

All Saints' Day

“The Inheritance of the saints”

Job 26, Colossians 1:9-14

A year ago I was on Iona, Columba's Island, off the northwest coast of Scotland. Here Columba founded his community in the 6th, and the monks there were likely to have had a hand in illuminating the Book of Kells. Columba had one of the first reported 'encounters' with the Loch Ness Monster. From Iona monks were sent out as missionaries across Scotland, into England, and on as far as Europe. The later 12th Abbey, once ruined, has gradually been restored. Significant work was done by George Macleod in the 1930s and beyond, when he took unemployed men from Glasgow during the Depression, and alongside trainee clergy, set about restoration.

Outside the Abbey there is a small cobbled road thought to be over 1,000 years old. It is called the Street of the Dead. It goes from the Abbey to a little burial plot, and on to Martyr's Bay. According to legend former Kings of Scotland are buried there, including Macbeth and his victim Duncan. It is also the resting place of John Smith, the former Labour Party leader.

George Macleod described Iona as one of those 'thin places', where the veil between heaven and earth is virtually transparent. You feel it. It is a place where life, death, and what lies beyond death are almost tangible. It doesn't answer the questions we have about those existential challenges, but it encourages those with questing minds and hearts to explore the possibilities.

On Iona, the Street of the Dead with cobblestones set in grass (whose hands made and laid them?), end at the graveyard, but a pathway goes on, down to the sea. It is an inheritance of the saints. Saints work in the present in life, and point, in death, to the journey of faith that lies beyond.

Faith moves us onwards, through grief, through pain, through loss, through anger, through denial, to acceptance, and on to something, un-worded, unspecific, even in the Bible, but towards something. And that gives hope.

At this time of year, with Hallowe'en, All Saints and All Souls, we see Celtic and Pagan worlds collide with Christianity, and all seem to want to say something about light and darkness, summer and winter, life and death. Giles Fraser commented on Radio Four a little while ago:

“We live in a largely scientific age, from the Mexican Day of the Dead to Strictly Come Dancing doing all things spooky, there’s an aspect of the supernatural that just won’t go away, however rational our self-understanding. And surely one of the reasons we go in for this sort of thing is to play out some of our unexpressed fears about death, about the unknown, so as to mock them and put them in their place. Hallowe'en, and All Saints, are sorts of coping mechanisms...”

I like that. Coping mechanisms to help us come to terms with the reality of death, and see it as part of the process of life and, for the person of faith, the journey into something beyond. Saints, past and present, point us beyond death to a new life that is to come. And that is some inheritance.

I have spent several days in this last week with people who know they are coming towards the end of their lives, and with one person who has had a near-death experience. The usual mixture of emotions were present. Fear, uncertainty, denial, gratitude. All three have made preparation for the inevitable, whenever it comes, and one noted that it felt right to do this at this time of year, All Saints, where that separating veil between heaven and earth is thin, as it is on Iona.

That sense of putting life into perspective, beyond the squabbling and the pettiness and the misplaced priorities and the breakdown in communication and the nonsense that so often mars our living. The example of saints help us, again, under the generous eye of God, insists that we put our lives into better order. Sift out the things that matter from the things that do not, and realise that our fleeting touch on this planet is short. And what, in the end, will our inheritance be that we pass on to the generations to come?

In this time of political flux; in this time when the ecology of our planet and its future is a far bigger issue to tackle than the shortcomings of some of our leading politicians; in this time when anxiety about the future infects the way we live life today, what calm from our forebears in the

past might we draw upon, and what faith in the future, already held in God's hands, might we yet pass on.

It is not that we should obsess about the number of fingerprints we leave on the future. Rather that we should consider carefully the nature of what we leave behind. Like this chapel, crafted from a sad memory from the past, but gifted in hope to a future that might still have a place for quiet and peace, and music and soul, and reflection on what matters in the world today, and how we, the saints of today, might prepare something worthwhile to pass onwards.

The inheritance of the saints is not static, but dynamic. It is our duty and privilege to pass on to those yet who will follow on something of the hope and wonder, struggle and concern, that all saints hold in their lifetimes. This is our faith, for which we give thanks to the God of yesterday, today and forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen