was via a letter I wrote to their leader, Ron Ferguson. In it I explained something of our life and those areas of service and ministry that we were attracted to. For twelve weeks we eagerly awaited a reply, but none was forthcoming. There seemed to be no logical explanation. Our patience was stretched to the limit. As we shared our dilemma with friends the suggestion was made that a telephone call might resolve the impasse. This I did, only to discover that my letter never arrived or had been misplaced during a recent move the community had undertaken. The conversation was confirming and opened the way for me to press on with my plans to go to Iona. The drought had been broken.

Our faith is often put to the test. It is easy to become disappointed, discouraged, and despondent. There are times when you want to forget the whole thing. Somehow the Lord doesn't let us escape. His word latches on to us, pursues us, and denies us any peace. We must come to terms with what is being said no matter how long the period of waiting.

As preparations were being made for my trip it became clear that the cost of such a venture would drain our financial reserves. This was no small consideration and I felt most uneasy about leaving Julie and the children at home without sufficient funds to meet their daily needs. During this time of uncertainty, the Lord confirmed to Julie that I should go. We paid for my airfare but in doing so surrendered what little financial security we had. It was a matter of coming to terms with our complete dependence on the mercy of God. Over the weeks that followed we witnessed springs of water welling up in dry land. Such was the generosity of family and friends that my travelling expenses were almost paid for in full. This was further evidence to us that the Lord wasn't about to abandon us.

Having arrived at Iona and having shared in the life of the abbey for nine days it came as a shock to realise that it was time to leave. Not only was I faced with the prospect of deciding what next, but I was conscious that I would be leaving behind my contact with Julie. I had no forwarding address so her letters would be lost to me. This painful realisation was accentuated when Julie rang the day before I was due to leave. I found it difficult to re-assure her as my thoughts reflected my uncertainty.

In one of the letters I did receive, Julie made mention of Sister Eulalia of the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary whom I had written to prior to leaving Australia. In that letter I shared a dream I had in which several sisters from the Sisterhood had come to me and ministered in song. They encouraged me to continue my walk of child-like faith. Julie informed me that Sister Eulalia was no longer in Australia but was living in England. She also included her address. At a time when my hope was floundering, here was an answer. As I made my way to the morning worship service at the abbey, I prayed that the Lord might confirm His leading. When I stepped through the door I was greeted with the tune "Father welcomes all His children". The Lord's peace filled me. I felt free to move on.

I caught the overnight coach from Glasgow to London and a train to Radlett where the Sisters' of Mary reside. It was Sunday morning. The walk from the station was long and tiring but eventually I made it to "The End House". I wondered whether this was prophetic in any way. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. Reluctantly, I walked on and found a park where I sat for a while and watched a soccer match. Storm clouds were gathering. I returned to the Sisters' of Mary and knocked again but still there was no answer. I left a bag of apples on the doorstep and decided I would try again the following day.

I returned early. The day was cool. I was pleased to find the apples had been taken. When I knocked the door opened and Sister Eulalia greeted me. God's timing is always perfect. Later that day Sister Eulalia was due to leave for a two-day conference. After watching several videos about the work and witness of the Sisters' of Mary and sharing lunch I was able to help her load up several heavy boxes which she had been worried about. My flagging spirit had been revived.

The end of my stay in London was a crisis. My financial reserves were quickly draining away. I had tried in vain for a week to secure a seat on the next Garuda flight out of London. I knew that on Monday I would have to travel out to Gatwick airport with little or no money in my pocket and no guarantee that there would be a place for me on the aeroplane. I was desperate. During my time away the Lord had taught me a two-fold affirmation.

"FAITH to believe; GRACE to accept."

Often, we lack the divine perspective, and our praying becomes presumptuous. I knew that God loved me and that I could trust him with my affairs. God's peace awaits all who rejoice in His fatherly care and concern.

When I arrived at the airport, I checked in at the standby counter and discovered, to my amazement, that my name had already been added to the passenger list. I was on my way home. The Lord had made a way in the desert.

A VISION OF RECONCILIATION

During my brief stay in St. Albans, a cathedral city in Hertfordshire, I had dinner at a pizza restaurant. As I sat at a table and looked out the window, a sign across the road took my attention. In England there is a bank or credit union with the name Abbey National. From my position in the restaurant a road sign obscured 'Nat' and a branch of a tree covered the 'l'. There before me were the words "Abbey Iona". As I marvelled at this happening, the Lord spoke to me and said that I must never forget what happened in the abbey.

As the weeks and months have passed my understanding of this word has grown. Initially, I thought in terms of the anointing I received. Here was the Lord actively empowering me for His service. I prayed that the spirit of St. Columba, a man of faith, courage, and cheerfulness, might fill me. Columba was a man with a strong missionary spirit. He left his beloved Ireland in 563A.D. with twelve men of like ambition and settled on Iona where he established a thriving Christian community. From this spiritual centre Columba and his followers went forth with the Gospel of Christ and so evangelised Scotland.

But there was more. The words of prophecy spoken out in obedience have become a personal mandate.

"Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted."

Jesus is earnestly looking for a people who share His concern over His church, a people who lament the apathy, the ignorance, the unfaithfulness, the disobedience, the suspicion, the rebellion, of those who claim to be the people of God.

"Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times have I wanted to put my arms around you, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me." Matthew 23:37

Jesus weeps over His church. He longs for a bride who is pure and spotless. But what does He see? Division! Dissension! Discord! Where is the sense of unity? Where is the sense of togetherness? Do we really care when a brother or sister is hurting? We are the body of Christ and yet often we are driven apart, dismembered, and defeated.

The following prophecy might well apply to many of our local churches.

