

Ye Gates Lift Up Your Heads on High

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The worship is an indelible memory; it has remained a driving force for my preparation of liturgy and leadership of worship since 1965. I first saw the scene enacted in the Abbey Church on Iona (a small but religiously significant island off the West coast of Scotland). In Sunday worship when the time came for the celebration of The Lord's Supper, a procession emerged from the abbey crossing, led by the founder of the Iona Community, the Very Reverend George F. MacLeod.¹ He bore in his hands the chalice and paten. Behind him came a tray almost overflowing with freshly baked bread, and behind the bread were other communion servers carrying large crystal goblets filled with dark wine. The procession moved with dignity though the choir stalls toward the green marble altar under the abbey's east window shining with sunlight, as five hundred people sang, "Ye Gates lift up your heads on high, ye doors that last for aye, Be lifted up that so the King, of glory enter may."²

For the first time I was palpably aware of the presence of the Risen Christ in worship. The intentional symbol/reality was unmistakable: the One who hung the stars in space and spun the planets into orbit; the One who is seated at the right hand of God, praying for us, was here among us, present (though words cannot truly capture it, thank God) in bread, wine, and the gathered community of God's people. As we sang the Scottish paraphrase of Psalm 24, the elements were placed on the altar, the servers gathered behind, and the words of institution rang through the room: "This is my body, broken for you; this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for a multitude, for the forgiveness of sins." Who would ever doubt again the Word made flesh, dwelling among us? The Eucharistic Prayer which rose to heaven included a spoken *Sanctus* and a responsive *Agnus Dei*.

Never had I seen The Lord's Supper celebrated in such manner, nor as frequently as each Lord's Day. There was a youth communion service every Friday night: after the opening liturgy and the sermon, the same procession emerged from the abbey crossing. Only now we sang: "He's got the whole world in his hands, the whole world – and you and me sister, you and me brother . . ." Then I knew God in the Christ of all people, not just my kind, and the Christ for all nations—not only mine. I knew Christ as I had not before that time—Christ for the world, not as Someone we possess to take to others, but as One who is (as the Colossian letter declares) the image of the invisible God. . . .for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . and in him all things hold together (1:1 5- 17). Christ was not just for the world, but in the world already, even where the church had not yet shown its face. As Macleod reminded us regularly, "There is a cross in the nature of things."

When I went to Scotland to join the Iona Community after graduating from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (now Union-PSCE), I was initiated thoroughly into an incarnational theology, far removed from the spirituality of the church that had dominated my childhood and youth. Try as they certainly did, that theological separation of the physical from the spiritual (of soul salvation from bodily existence here and now) was not fully eradicated from our understanding by excellent seminary

professors, even in the heyday of the Civil Rights movement. And worship as a transforming experience was as negligible at Union as it was everywhere in the former PCUS; it was dutiful but rarely joyful. Sometimes in seminary there were responses in student led prayers, but the memorable event that signaled even slight risk was the occasional playing of “Never on Sunday” disguised as a Bach fugue for a chapel postlude.

In my student years, communion was not celebrated in chapel. After all, we were not a church, but an educational institution. Chapel worship was ‘Puritan plain’ – with extemporaneous prayers and solid biblical preaching and the singing of hymns. Liturgy was something Catholics used in worship; it was Episcopal at best, and certainly not encouraged for serious Presbyterians.

My own upbringing in an urban church was similar—hymns, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer were all in which the congregation was invited to participate. The Lord’s Supper was ‘administered’ (that word speaks volumes) four times a year. While I was brought up to be respectful of holy places and the sanctuary of the church, the churches of my childhood had none of the gravitas of a twelfth century abbey built by Benedictine monks, now presided over by a towering, world-renowned Scottish preacher who, with the eloquent, persistent, merciful, generous preaching of the gospel, denounced nuclear weapons, and promoted healing, prayer, social and political action, and the renewal of worship.

