

The Iona Community is:

- An ecumenical community of men and women from different walks of life and different traditions in the Christian church
- Committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to following where that leads, even into the unknown
- Engaged together, and with people of goodwill across the world, in acting, reflecting and praying for justice, peace and the integrity of creation
- Convinced that the inclusive community we seek must be embodied in the community we practise

So we share a common discipline of:

- Daily prayer and bible study
- Mutual accountability for our use of time and money
- Spending time together
- Action for justice and peace

And are, together with our staff, responsible for:

- Our islands residential centres of Iona Abbey, the MacLeod Centre on Iona, and Camas Adventure Centre on the Ross of Mull. And in Glasgow
- The administration of the Community
- Our work with young people
- Our publishing house, Wild Goose Publications
- Our association in the revitalising of worship with the Wild Goose Resource Group

The Iona Community was founded in Glasgow in 1938 by George MacLeod, minister, visionary and prophetic witness for peace, in the context of the poverty and despair of the Depression. Its original task of rebuilding the monastic ruins of Iona Abbey became a sign of hopeful rebuilding of community in Scotland and beyond. Today, we are almost 250 Members, mostly in Britain, and 1500 Associate Members, with 1400 Friends worldwide. Together and apart, 'we follow the light we have, and pray for more light.'

Coracle is the quarterly magazine of the Iona Community. Views expressed in it are not necessarily the policy of the Iona Community, but the Community seeks the exchange of thoughts and ideas as a basis for finding common ground.

Letters are welcome, but may be edited because of space restrictions. For **advertising** or **photography** specifications, please contact the editor. **Unsolicited material** is welcome (by e-mail or on disk) but cannot always be included.

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Alastair McIntosh

Where stands our Nineveh today?

Sermon from Iona Abbey on the Sunday after the Scottish Referendum ...

Bible readings: Jonah's anger with God at Nineveh (Jonah 3:10, 4:1-11); Jacob wrestling the angel at Peniel (Genesis 32:22-31)

I drafted this sermon on Thursday, while the voting was taking place on whether Scotland should become an independent country.

At that time, none of us could tell which way the ballots would be cast. Now, three days on, I read it to you pretty much as sketched out then. But first, a preamble in the light of the outcome.

This weekend sees the joy of the 55% standing tempered by the sorrow of the '45; and that, as both a percentage, and an apostrophe.

Some of you will recognise there my allusion to the Jacobite uprising of 1745 against the fledgling British state; to the crushing of the clans the following year at the last battle on mainland British soil, Culloden, on Drum Mossie Moor near Inverness.

Such was its psychological impact that when George MacLeod, who rebuilt this Abbey and founded the Iona Community, was nine years old, his father took him down to the village pier to shake hands with a Mrs McCormack, who was 85 years old.

'Now I'll tell you why,' the old man later explained. 'When she was nine years old she shook hands with a Mrs Campbell who was then 85 years of age, and Mrs Campbell, when she was nine years of age, stood at exactly this point on the jetty and watched the boat going down the Sound of Iona taking Bonnie Prince Charlie back to France [after the defeat at Culloden].'

I shook hands with George MacLeod when he was 85, so I'm just 3 handshakes away from the '45.

Right through to my generation, the psychological, social and economic problems of Scotland would often be summed up – albeit with poetic licence – by the one-liner: *'It all goes back to Culloden.'*

It helped to usher in the era of the Highland Clearances, the empty glens of the Isle of Mull that many of you will have passed through yesterday, the intergenerational poverty in our cities; and one can make tentative links to the evils of sectarianism, to chronic alcoholism, and to other symptoms of the violence in our culture never yet resolved for which, if you wanted to push the point and sum it up in a single word, you could say: *Trident*. Our weapons of mass destruction.

On Friday, after the 'No' vote, I had an e-mail from a 'Yes' campaigner and cultural figurehead. He begged the question: 'How do we process the genetic memory as we, again, scan Drum Mossie Moor for our wounded loved ones?'

That's the psychohistory that echoes down the glens into the present.

