

Prayer in a Time of Crisis:

A Personal Reflection from Scotland

An Iona Community Perspective—“Heaven in ordinarie”¹

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This invitation—to offer some thoughts on prayer in this “time of crisis” reflecting the Iona Community’s experience—presents me with a huge challenge, both because of the multifaceted nature of the current situation (both national, in the UK as in the US, and international) and because, as I shall explain later, prayer has always been a struggle for me both in terms of personal discipline² and of leading public worship with honesty and integrity.

Prayer, in its personal and public form, is the bedrock of faith and spirituality. Prayer and worship have always been central to the life and activities of the Iona Community since its founding in 1938. George MacLeod,³ the Community’s founder and first Leader (1938-67), who composed wonderful prayers on which he is said to have taken even more time than on sermon-preparation said, “You can’t get out of touch with God every moment that you live, for the simple reason that God is Life: not religious life, nor church life but the whole life we now live in the flesh.”⁴ The Community’s prayers reflect our shared values, priorities, and commitment, our view that faith and spirituality embrace and call us to engage with all aspects of life. Prayer and politics, work, and worship are thus seamlessly integrated, and the prayers are inevitably and invariably contextual and topical. Over the years, aspects of the Community’s liturgical approach (constantly evolving, essentially participative, inclusive, contextual, ecumenical) have been absorbed into the mainstream of the churches’ life in Scotland and elsewhere—e.g., songs from the world church; congregational responses; use of actions and movement, candles, silence, symbols and artefacts. And the Community has changed and grown, but the original vision, thrust, and purpose have remained constant—the commitment to the pursuit of justice and peace, the building of inclusive community, and the renewal of worship.

During any “time of crisis” prayer and worship tend to take on even greater significance, become more particularly focussed. In the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the usual pattern of the Community’s worship and prayers was adapted and the content geared towards current concerns and priorities. In Iona Abbey, whereas it is normal for guests, staff, and visitors to gather each day at 9 am and 9 pm Monday to Saturday with a Communion service at 10.30 am on Sundays, these arrangements, already affected by the closure of the Abbey’s guest accommodation from 2018 to 2020 for major refurbishment, were changed significantly during the “lockdown.” A small resident staff group maintained the daily pattern, but, as with so many local congregations and other organisations, new online possibilities were explored and developed. The Iona Abbey morning service, based on the Community’s “Office” but with elements changing each day, was made available through the Community’s website. Similarly the Tuesday evening Prayers for Healing was accessible online each week, linked to the work of the Community’s Prayer Circle, a long-standing

world-wide network of intercession whose work, embracing social and individual needs, acquired additional impetus as the range and urgency of global emergencies increased.

As the online services were developed, so their reach extended significantly. In early June 2020, over 650 people, mostly in the UK but a good number in the US, shared in a service of welcome and blessing for Ruth Harvey as she took over as Leader of the Community, and for seven New Members on completing the two-year joining process. A few days later on St Columba's Day (9 June), 350 shared in the annual service of recommitment for the Community's Associate Members. Each Tuesday evening during the "lockdown" up to early October, and then monthly thereafter, around 100 Members, together with some Associate Members, gathered to say the Community's "Office" together and then in smaller "break-out groups" to share concerns; and it became evident how important this experience of solidarity and connectedness was to everyone, not least those in the US, coping with and living through the pandemic, the protests, and social unrest following the George Floyd murder and the lead-up to and aftermath of the Presidential election, while we in the UK are having to cope with the fiasco and social and economic consequences of Brexit.

Members and many Associate Members meet together regularly in local Family Groups to account to one another for keeping of the communal discipline (including our use of money and time and our carbon footprint), to pray together, and to discuss Community business and topical issues. These meetings normally take place monthly, but many groups, through the "time of crisis," chose to meet more often using Zoom, and this proved to be a helpful and supportive experience. Arrangements for the Community's plenary meetings, when members of the Community gather generally for worship and discussion, usually three times a year, also had to change: the annual business meeting for reports and elections had to be conducted online; and owing to the Government's "distancing" and travel restrictions, instead of the planned Community Week on Iona in mid-October, a special "Community Month" was held during November, enabling wider access to online daily worship and programme sessions focussing on the Community's concerns. As the "lockdown" has continued, the Community's activities online have been developed accordingly in a programme entitled "The Iona Way" that has included series of Bible studies and the live streaming from Iona Abbey of reflective worship on Christmas morning and a Hogmanay vigil at the turn of the year.

