

Hallowing Reflection

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“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.” Luke 10:1

Shortly we will hallow 10 new Members of the Iona Community. You, like the 72, are scattered, in towns and villages around the world, on pilgrimage with others, seeking and preaching the justice and peace of Christ’s Gospel.

Over these last two years as new Members, you have modelled not just the journey, but a way of journeying together. You have modelled a way which is compassionate and robust, which allows for many views, and which has mapped a way through time zones and physical limitations to craft community across the globe. I honour your wisdom for modelling this way of being community.

May you always find solidarity in this community whether it’s in 2s, in 10s, or as a group of 72, or 272!

But we are not here playing a game of community by numbers! Today marks a call to be companions with one another, to continue to find new ways, in community to stand together, and alongside the most marginalised in our world. And to be bold collectively to speak out for justice in love. This is the journey to which our Rule calls, commits and keeps us, as much as we keep it.

Whatever the number of our earthly communities, much larger is the number with whom we are bound together as God’s oikumene, ‘the whole inhabited earth’, God’s global household or community of faith.

We are not alone on this journey of a life of faith in action. In local Family Groups we accompany one another with tenderness and compassion. In Family Groups we account with one another, or ‘share deeply about the concerns and passions of our heart’. This involves an annual reaffirmation of what it means to live by this Rule, and this is the time of year when I with others have the privilege to read these letters.

One Member reflected in their letter this year on this common humanity that binds us together:

“At the front of my mind are the circumstances of our common humanity, the way we express our hopes and act upon them, that all can come together, having life, life in all its fullness.”

Another wrote of their ongoing frailty and their quiet determination to remain active from their armchair in prayer and discipleship.

Yet another wrote of their frustration that the Community sometimes seems too timid to speak truth to power.

Others spoke of the power of community “as a broad embrace of all sorts and conditions, good and bad, dark and light, healthy and unhealthy”. Yet others wrote about their struggles with the daily discipline of prayer in the face of their commitment to keep that door to contemplative practice open.

I know many Members still struggle with the impact of Covid. In the words of one Member: ‘what was continuous is no longer there.’ Some shared honestly about the contradictions of committing to peace while supporting the people of Ukraine in their needs for arms.

Struggles and paradoxes, doubts and faith nestle alongside us in the place of our common abiding.

These local family groups remain the heartbeat of our journeying together in community. It is here that the passions of the heart and the deep concerns for our world most vividly find expression. Our Family Groups, for all their frailty, remain the strongest expression of the way in which we journey together in community.

Scripture is full of stories of people finding strength for journeys, whether in groups of 2 or more. From the Israelites crossing the desert, to the holy family fleeing Bethlehem, from Jesus taking himself to the stillness of the desert; to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the journey to Calvary, being on the road to Emmaus. Each a journey; each a pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage, journeying together is familiar to us in the Iona Community. Whether it’s the weekly pilgrimage around Iona on a Tuesday, or the journey some of you have made to get here. On Iona we welcome many making a holy journey, or pilgrimage to sacred sites.

I was reminded recently by the retired academic and writer Ian Bradley of the inspiration of pilgrimage, or peregrination, from our Celtic past. Bradley has recently updated his book 'the Celtic Way' with the subtly reframed title 'Following the Celtic Way.'

In this new version he apologises for the romanticism with which he peppered the original book 25 years ago. He does however affirm that while we may have over-played the focus on environmentalism in the early Celtic Church, we have probably underplayed the centrality of pilgrimage to the Celtic Church between the fifth and seventh centuries. And Bradley is convinced that the increased interest in pilgrimage is one of the ways in which faith is being radically revived.

Brendan, Patrick, Columba, and Columbanus, says Bradley, all used the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe the Christian life. Rather than being a journey to holy places, pilgrimage for these early Christians was 'a costly form of witness involving perpetual exile from the comforts and distractions of home.' (so – no more flapjack on the machair then?)

In all this journeying together, it is of course less about the numbers of us travelling and, following the lead of our new Members, more about the way in which we travel.

So how then do we travel? Well, 'travel light', says scripture; 'travel with peace as your garment'; 'receive the nourishment that is offered.'

And so to the 10 to be hallowed, to those of you here onsite and online, to the thousands across the globe with whom we travel in holy pilgrimage, listen now for further glimpses from Jesus of the way to travel from the gospel of Matthew, in The Message translation, shared with me recently by a Member:

'Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythm of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

'Walk with me and work with me' – this is an invitation to listen out in stillness for God's prompt to set off; and be prepared to 'get stuff done.'

'Watch how I do it' – an invitation to follow, to imitate those who go before; learn and borrow. Learn the unforced rhythm of grace allow your natural rhythms and gifts to emerge – don't be afraid to show who you are

'I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you' – in our travelling, as we come to know one another, we will learn not to ask the impossible. We will learn to greet one another, the stranger as they are.

'Keep company with me' – let us share nourishment, break bread with one another, through all the ups and downs of the journey.

And so we will 'learn to live freely and lightly' – with one another, and with earth.

Let me close with these words from a hymn shared by one member in **their** with us letter – a reminder that whatever the journey we are on, we are not alone:

'Today I arise and Christ is beside me.
He walked through the dark to scatter new light.
Yes, Christ is alive, and beckons his people
to hope and to heal, resist and invite.'

Ruth Harvey, 10th June 2023.