But let me be very, very clear.

Had the vote gone the other way, the heartbreak might reciprocally have fallen on the other side. A different set of narratives, another sense of loss, would today be playing out.

That is why I could draft most of what follows blind to the referendum's outcome, and directed equally to both sides.

I did not know who might be suffering, but what I did know is that God is always on the side of those who suffer. God hangs with us on the Cross. As a proverb of the Scottish Traveller people has it, 'God's no' sleeping.'

In today's reading from the lectionary, the prophet Jonah anticipates God's vengeance upon Nineveh, the modern-day city of Mosul in northern Iraq.

Picture it: There's Jonah, nursing his wrath and hoping that God will live up to his firebrand reputation.

The citizens of Nineveh had it coming on account, we're told, of *'their evil ways and ... the violence that is in their hands'*.

Jonah was anticipating a spectacle of fire and brimstone. The perpetuation of the myth of redemptive violence. The idea that violence can redeem violence.

But the King of Nineveh repents. He undergoes a massive inner transformation and manages to break the spiral of violence. He short-circuits the myth of redemptive violence.

Then, and only then, we glimpse the true face of God: *'gracious ... merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love'*.

But here's the ever-so-human irony. That very salving light leaves Jonah's small self feeling cheated.

The text tells that God's laid-back attitude was *'very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry'*.

Why? Because the reluctant prophet preferred to think of God as being *armed for vengeance*. A God made, we might infer, not in God's own image, but in the idolatrous image of Jonah's own projected violence.

What does God do? He catches the opportunity. She uses it as a spade to dig for deeper spiritual gold.

God sends a bush to shade the overheated prophet from the sun. But scarcely has its foliage burst forth, when a worm is sent to gnaw its stem and cause the

leaves to wither.

Have you or I, in our lives, ever met – that worm?

The worm that strips away the fig leaves of our self-deception and our righteous indignation? The worm that composts them to something that can grow new life?

Jonah's left beside himself with rage. He cries out to his creator: *'Please take my life from me; it is better for me to die than to live.'*

Only then one feels the warming smile, the raising of the eyebrow, even the humour in God's reproach:

'Is it right for you to be angry – about the bush?'

Poor Jonah! He can only beat about the bush.

'Yes, angry enough to die.'

To which God replies: *'You are concerned about the bush ... for which you did not labour and which you did not grow ... [But] should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand [souls]?''*

Here is the God whose name is Holy, who inhabiteth eternity, who has just pressed 'reset' on his prophet's shrivelled and shrunken worldview. Here is the God who takes a God's-eye-view. Whose tickling worm recasts the suffering of a blinkered humankind and opens up what Tillich called the *'depth of existence'*, the depth of life itself.

And so I put to you gathered here on Iona, today: *What is a nation?*

What does it mean to be a community writ large?

The Bible shows an historical progression in its sense of nationhood.

It starts with Genesis, where the nations rest upon an ethnic basis of blood lineage. Then halfway through, Ezekiel introduces a civic basis of nationhood. Here the children of the aliens – the refugees and the incomers – shall be adopted, and given land: and

'they shall be to you as citizens of Israel' (Ezekiel 47:21-22).

The New Testament further ramps it up towards a spiritual basis of nationhood. In Christ there is *'neither Jew nor Greek'*. And recall how Jesus was pressed by the Canaanite woman to extend his Jewishness, to render it inclusive, and thus to heal her daughter who he had initially shunned on grounds of racial discrimination.

It has been said: *'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.'*

That collective sense of soul is what the Bible calls the *'angels'* of the nations.

In the Book of Daniel, the angels of the nations wrestle each other, even to the point of fighting.

We must, says Walter Wink, the late great American theologian of power and peace, *name* these powers and what they do.

And then *unmask* the ways in which, when they are 'fallen' or corrupted, the poor are oppressed and the natural world wasted.

Only then can we *engage* the Powers that Be: can we call back the angels of the nations to their higher, distinctive, God-given callings or vocation.

