

North Kildonan United Church

1st November 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“For All the Saints”

Revelation 7: 9-17

I John 3: 1-3

Matthew 5: 1-12

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

On the west coast of Scotland, across from the town of Oban, lies the Island of Mull. Beyond the southwestern shores of Mull is the tiny Isle of Iona, just one mile wide and three and half miles long. But for hundreds of years that bit of rock and beach and pasture has been home to the first Christian site in Scotland, a monastic community established by St Columba in 563. For centuries the community flourished as an important cradle of Celtic Christianity, though by the time of the Reformation the community was about done, and much of the ancient abbey there fell into disrepair.

In 1899 the Duke of Argyll gave Iona to the Church of Scotland and through private donations much of the abbey was restored. But in 1938 things really took off when George MacLeod, a Church of Scotland minister from Glasgow, established the Iona community. This was to be an ecumenical Christian community of men and women from different walks of life, all committed to seeking new ways of following Christ in today's world.

Part of the shaping of the community happened in the approach he took to restoring the historic structures he found. He rebuilt the buildings by bringing to Iona church ministers and student ministers from Glasgow and other places, to work alongside local labourers and those previously unemployed. The shared work broke down divisions, the clergy learned real empathy for the labourers, and true community formed.

Dr. MacLeod possessed a vision of Christian mission and discipleship. He combined practical work with the demands of the gospel and bound it all together with sensitive and liturgically rich worship. Though steeped in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, at one point he served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he embraced the entire Christian tradition and was enthusiastically open to the ecumenical movement. And from those first days, the Iona community has become a leading force in the revival of Celtic Christianity and spirituality.

During Dr. MacLeod's time, and since then, an amazing amount of liturgical resources and hymns has come from Iona. John Bell, the author and composer of a number of hymns in Voices United, was for many years a member of Iona, and his experiences there are certainly reflected in his works.

So it was that in 1995, when I was on a summer pulpit exchange in Scotland, I made my own pilgrimage to Iona. If memory serves me correctly, your former minister Marc and his wife Mary also spent time at Iona.

The journey to Iona began from the Manse in Tyndrum, a village north of Glasgow, in the company of two friends from Winnipeg. We drove to Oban, where we parked the car and took a ferry to Mull. Staying a night in a bed and breakfast, the following morning we caught a bus which took across the Island of Mull to Fionnphort, the port on the west of Mull.

The bus ride was pleasant and the scenery wonderful, as we drove on a single lane road, complete with lay-bys, where oncoming traffic could pull over as the bus passed. I never discovered the rules about which car was to pull over if two came together on that single lane.

Arrival at Fionnphort meant taking a ferry to the Isle of Iona. Once on Iona we found our way to the Abbey. It was a simple, yet beautiful building, made of rough stone and timber, some of which was a gift from Canada to aid in restoring the Abbey back in the 30s. It was a structure clearly steeped in history. We sat for a bit in the Abbey and I thought of Dr. MacLeod, standing behind the Holy Table, celebrating Holy Communion just as countless other ministers and priests had done so down through the centuries and would continue to do so as long as the Abbey stands. The peace of sitting in this holy place was soon disturbed by the loud commentary of a guide, bringing yet another group of tourists to yet one more Scottish treasure. My friends and I moved on, for soon there was a ferry to catch, then the return bus ride to take us to the second ferry and once on the mainland, the car ride back to the manse.

It was a brief yet wonderful experience and I still don't know for sure what to make of it. Those more in tune than I with things Celtic see the tiny isle as mystical. They talk of it being a thin place, where the boundaries between heaven and earth are more transparent, a spiritual, almost otherworldly location. Iona has always been regarded as a holy place, with several kings of Scotland and of Norway buried there. Perhaps part of the draw for these royals was the legend that when the Resurrection of the dead occurs, it will begin at Iona. Who knows?