On Iona, in addition to Sunday and Friday communion services, there was morning and evening worship six days a week. We followed set liturgies, with time left within each service for extemporaneous prayer. I can sing from memory some of the hymns we repeated on alternate days of the weeks, a couple of which are included in our most recent Presbyterian hymnal. After about three weeks of repetitive prayers – ‘the same old, same old’ – I began to feel restive, and thought the worship boring. Then one day during my summer on the island, something came over me (was it the Holy Spirit’s work?) and the repetition ceased seeming trite or hackneyed. The prayers began to ring true, immediate; they became my prayers. What I realized was that to each worship service I was bringing my own daily experience: my life, my sorrow, joy, longing, and fears—and that with each different circumstance, the prayer took on new meaning. They were helping me speak to God.

Members of the community were listed in a small book called the *Miles Christi* (the way of Christ). We prayed for each other (in geographical clusters) each day. Five to twelve members were listed on a page, and at the bottom of each list of members several countries were named, until by the end of the month and the end of the book, every nation on earth was lifted before the throne of grace. Also listed in these pages were communities similar to the Iona Community: Taizé and several lay academies on the continent, indeed any Christian community of like purpose, people who were seeking new ways to touch the hearts of all, for the sake of the gospel.³ By using the *Miles Christi* I was being initiated into an understanding of the world church, of the ecumenical church, of the church as God’s holy people out of every nation.

On Iona I made a startling discovery. In Americus, Georgia, a couple of hundred miles from my home, was something called the Koinoinia Community, an interracial fellowship for which we prayed once a month on a remote Scottish island. The founder of Koinoinia was Clarence Jordan, a Baptist who had studied at Union Seminary in Virginia.

The worship of the Iona Community drew on Wesleyan, Anglican, and Roman Catholic sources. In the early days of the Community's founding, the Church of Scotland, ministers and laity, were critical of MacLeod's trying to "Catholicize" the Kirk with his funny papist ideas, his responsive prayers, and his encouragement of the congregation's response to prayers in public worship with a loud "Amen." George would reply to his critics, humorously, polemically, and consistently: liturgy is the work of the people—not only of the preacher and the choir.

Every Wednesday night there was a healing service. Requests came from all over the world seeking prayers, from churches wherever George MacLeod had traveled and preached after the end of World War II throughout the 1960s and 70s. Names came from cities in Africa and Asia; prayers were sought for persons in Australia and South Africa, prayers for people with every kind of illness and disease.

At the healing service, the last act of worship before the hymn and benediction was prayer with the laying on of hands. Kneeling cushions in front of the communion table filled with those who came forward. After the custom of the Apostles, the worship leader would lay his hands on each person's head and ask God to heal her of all that harmed her in body, mind, and spirit.

At first this was unnerving. The only time I had seen anything inhabiting the same universe was at an Oral Roberts revival I attended on a dare one summer during my first fieldwork experience. The atmosphere was manipulative, and at first, people at the Roberts' revival, held in a tent on the river bank in Roanoke, Virginia, were asked to raise their hands, and then as the music played and the cajoling increased, they were asked to stand up, then to step out of their chairs into the aisle, then to step forward to the front, and finally they were asked to kneel.

On Iona the service was not emotionally manipulative; it was reserved, modest, and suffused with quiet reverence. Sometimes there were tears. Before people were invited forward, at every healing service, George MacLeod provided the same explanation: "that we do this at the invitation of our Lord. Our actions are neither opposed to—nor meant to be a substitute for—the practice of medicine. The church rejoices in all healing, wherever it takes place, in Communist Russia, in Communist China, in a hospital in Edinburgh, in a village hut in Africa. All healing comes from God and is the work of God's mercy in all creation. But Jesus told his disciples to pray and to lay their hands upon the sick, and in the mystery of faith, and in the tradition of the holy, universal church, trusting his love and power to heal; we do this in obedience to him." Then MacLeod would read the verses from the "long ending" of the Gospel of Mark that include the words about the handling of poisonous serpents, a text before which most of us are inclined to hide our faces. After the Scripture, the suppliants would come forward and kneel.

