

PETER JAMES MACDONALD

On an April Thursday in 1982, I travelled to the island of Iona. It was a journey I had made countless times before, to a place of profound significance for my family and my life. This time, I was going to join a group of kids and volunteers from Ruchill Youth Project in Glasgow, where I was working. When to the old Youth Camp huts, I wandered into the kitchen. A guy with thick black wavy hair and a three day growth was kneading some bread dough. He looked up, smiled and with a lovely twinkle in his eyes, said hi, I'm Peter, I've heard a lot about you. It was Holy Week, and after midnight on Easter Sunday as we came out of the Abbey Church together, the Aurora Borealis was dancing gloriously above the Sound of Iona and the sky. By then, Peter and I had talked and walked, flirted and laughed, played table tennis and danced and shared the bread. And we knew...we knew that this connection was the beginning of a lifelong adventure. That Easter I found my soul-mate, my lover and my best friend, Peter Macdonald, Son of the Rock and notorious charmer from the Red Vale of Leven. My small town boy with a heart which encompassed the world.

He was born on 22 March 1958 to Jessie and Donald – an engineer - who lived in Alexandria, and four years later a wee sister Shiona arrived. They grew up in a home full of warmth and welcome. The door was always open to friends, and the family had lots of fun together. Peter enjoyed winding his mum up, but she and Donald were encouraging and supportive. Peter was a great big brother to Shiona, patient and protecting her when she got into scrapes. He valued the happiness and security of his childhood and knew he was loved. He learned early and well to be open in expressing his feelings - heart on sleeve, uninhibited laughter, ready tears and noisy rants were all in his emotional vocabulary. Football was an enduring passion. Peter played for primary and secondary school teams, and later for Drumchapel Amateurs. He was a speedy striker, a prolific goalscorer, looked good in shorts and quite fancied himself on the field. The truth is he just loved the game, and any team which played it beautifully. Possibly his finest footballing moment came in 2003 at Celtic Park, scoring a peach of a goal in a Scottish Church v State match v politicians. In this ecumenical spirit, perhaps Peter is playing once more in Paradise with boyhood idols Jim Baxter and Charlie Cooke.

Peter was proud of his roots in the Vale – he had a strong sense of belonging in the close knit working class community, especially among the folk of Bonhill Parish Church, where his family were members. When he was a teenager, a lively young minister arrived. Ian Miller recalls of Peter ‘He was warm, vibrant, fun, sometimes outrageous but always kind and loving. I remember him as head boy at Vale of Leven Academy, as an inspiration behind and at the forefront of many church youth activities in the area.’ The stories are legion, bearing witness to Peter’s early penchant for dressing up and making a spectacle of himself. Scaring weans as a gorilla, dancing Swan Lake in tutu and flippers, organising concerts and charity stunts. Peter was always in the thick of things, taking the lead and rising to the challenge, charming his way out of trouble.

The belonging was important, but he had searching questions about believing. After school Peter marked time working in a bank and, as they say, seeking discernment. Reading Ron Ferguson’s biography of Church of Scotland minister Geoff Shaw was a revelation. Geoff was a member of the Gorbals Group, a radical experiment in community and presence outwith conventional church structures, and he later became leader of Strathclyde Regional Council. The book spoke of a challenging and relational way of living the gospel which made sense to young Peter of the vocation he was grappling towards. In 1981 he began studying theology at Glasgow University, as a candidate for ministry, and during Freshers Week, after hearing the student rector, decided this was a man he needed to meet. So he introduced himself to John Bell and fell in with the Iona Community. These were formative experiences, as Peter once recalled in a sermon: ‘University took me out of the innate conservatism of the small community I grew up in...I was unsure how to relate to some of the people I encountered. This was particularly the case when I got involved in the Iona Community. Soon I found myself mixing with some of the folk my mother had warned me about – a truly weird assortment of upper class eccentrics and alcoholics, inner city kids and homosexuals, people with mental health issues and PhDs, vegetarians and Episcopalians!’ I think I know which of these boxes I tick. How about you?

*It was at this point that our lives converged, and we soon decided to embark on the glorious risk of commitment to one another.*

Ours was a 1983 midsummer marriage, and we began life together in Edinburgh. After completing his studies at New College, Peter's first job was as assistant minister at the Old Kirk, West Pilton, followed by four years as National Young Adult Advisor for the C of S, working alongside Bob Fyffe and Fiona Buchan. They were a dynamic and creative team, despite Bob and Peter's relentless teasing of Fiona, developing national initiatives and international networks. We lived in a Muirhouse council stair, having set up what we called a Columban community with a group of Iona pals, plus many shorter term residents. In 1989 to Peter's ecstatic delight, Callum was born, followed in 1992 by Lorn. Being a loving equal partner and a totally involved parent meant more to Peter than anything else in his life. He was so proud of Callum and Lorn – not only for their considerable intellectual and artistic achievements, but mainly because they have grown into such fine young men.

Over the years, Peter served as minister in three parish churches. From 1990-98 in Torbain, a 1960s housing estate in Kirkcaldy, he soon made an impact, not only with the congregation, but in the wider community, where he took the lead in developing the innovative Oasis Project and Lomonds Trust to tackle youth homelessness. As a hands on dad he also started a parent and toddler group. It was a good place to be with young children. Peter never needed a lang spoon to sup wi Fifers.