I am not entitled here to suggest that Scottish nationalism trumps British nationalism, or the other way around.

I am just pointing out that the Book of Jonah suggests that when the worm wilts our foliage, when things don't work out the way we'd have hoped, we can either wallow in self-pity and our wrath, or be uprising to a greater understanding.

It is that, to me, that gives legitimacy to nationhood. By our values they shall know us.

In our other reading this morning, Jacob wrestled all night long at Peniel, struggling with an otherworldly man, another kind of 'angel'.

It left him limping, struck and dislocated at the hip.

What is the symbolism of the hip? It is the means by which we stride out into the world. Psychologically, it is our outer self, our ego self, the small self

that's yet to grow up spiritually.

It fears the worm, yet something somewhere yearns to glimpse the God's-eye-view.

Jacob found that when you wrestle with an angel, you get hurt; but the endgame – is blessing.

That's the wrestling with the angels of the nations that has been, and remains in its aftermath, the referendum process.

That is why the referendum outcome may have closed a door upon the '45, the 45%. But the challenge now, for the 100%, for both sides, is to ask: *where stands our Nineveh today?* To seek a deeper opening of the way.

An opening already glimpsed in the huge surge of creative energy and political participation that the process has set free.

Pray this day that we can learn from Jonah's confessional sharing of his vengeful wrath.

Pray that we might find the blessing wrought, for all his flaws, by Jacob. The blessing wrought at Peniel, a place that means 'the face of God'.

Pray to find, amidst our suffering, or our joy, the face of God. And that, in God's own image. The face of steadfast love. ●

Alastair McIntosh is a Director of the GalGael Trust in Govan (www.galgael.org), and is the Quaker representative on the advisory Board of the Iona Community. His books include *Soil and Soul* (2001), *Hell and High Water* (2008), *Island Spirituality* (2013) and *Parables of Northern Seed*, Wild Goose Publications, 2014 (www.ionabooks.com)

Peter Macdonald

From the Holy City: A better world is possible

The crowd at Glasgow Central Station, thousands strong, sang the 23rd Psalm, 'The Lord's my Shepherd', Psalm 124, 'Had not the Lord been on our side', and also the Red Flag, as twenty-nine newly elected Labour Party MPs prepared to travel to Westminster. It was 1922 and, as representatives of working people, the MPs publicly pledged to '*abjure vanity and self-aggrandisement*' and to recognise '*that their only righteous purpose is to promote the welfare of their fellow citizens and the wellbeing of mankind*'.

In the intervening years, faith in politicians and in the business of politics has declined. Increasing numbers of the electorate have become disillusioned and disengaged. Electoral turnout even for General Elections is alarmingly low. Many have tried voting and tried not voting – it made no difference.

Recent research indicates that this trend is accelerating, with interest in politics declining from 50% to 42%, intention to vote at the next General Election in the UK declining from 51% to 41% and belief that the system of government requires significant improvement rising from 60% to 69%.¹

The crowd at that Glasgow railway station were in no doubt that they were sending their *ain folk* to represent them at Westminster. Today representative democracy is undermined by a political class which largely comprises people more like one another than those who elect them:

*'In terms of educational and vocational background the new political elite look remarkably like the old establishment. It is surprising how many of our MPs were privately educated, went to Oxbridge and worked in the professions ... it seems our Parliament is becoming less representative in terms of education and occupation, and continues to attract similar types of people from a rather narrow professional base.'*²

The growing gulf between people and politics has been at the heart of the Scottish independence debate, as has been clear from contributions to *Coracle* over the past year. By the time you read this, the result will be known, but the debate will continue – must continue – within Scotland, the United Kingdom and the European Union. How can we create democratic structures that are participative, that enable everyone's voices to be heard, and that ensure the widest possible representation – with full gender parity – in political institutions at local, national and at international levels?