Important parts of the Community's continuing life are the Wild Goose Resource Group, who hold workshops, speak at conferences, produce a rich flow of hymns, prayers, and liturgies, and our publishing arm Wild Goose Publications, whose catalogue includes a wealth of material for worship and prayers in both printed and download form, most of it produced by Community Members and Associate Members. This material was well used last year, and an anthology of prayers and poems, *Voices out of Lockdown*, written early during the time of crisis by Community Members and Associate Members, is remarkable for its vigour, creativity, and diversity of material. The book's editor, Jan Sutch Pickard, a gifted poet and liturgist and formerly Warden of Iona Abbey and vice-president of the UK Methodist Conference, in her preface describes the collection as "an example of our engaged spirituality. It explores shared experiences and asks tough questions. Faith for these writers takes different forms but doesn't find easy answers."⁵ Then in December, a further book was published,

How Shall We Pray This Morning? For What Shall We Pray This Night? a month of worship resources for a time of pandemic, by Thom Shuman, one of the Associate Members based in Columbus, Ohio. The monthly *e-Coracle*, an online version of the Community's thrice-yearly magazine, contains short articles and news about the Community's concerns, and last year's editions contained numerous prayers, reflections, and moving accounts of the "lockdown" experience of Members and Associate Members.

The Community has always said that just as important as our work on Iona, and as what our staff there and working from our mainland base in Glasgow do "on our behalf," or when Members act collectively, is what each of us does locally in living out our shared purpose and commitment. Community Members and Associate Members, as part of our Rule, pray daily for one another and for the Community's concerns, including "the needs of the world," on the basis of a monthly cycle. The different rhythm of life under lockdown gave Members added chance, in their personal devotional life, to develop awareness and experience of the contemplative approach to prayer as "self-surrender." Members are actively engaged in leadership, many through ordained ministry, others through worship and pastoral care, in the life of local congregations of a range of different denominations. Over the past year, when church buildings were closed, the traditional arrangements for Sunday mornings suspended, and distancing restrictions prevented people meeting together, Members developed creative ways, primarily online and through social media, of keeping in touch with people and providing spiritual and pastoral support and encouragement through making available regular reflections and prayers, mitigating any sense of isolation, promoting connectedness, and ensuring that the sense of community was not lost.

Each month for almost a year now Peter Millar, previously a Church of Scotland minister in south India and formerly an Abbey Warden who himself has produced several books of prayers, emailed world-wide a much appreciated reflection with his own prayers and insights interspersed with helpful quotations from other sources; and these were collected in a beautiful little book published in Advent, *Candle in the Window; Reflections to Encourage Us in Tough Times*.⁶ And each day for several months earlier in the pandemic, one of the Community's New Members, Marvyn Mackay, used WhatsApp to "post" a couple of Wild Goose Resource Group songs, accompanied by a short reflection and the relevant reference from the Community's cycle of daily prayer.

Ruth Harvey, shortly after taking over as Leader of the Iona Community last June, in the keynote address at an on-line meeting of our sister Corrymeela Community which seeks reconciliation in Northern Ireland, spoke of the need for hope, vision, and the search for new ways of belonging together in difficult and challenging situations. Using the Chinese pictogram for "crisis," which combines two separate symbols for "danger" and "opportunity," she emphasised that these times, however dark and demanding, provide the chance to dream of and plan for a better, fairer future, a different world with different priorities. These themes have also been picked up and explored publicly by other Members.

David Coleman, Environmental Chaplain to Scotland's Eco-Congregation Network, who leads worship in many different churches and other settings, said in relation to times of fear and uncertainty, "Crisis is actually the mode in which Christianity,

and Christian prayer, makes sense.” And he described prayer as a means of living with fear, not denying it: of becoming reconciled to mortality, not in seeking repair, recovery, or return to “the good old days” but instead finding hope not in the illusion of an omnipotent, all-controlling God but in “experiencing rather the presence of God in the darkness.” John Bell of the Wild Goose Resource Group conducted the BBC Radio 4 Sunday morning worship on 28 June as part of a series of programmes entitled “ReThink,” when speakers from a wide range of different fields envisioned a new post-crisis future. Very effectively and creatively through scripture, song, reflection, and music, John encouraged and inspired listeners to look beyond present difficulties and restrictions to reimagine a new future—better than and different from the past—and to play a part in bringing it about.