In 1998 we moved back to Edinburgh and St George's West Church in the city centre. On his way to the interview Peter saw Nelson Mandela coming out of the Caledonian Hotel. They smiled and exchanged waves. It had to be an omen! Barbara Finlayson was the session clerk, and despite being at opposite ends of the political spectrum, they got along famously. She writes: 'Peter was a blessing to St George's West, leading and encouraging the congregation to work in new ways, to believe in the possibility that its best days lay ahead and not behind it. Peter was a force of nature. Peter did not "do" dull! His energy and enthusiasm were contagious.' Just as well, because he had a plan to reshape the sanctuary and transform the whole building, and he relied on a great team who could complement his big ideas with the practical skills and hard graft to make them happen. His vision for the building was that it should be open as many hours of the day as possible, and used by as many people as possible. That ethos was reflected in glass entrance doors with the word 'Welcome' engraved in many languages. Among those who came through the café doors was

playwright David Greig. 'I really enjoyed the conversations we had over the happy ambient noise of different people coming together; vulnerable people and ladies who lunch, parishioners and artists, old folk looking for company and homeless folk looking for warmth. I loved being part of the buzz.' Peter developed the building as a successful Fringe venue, first with Assembly, and then in partnership with Toby Gough and others for The World @SGW. He was in his element at Festival time. In another life he would have loved to be an impresario, so you can imagine his delight at receiving a Herald Angel, and also a Jack Tinker award, for the success of SGW as a venue, and its programme.

Broughton St Mary's was Peter's third parish. He was locum for a year before being inducted in November 2018 and from the start felt at home in this welcoming, eclectic and inclusive congregation. I know how much he already meant to people here. He wanted to leave his footprint on this ground and depended on folk willing to catch the vision. Diane Chiselm: 'Peter was a lovely man. He ticked every box, not just as an inspiring minister, but a good friend.'

In all these places he preached prophetically, cared generously, riled folk frequently, played with kids riotously, washed dishes cheerfully, kept his opinions to himself rarely, and was in the thick of things always, creating space, naming the oppressive ideology of Empire, confronting power and its abuses, weaving stories to live by. Because what energised him was relationship, engagement, building bridges. Peter's idea of hell was a solitary silent retreat.

Which brings me to the Iona Community. My upbringing had been shaped around its places and people, its passions and politics. Iona kindled the spark of our connection. We joined the Community in 1984. It gave us maps and stories and companions on the long and rocky road Peter and I travelled together. In 2009 he was elected Leader – an enormous, impossible job in challenging times. I could speak of the organisational, management, strategic and public dimensions of the role. He organised the 2013 celebrations to mark 75th anniversary of the Community, 1450th anniversary of Columba on Iona, and visit of Irish President Michael D Higgins. He was the prime mover in planning, development and Capital Appeal fundraising for the current major refurbishment of the Abbey buildings. He

led worship, spoke at conferences, travelled widely as ambassador for the Community. He enjoyed those eight years, always conscious of the privilege and responsibility, though it was also costly. Building community was the beating heart of Peter's faith - The only Church he believed in or cared about had nothing to do with holy huddles or dogmas. It was embodied, inclusive, welcoming, affirming, healing and transformative presence in the world, with and for others. One Community member wrote: 'To me he was all that was good, deeply spiritual, fun and just glorious about the Iona Community. We loved him deeply'. Peter's energy and creativity always fed off human touch, friendship and support. It was most depleted when he felt their absence.

Woven through his working life were umpteen voluntary commitments – no wonder he was always running late. Mental health, LGBT rights, gender justice, fair trade, challenging global poverty and greed, CND, animals and the natural world...just some of the issues he cared enough about to act on. Solidarity with Palestine was a burning cause. AS convener of Palcrafts/Hadeel, which supports Palestinian producers in the West Bank and Gaza he was in the midst of organising a study tour to Palestine this April. Peter's political activism took him briefly into the SNP as a teenager, member of the Labour Party from 1983 till 2010. During the Indyref, he became an increasingly passionate and vocal supporter of independence. He was out with the local SNP campaign team at last year's general election. He revelled in upsetting apple carts, and certainly wasn't mellowing with age.

Intensely competitive, he had an insatiable appetite for watching and arguing about any sport, any time. In fact, most of Peter's appetites were large. He climbed Kilimanjaro, and we had many wonderful trips abroad (for work and pleasure) but most of the time we enjoyed the everyday pleasures of Scotland's beaches, islands and wild places. And we spent a lot of time together in the dark – at concerts, Filmhouse, Lyceum, Traverse... Thrilled in recent years to see Lorn on stage and screen. At this very time last year, we were raving in Glasgow's Sub Club after the premiere of Lorn's film Beats. He made himself at home anywhere, greatly enjoyed the company of family and friends.

He was my companion...And we were very good for each other. Of course there were hard times and crises along the way. But being a man who found God in the everyday, he

believed in the power of ordinary miracles. As Peter often preached, death and new life is the process in all creation, and from the depths of loss or despair we experience wee resurrections all the time. He could be drinking the dregs and still believe, against all reason, that the glass was brimming. He had faith in life, he was full of hope...he overflowed with love.

During an interview when he became IC Leader, Peter recalled that fateful Iona Easter when we met:

‘As dawn rose on Easter Sunday the black cloths were taken away, the music started up and there was suddenly colour and joy and we all danced outside. The sky was on fire with the Northern Lights – what an incredibly powerful symbol of resurrection, the coming of the light.’

The world is and quieter and less colourful without Peter, my merry dancer and my rock. But the love and the light endure.

Lesley Orr