The life and teachings of George MacLeod have always held a great attraction for me, so it was wonderful to see his accomplishments on Iona. His writings have certainly influenced my thought, particularly his openness to the whole Christian tradition. He also knew the power and wonder of carefully crafted worship, and so yearned for his denomination to take more seriously the gift of worship. He commented, perhaps more than once, that he was convinced that the attraction Freemasonry held for Scots was because it offered a richness of ceremony and ritual that was missing from typical

Presbyterian Sunday worship. I dare say the same might be said of much of United Church worship as well.

Iona was certainly worth the trip but I have to confess that I didn't find it mystical or magical or even spiritual. I knew I was in a place of great history and importance and the significance of this cradle of Christianity was not lost on me. But I didn't *feel* anything. Perhaps the interruption by the tourists affected my visit, combined with the brief time we had on the isle. Perhaps if I had attended worship, surrounded by believers, the place would have come alive for me. Perhaps if I am able to return, and spend more time there, my experience might be richer. All I can say is that I didn't feel the magic that I expected, and I have to say that that's alright.

Popular Christianity, especially the more charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of it, tend to place great importance of feeling, on emotion, on knowing God is in your heart. And, for some, I am sure that is true. But it seems to me that Christian faith is more about trust than feeling, and religious doubt is about far more than the absence of feeling something.

For example, much is made of how John Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed one evening as he heard Luther's commentary on Romans. This was Wesley's Aldersgate experience, of which he wrote: *"I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."* It was a conversion experience for Wesley, an awakening within him that God did indeed love him. But it seems that Wesley did not spend the rest of his life continually expecting heartwarming experiences. His theology was profoundly changed, yet he doesn't make mention of that experience the following day.

Feeling can be a tricky and disappointing thing. We are right to want, to expect joy in our life and joy in our worship, and I would hope that all of us have memories of times when we were *"lost in wonder, love and praise"*, as Charles Wesley says. It's hard to have that experience in worship right now as the pandemic limits our gathering together, silences our hymns and makes fellowship nearly impossible. So we may feel that the joy we knew in worship is absent, that it just doesn't seem the same nowadays. And to feel and to acknowledge that is just being honest. But that absence does not mean that God is absent in our lives. Pandemic or not, we all have the dark valleys, the pain and fear and loss, times when we don't feel God's love, though we know that God is faithful.

But faith is about more than feeling. After all, feeling is a fickle thing, subject to change at a moment's notice. That's why Christian life is based in the story of God's love in Jesus Christ. That's why we are reminded of the story every time the Word of God is read, the prayers offered, and in times soon to come, the hymns sung, the bread broken,

the cup lifted up. The story is bigger than us, bigger than our emotions and senses. The story speaks to our heads as well as our hearts, to our intellect as well as our emotions. The story invites us to find our life story lived out in this bigger, encompassing, embracing story, a story of God's love down through the ages, supremely shown in Jesus Christ. The story is God's claim of love upon us, God's appeal to us to hold on in good times and in bad, to lift up our heads and see the wonder of creation, to reach out in love to all others with whom we share this creation, to trust that there is more to this life than just what we can see and touch and experience, to believe that God's love and care for us is greater than any pandemic.

Today, All Saints Day, is one of those wonderfully rich days the Christian tradition offers us. Even in the reduced form of worship we are required to offer these days, this is a day of deep emotion and, yes, feeling too, as we remember those whom we love but see no longer. It is a day of remembrance and thanksgiving, a day shaped by a daring hope, the hope that stares down death and says that God is the One who has the final word, and that is a word of Life. What did we just hear?

"For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

This day we give thanks for the faithful of all ages who struggled to build up the church, who joyfully spread the good news, who served in countless great and humble ways to make life more joyful and liveable for others. This is a day to take seriously the hope of resurrection to eternal life. This is a day that brings together and binds as one the promise of our baptism, the joy of Advent and Christmas, and the hope of Easter.

And this is a day to commend those whom we love but see no longer within that living hope, within our Saviour's warm embrace, to place and to trust that our beloved are safe with the Good Shepherd in the Father's house.

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. May they rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.