

All Saints' Day

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44

Two weeks 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, one made it to Cambridge tonight, 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.

The story of Lazarus is one of the most layered stories in John's Gospel. A friend of Jesus, who never speaks and is never described; outshone in many ways by his sisters Martha and Mary, yet hospitable to the preaching carpenter from Nazareth on many occasions. He seems a nobody, except to his sisters, and to Jesus, who love him dearly. Lazarus dies. And Jesus weeps.

Jean Vanier writes:

"Jesus weeps in front of death; He touches the horror of death, the void created in hearts when someone who is loved dies...He lives a moment of intense emotion...this is the

only place in the gospel where Jesus reveals His deep, human emotions...here something is broken in Him.”

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. Last week Giles Fraser commented on Radio Four:

“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. Jesus wept in the face of death, but still had enough faith to ask the fellow-mourners in Bethany to take away the stone, and unbind Lazarus from the power of death, and let him go. Whether you take it as metaphor or literal, it is a powerful image of what faith does in the face of death. Still weeping, still hurting, still questioning, but just about enough faith to face death’s power, and move on, hopefully.

Emily Dickinson wrote:

*This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles -
Philosophy, don't know -
And through a Riddle, at the last -
Sagacity, must go -
To guess it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -
Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
Blushes, if any see -
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
And asks a Vane, the way -*

*Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -
Strong Hallelujahs roll -
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul -*

Not to trivialise death, or at least, the cause of dying. Who could trivialise the awfulness of the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue the other week, or the ongoing horror of Syria, Yemen, Gaza; or the cancer ward, or the mind unravelling in dementia; and any other place where Death stalks untamed. But at least, not to be cowed by death, and to know that it is not an end destination, but like Harry Potter and Dumbledore, see it as a station travelling beyond life, and stage on the way, and an adventure onwards.

On Iona, the Street of the Dead with its cobblestones set in grass (whose hands made and laid them?), end at the graveyard, but a pathway goes on, down to the sea. Jesus said to the grieving people of Bethany, “take away the stone... Unbind him, and let go”, the one held by death. 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.

In W H Auden’s long war-time poem, *For the time being*, he wrestles with the fact of death, and that we are not given a reason, but something else: a question, a promise, an open end that beckons us beyond time and space to something just beyond our grasp, but leading us onwards, and somehow, inexplicably for sure, offering a glimmer of hope.

*How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle.*

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

Amen

¹ Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John