"My people, my chosen ones. How long will you wander? How long will you resist Me? How long will you turn your backs on My word? How long will you raise a sword against one another? How long will you slam the door in My face? How long will you continue to make such righteous claims when your hearts are far from Me? How long will you wallow in unbelief? How long will you seek to conceal My light? How long will you continue to stumble as one who is blind? How long will you quench My Spirit? Have I not been merciful to you? Have I not prospered you? Have I not blessed you with every immeasurable gift? Have I not sought to lead you in paths of righteousness? Have I not given Myself for you? Is there no

love in your heart? Is there no compassion? Is there no awareness of sin? Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. He it is who resists the proud. He brings their plans to nought. He brings confusion and scatters them near and far.

Return to Me. Seek My life with all your heart. Don't be distracted by lesser concerns. Fix your eyes on Me. Love Me. Serve Me. Open your hearts to the life of My Spirit. Turn not away. Harden not your hearts. Today is the day of your salvation. Come willingly. Come gladly. Come with a spirit of thankfulness. I, the Lord, have saved you from the pit. I have rescued you from the grip of evil. I have set your feet upon a rock. I am the Lord. There is no one greater than Me. I have all authority, all power, all dominion, all might.

Don't you know? Have you forgotten? Don't delude yourselves. Don't continue to wander aimlessly. I am the great Shepherd. I will never leave you or forsake you. My love is like an eternal spring. It never runs dry. Come and drink of Me. Drink your fill. Don't leave My presence while you are still thirsty. Don't leave Me. Comfort Me with your love."

The abbey at Iona offers a unique picture of reconciliation. Once the home of a Benedictine order the abbey is now serviced by an ecumenical community. During the time of my stay, a Catholic priest was given the freedom to celebrate the Eucharist each day.

Why is it that we must be so exclusive in our thinking? Can we not pursue a Christian spirituality that embraces all that is good regardless of its source. Jesus prays for unity amongst His followers. It seems unlikely that His vision was of some super structure that would gather in all who confess His Lordship. Rather, Jesus saw a people knit together by His Spirit. It is the work of the Spirit to bring us all to that place of acceptance and maturity where our words and actions are governed by humility and love.

Let us guard against a stance that applauds the polarization that regularly occurs within Christian circles. Jesus asks that we be faithful to the truth as we perceive it but appreciative of the differing perspectives expounded by our brothers and sisters. We must exercise our intellects in such a way that they won't reject the paradoxes within God's revealed truth.

The healing debate is a pertinent example. How difficult it is to hold in tension our understanding of sickness and suffering on the one hand and healing and wholeness on the other. Some would argue, quite forcefully, that healing is in the atonement and that any sickness is of the devil and should be approached accordingly. Others would suggest that sickness can bring us into a deeper communion with the Lord and that any pain and discomfort we experience allows us to share in the sufferings of Christ.

Is it not possible to accept both these viewpoints, acknowledging our constant need of God's enlightenment and understanding? Praise God that we are witnessing an outpouring of His healing power today and praise God for the many saints who endure the cross of suffering and rejection with patience and joy and so bring comfort to their Lord.

The prayer convenor of the Iona community died of a terminal illness the night after I arrived. He was responsible for keeping members of the community informed of the many requests received for healing prayer. I was privileged to watch a video of an interview with

this man. There is one statement he made which will always remain with me. "Of course, death is the ultimate healing. "

We are living at a point in history when fear is crippling many who are followers of Jesus. Fear of the unknown, fear of the demands of discipleship, fear of being different, fear of being left alone, fear of the forces of darkness, fear of death. Jesus is looking for a people who will believe Him when He says,

"Be not afraid. I am with you. Even the gates of hell shall not prevail against you."

The Bible describes Jesus as a "man of sorrows". He is the suffering servant who knows what we must endure and is acquainted with our grief. It is the Lord who takes upon Himself the burden of our suffering and sadness.

While near the Tower of London I rang Julie to tell her of my plans to return home. It was a brief call, and I knew she wouldn't understand. How could she? My heart was heavy as I put down the receiver. Never have I known such grief. As I walked along the pavement, I struggled to hold back the tears. A little way down the road I came across All Hallows Church of England. As I looked at the noticeboard, I discovered that there was a Eucharistic service at midday on Saturday. It was just after midday. I stepped inside to find that the service had just commenced. There were three people in the congregation. As I shared in the sacrament the Lord gently ministered to me and took the burden of my sorrow. A weight had been lifted and I left rejoicing.

Jesus is present in the eucharist - present to comfort, to heal, to restore, and to impart His life.

"Comfort my people, says our God. Comfort them!!" Isaiah 40:1

The eucharist must be central to the life of any community of faith. It is here that we encounter Jesus. At Iona they stressed the fact that "This is an open table". Shout it out, "Come, all of you, and partake of the Lord's table." Jesus is accessible to all. He is the Saviour of the world. He invites each one to come and share in His life.

But participation in the sacrament demands that we examine ourselves.

- Do we discern Jesus in the bread and the wine?
- Do we appreciate that the bread and the wine are symbols of brokenness, of self-surrender?
- Are we willing to share in the humiliation of Jesus, the 'folly' of the cross?
- Are we willing to become partakers of His suffering?

Participation in the sacrament demands that we assess whether we are at peace with our brother and sister.

- Is there any anger or resentment in our hearts?
- Are we ready to forgive?
- Do we appreciate that Jesus is present in the "least of these?"
- Are we doing everything we can to preserve the "unity of the Spirit?"

- Is our prayer, "Father! May they be one even as we are one - one heart and one mind."

The eucharist is a sacrament of reconciliation. It is here we enter into a deeper communion with the Father and with each other. While away, I had the opportunity of sharing in the sacrament within the Church of Scotland, the Church of England, and the Assemblies of God. I continue to pray that the day may yet come when the eucharist will become a universal celebration of our unity.