In 1965, I knew nothing of Paul Ricoeur, or of his understanding of a naive reading of the text. Nor had I been asked to take canonical criticism with any seriousness at all. I was an Enlightenment graduate of a seminary renowned for some of the best biblical historical/critical scholarship in the world, a seminary famous for its struggle against fundamentalism. What I had learned to deplore in exegesis courses was a simple spirituality that took a text at face value, because such simplicity had been used to justify segregation from which the South (and the nation) was even then painfully emerging. Here was a simple reading of a hard text—not ignored, but read (within the mystery of faith) alongside the known facts of medical science and healing.

It would take thirty-three years before that text came alive for me in another way – in Africa, in discussing demon possession with African pastors. They answered my questions with kindness but were astonished at my naiveté. I had told them that exorcism was not something we understood in mainline churches back home. They said they were sorry for my inexperience. There was acceptance of modern medicine and of the use of psychiatrists in Ghana for people who are mentally ill. “But we also have exorcists at work in the church; there is a difference between mental illness and demon possession. Do you think evil gains no foothold in America?”

Finally, in the matter of healing and worship, each week we were given to understand that there is no sharp distinction drawn between social healing and personal healing. They are cut from the same cloth. Wherever there is personal illness, there are often social ills: low wages, oppression of workers, improper sewage systems, chemical spills, poisoned water supplies, and faulty food production. It was unthinkable that Christian people should be snatching individuals (or the souls of individuals) out of a diseased community while leaving others to languish in the conditions that brought on the illness.

Thursday night in the abbey there was a commitment service designed especially for the induction of new members into the community but also expanded to welcome those who wanted to re-dedicate themselves to the work and worship of God, and to faithful discipleship. It, too, involved kneeling on cushions on the stone floor of the abbey. As people knelt, praying, the leader of worship moved in among those kneeling, laying his hands upon them, and quoting verses of Scripture (“Do you love me? Then feed my sheep” or “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you” or “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these . . . you have done it to me”). Here all at once was something personal, addressed directly to you—for you, about you—to nourish and engage you. At the same time one never lost the corporate dimension, that we were members of a world-wide fellowship of persons who had committed ourselves to the ‘four pillars’ of Iona’s mission to the church and the world: ministries of healing and social/political justice, the renewal of worship and of prayer – individually and in community. We held each other accountable.

We prepared for the commitment service by rehearsing St. Patrick’s Breastplate, a hymn of great majesty that rejoices in the glories of creation and redemption while the singers bind themselves to “the strong name of the Trinity.” Just before the final stanza is an interlude that includes these words: “Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me . . . Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.” That interlude is now standard in many prayer books; the hymn can be found in the 1982 Episcopal hymnal. It comes out of the Celtic tradition in which the Iona Community was born, and lives, and still has much of its being, a tradition that sanctifies both the redemption of the common life and the thunderous glories of creation displayed on the rocky coasts of an island nation.

In that hymn, at the core of the commitment service, was the power of the incarnation suffusing all nature, made personal in the fellowship of saints. We were not to be withdrawn from a world too tempting and full of suffering to confront; we were rejoicing, underneath the brokenness of this world, in God’s true reality, which would not fail us. The brokenness is being made whole by the blood of the Lamb who invites his disciples to follow on the way to the cross—and beyond the cross to the New Jerusalem.

When I was invited to write this article for the *Journal*, I was asked to reflect upon how my experience in worship on Iona in 1965 and my membership in the Iona Community had shaped my ministry in the PC (USA). I have concentrated on the worship, and I hope that the recounting of experiences has awakened in you the contrast between what I was reared in—faithful though my people, my teachers, and pastors were—and what set my soul singing long ago on Iona.

I returned to Virginia and to worship that was in most respects what I had left behind. I found much of it spiritually suffocating. Worship at a synod meeting in 1968 where communion was served in the First Presbyterian Church in Staunton, Virginia, was a sad example. There was no Eucharistic prayer and certainly no *Sanctus* or *Agnus Dei*. The words of institution were mumbled, and then came a prayer that lasted less than thirty seconds—or so it seemed—and mentioned neither the sacrifice of Christ nor the needs of the world. The service managed to be somber and boring, but not only because it lacked the majesty and simplicity of Iona worship. It reflected nothing of the world around us, for which Christ died and in which his holy presence might also be discovered—binding, loosing, lifting up, consoling. And yet from that same synod meeting, carloads of people departed to Washington to join the Poor Peoples' March. I cite that example because it characterizes so much of the worship that nourished me, especially with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist. On Iona and in the parishes where Iona members were pastors, the form of worship reflected, even then, an emphasis on mission, and upon the world's suffering and lostness, for which Christ died. Iona was never meant to be a place of escape from the world's needs, but a place of refreshment for mission, evangelism, and social justice.