It was only in the latter stages of the referendum campaign that commentators beyond Scotland realised that it was primarily a national conversation about power and democracy, seeking to understand who has power and whom it serves.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Suzanne Moore commented:

*'I do not know what it is to be Scottish and utterly disconnected from Westminster politics. I only know what it is to be English and feel like that.'*³

Moore is not alone in expressing dismay about this disconnection, about the right-wing drift of UK politics, neo-liberal economic policies and the



slow detachment of the UK from the European Union. Many Community members and associate members despair at 'broken Britain's' increasing levels of child poverty, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the undermining of the Welfare State and the centralising of wealth and power in London, which acts as *'the dark star of the economy, inexorably sucking in resources, people and energy'*.⁴

Perhaps Scotland is the canary in the coal mine, alerting all who care about progressive politics and social democracy to the urgency of the current situation. Many of those who 'love-bombed' Scotland with appeals to 'stay with us' did not stop to ask why the referendum was being held, or for whom exactly Britain is 'great'. Millionaire celebrities know it works for them, therefore assume that it must work for the rest of us.

We have been told that in the aftermath of the campaign there is a need for reconciliation, such has been the animosity and division. This is far from the truth.

Reconciliation is a word that often comes easily to the lips of the comfortable and complacent, those who would rather not face hard questions or be challenged on their privileged position.

Isn't the need rather for democratisation? Throughout the United Kingdom there is an urgent need to revive the body politic by giving real power to local people to make the key decisions that will sustain and develop their communities – they live there and they are the best people to do so.

Democratic politics in Scotland has been reinvigorated by the referendum campaign. Town and church halls have been packed with citizens eager to be part of the debate. Local groups have sprung into life and campaign 'pop-up' shops have popped up in over thirty towns across the country. Social media has been lit up by blogs, Facebook posts and Twitter

storms that have been informative, entertaining and transformational. Mainstream media, such as the BBC, offered a top-down view of the debate and struggled to present a balanced narrative of issues and events. Through social media, misinformation was immediately countered, crude propaganda lampooned and alternative viewpoints went viral. Such social networks are non-hierarchical, democratic and foster community and solidarity. They are empowering and will continue to flourish.

We know a better Scotland is possible. We also know that it is not enough to replace rule from one centre of power by another. It is not enough to replace rule by one political elite for another. It is the system that enables the centralisation of power and the maintenance of elites that must be challenged and changed.

The independence campaign was never about Scottish isolation and separatism. We are all interdependent. It was and is about redefining Scotland's partnership with the other nations within the British Isles, Europe and the rest of the world.

Yes or No, the debate and the struggle for social justice will go on, and new progressive partnerships must be formed. Once people have contemplated how things could be they will be even more reluctant to accept the way that things are.

A better world is possible. Wherever we are let us work and pray for its coming. ●

Notes:

1. Political Studies Association, 2003-2013
2. Hackett and Hunter, The Smith Institute
3. The Guardian, 25/8/14
4. Prof. T. Travers, London School of Economics

Peter Macdonald is the Leader of the Iona Community.

Martin Johnstone

Priority Areas Holiday Week

When the sun shines, Iona is one of the most beautiful places on the planet. And even when the rain is battering down it is still pretty stunning. During the Priority Areas Holiday Week in July we had a mixture of both – thankfully more of the former than the latter – but whatever the weather this was a truly unforgettable week.

First and foremost it was a holiday, a welcome break for young and old from some of our very poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland. And so there were lots of visits to the beaches. Some of them were organised and some completely spontaneous – when the sun came out. There was a spectacular water slide – in the front garden of Dunsmeorach – that must have had the day tourists open-mouthed with amazement (and, I suspect, George MacLeod birling in his grave). And there was an evening of pampering for the grown-ups: manicure, massage, great food and deep relaxation.

For a significant number of our holidaymakers this was also a time for faith to be stretched and nurtured. I personally don't think that you can be on Iona without that happening. For some, that was in the Abbey church as we joined pilgrims from across the world in a building and in words which have inspired generations. For others, it took place in our specially crafted 'worship in the wild'. It was worship which sought to provide a window of faith for the many who experience God every day but often feel that they don't necessarily belong in the Church.