

---

## Rising through the third great flood

I grew up in the village of Leurbost on the Isle of Lewis in a parish called North Lochs. Water, both salt and fresh, and in the air both vertically and horizontally, was sovereign in our world. In the past, neither roads nor fibre cables, but the ocean was our forebears' superhighway.

So it is that a necklace drapes around much of the coast, the jewels of which are sacred sites in nature, the Gaelic names of which mark out a plethora of bygone oratories, convents, monasteries, holy wells – and the *teampail* or 'temples', as the old churches are known. Abandoned though these were with the Protestant Reformation of 1560, as R.S. Thomas put it in a Welsh context: *'The parish/has a saint's name time cannot/unfrock.'*<sup>1</sup>

The connections to the Celtic saints are everywhere. When growing up, we'd hear how the dead in olden days were taken round by boat for burial at *Teampall Chaluim Chille* on Saint Columba's Island. Eat your heart out, Iona. It's one thing to have an abbey. But a 'temple'!

It's an amazing thing to make a pilgrimage – I beg your pardon, an outing of historical interest – to these sites with local people. I've heard the Gaelic Psalms sung out at *Chaluim Chille* – literally, Columba of the Church – and this is worship hauntingly evocative.

Evocative of what? Well might you ask. Evocative of God. 'O taste and see', and these days, though I'm Quaker by conviction, there are times when the Presbyterian catechism of 1647 as we learned it by rote just nails the point: *'There is but ONE ONLY, the living and true God.'*

Nine miles to the north-east, near Stornoway, is another church and major cemetery with the same dedication. But *Eaglais Chaluim Chille* is being eaten round the edges by the sea. The council and a community trust have built up sea defences. They'll last a generation. But with climate change, the oceans of the world are rising by an inch in every seven years, and speeding up. In our north-east Atlantic storms, the peaks of waves are higher than before. The sea takes back her own, and yet, there is a sadness in her sough. A friend, a priest in Ireland's Aran Isles, was on the phone the other day. He asked me what of activism as the UN prepares to bring its climate conference, COP26, to Glasgow where I live now. In many ways, my books distil my

activism. I told him of a dream I'd had recur while writing. It's as if, I said, we've mostly started at the splashy, shouty end of the pool. But we need to deepen in our activism. Wade out, and learn to swim, and then to dive down at the deep end: and even, how to breathe underwater.

He said the Celtic hermits didn't try to change the world. They changed themselves. They went out to be alone with God and nature. And then the world changed round them. That's faith, and prayer in action, *peregrini*.

Rarely I repeat a story, but such is its importance that my last two books retold the Hebridean legend of the three great floods.

The first was that of the Creation. The second, that of Noah, born of human violence. But the third great flood, the bards say, has yet to come. In 1869 an old woman told the chronicler of the *Carmina Gadelica* that there will be '*an overflowing of the Atlantic*'. A time will come to pass when '*the walls of the churches shall be the fishing-rocks of the people*'. And there, amongst these temple ruins, '*the pale-faced mermaid, the marled seal and the brown otter shall race and run and leap and gambol – like the children of men at play*'.

One version tells how the isles themselves will be submerged, except Iona. It will rise up on the waters, '*and float there like a crown*'.

I ask you, what qualities of spirit might breathe underwater, and rise up like a crown? What activism might faith groups bring? I can but think of Saint Columba's dying words: '*Love one another unfeignedly. Peace.*'

Alastair McIntosh

*Alastair McIntosh's most recent book, Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being (Birlinn), is described by the world's most prominent climate scientist, Michael Mann, as 'a life-giving vision for our collective future'. His previous book, Poacher's Pilgrimage, recounts a 12-day Hebridean walk, an ecology of the imagination, that opens to a Christian vision for the third millennium. Alastair is an associate member of the Iona Community.*

## Note

1. From 'The moon in Lleyn', by R.S. Thomas