If people know the Iona Community today, apart from the thousands who have visited the island, they know it through the words and music of John Bell, a member of the community, now a fellow of the Royal College of Music and one of the most prolific and influential hymn writers in the English speaking world since the Wesleys. In addition, Bell has (through Iona worship and in workshops internationally) 'channeled' music from South America, South Africa, and nations all over the developing world, into the mainstream worship in the West. Bell has traveled more than any other community member since George MacLeod, and has taken the Iona gospel of the wholeness of salvation to many lands and places. He was selected as convener of the Church of Scotland committee that produced a revision of the Book of Common Order in 1994. In the preface Bell writes:

Whatever else God call us to, we are called to worship, to do so together, and to do so in the promised company of Jesus Christ. It is in worship that our lives are expressed before God and informed and converted by God's Word. It is in worship that through song, prayer, and preaching, our theology is formed, our discipleship encouraged, and our spirits nourished. In worship we reach out to touch the hem of Christ's garment and find that, instead of touching the hem, we are being offered the grace of God by word of mouth and gift of hand.⁴

Those words capture what I found—and fell headlong into—on Iona in 1965. If I had now to say what really led me there—the suggestion of a professor, the invitation

of the Iona Community, and a sense of adventure—yes, all of that. But I would also confess—and witness to—that somehow deep inside I knew that what I had learned from the church in which I had been raised, and which was an incredible blessing and foundation for life and Ministry of the Word, was also, to some extent, stunted and impoverished. My heart was reaching out for something to live into, and what found me was worship of almost indescribably beauty.

Bell also writes words with which to close this essay, words that speak with power to every pastor and congregation where there is conflict over or even conversation about worship—ancient, modern, traditional, lively—or where there is longing for worship that is grounded—faithful to the church’s past and yet open to the Spirit’s leading.

In worship we engage as the Body of Christ in an encounter with almighty God. This engagement should never be a rambling incoherence of well-meaning phrases and gestures. It should exhibit that deliberate and historical patterning of sentiment and expression which befits the meeting of the sons and daughters of earth with the King of Kings. Further, in public worship. . . it is important that the whole congregation sense a purpose and direction in their representation before God. They should never be placed in the position of being spectators at a performance which is entirely dependent upon the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual whims of its leaders. This in no way precludes the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. The enemy of the Spirit is not form, but anarchy.⁵

In such a time as ours when so much is changing around us, we who lead worship regularly are privileged to bring each Lord’s Day before the people of God our “deliberate and historical patterns” which are as old as the words of institution and the Eucharistic prayer of Hippolytus, and as new as the most recent African “Amen.”

When George MacLeod walked briskly around Iona, or met with guests and new members, talking about his experiment on Iona and about the renewal of worship, he often quoted John A. Mackay, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, who said in the early 1950s: “By the beginning of the next century, the church will manifest itself in two forms: a mature Pentecostalism and a truly Reformed Catholicism.” Some of what John Mackay foretold, which has largely come to pass, had its origin in the worship of the Iona Community.

Every Lord’s Day, may we who lead worship and preach be lifted up so that the King of Glory may come in.⁶

Notes

1. When I first knew George MacLeod, he was a former moderator of the Church of Scotland and a Chaplain to the Queen, thus the ‘very’ before the Rev’d.

2. *Scottish Psalter and Church Hymnary*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929).

3. From a phrase “new ways to touch the hearts of all” from *Morning Prayer in the Abbey*.

4. *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1994), ix.

5. *Ibid.*, x.

6. I was greatly assisted in writing this article by *Lift Your Hearts on High, Eucharistic Prayer in the Reformed Tradition* by Ronald P. Byars (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).