Prayer is a journey into mystery, an orientation as much as an activity, a potentially transforming encounter with “the beyond in our midst.” In and through prayer we seek to deepen and strengthen our connection and connectedness with God—the ultimate reality beyond our comprehension yet ever in our midst, the creative power bursting with potential, to which we are given the opportunity to open ourselves, respond and, as it were, “plug in.”⁷ And our prayers are rooted also in and threaded through with our connectedness with and concern for the world and all its joys and needs, and with others, reflecting that we are part of what Barbara Brown Taylor has so tellingly described as “an infinite web of relationship,”⁸ beyond time and place.

Prayer emanates both from the sense of wonder, adoration, and gratitude and from despair, helplessness, and a recognition of frailty (hence the not infrequent resort of “atheists” to prayer *in extremis*). And prayer is permeated with, perhaps even depends on, hope—for our world and ourselves. So a time of crisis provides, alongside dissatisfaction with the present, the opportunity for reassessment, reorientation, recalibration, recommitment to a vision of a radically new, better, fairer future, to the possibility of doing things differently—personally, socially, politically.

And critically prayer is rooted in, reflects, expresses, and is constrained by our understanding of God. In this respect, the leader of public prayer, whether ordained preacher or “lay-person,” bears an awesome responsibility. As I have grown older, while in some respects my religious and theological convictions have become stronger, I have increasing difficulty in articulating certain aspects of my faith, particularly concerning Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. My belief in God as present reality, the ever-trustworthy epitome of grace and truth, is stronger than ever. However, I no longer find it helpful to understand or address “God” in personal terms, or to regard Jesus as more than the conclusive embodiment of God in history,⁹ “pioneer and perfecter of faith,” whose life provides a model of “the Way” towards fulfilment of identity and fullness of life for all; and I struggle with the notion of God as agent “working his purpose out,”¹⁰ as the familiar hymn puts it.

Owing to our limitations of language and comprehension, the fullness of God cannot be encapsulated in any single image or expression: Brian Wren’s wonderful hymn *Bring Many Names*¹¹ covers a range of personal metaphors—male and female, old and young; but I have come to prefer something like “love-force” or “life-energy” (more dynamic than Tillich’s “ground of our being”), while recognising that this is too abstract for the liking of many. And increasingly I struggle to understand the concept of the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. Although I am bound to accept the element of agency and will and design in the initial act of creation (in other words

that we humans and the world we live in are not simply the result of some cosmic evolutionary accident), I cannot reconcile an all-powerful, loving God with the suffering and need in the world and the tragedies that afflict the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Pain and suffering remain a terrible reality, an apparently insoluble mystery. The hymn tells us *God moves in a mysterious way*,¹² but if God is sovereign and caring, why does God allow it to happen and not intervene to prevent misfortune and change things for the better? And what sense can we make of the idea of God “hearing” or “responding” to prayer?

So I have come to see and understand the loving purpose and continuing activity of God in terms of the creative force that brought the world into being, incarnated in the life of Jesus, pointing the way to the fullness of life that is the desire and destiny of every human heart, present still in the power of the Spirit, supportive, disturbing, promising new life, with us through thick and thin, from which nothing can separate us. But this Spirit-power is essentially latent, needing to be tapped and released, presence rather than agent: God is—I AM WHO I AM.¹³ God does not do (in the sense of initiating) things other than through human agency: as the famous prayer of St Teresa of Avila puts it, God has no body, hands, feet, or eyes on earth but ours; our unstinting calling and responsibility is to be not only witnesses but also channels of God’s love and compassion. Thus in the time of pandemic, in the churches’ prayers, there was acknowledgement of the ways and places in which God’s loving purpose was “working”—for instance through the scientists trying to develop the vaccine, the staff of the intensive care wards, the care-home workers, the dustbin-collectors, the good neighbours, the points at which more enlightened political leaders expressed and reflected the hopes and fears of the nation.

The form and formulation of our Christian creeds and confessions—and prayers too—stem from the human compulsion to make sense of and describe our experience of and relationship with the divine and the tendency (perhaps inevitable) to project on to the divine—in, through and from which they originate—human qualities, attributes, and ideals. The word *person* is derived from the Latin *persona* originally meaning an actor’s mask; so the persons of the Trinity come to be seen as “masks,” aspects or manifestations of God—God in the beginning, personified as “Creator”; God in history, incarnate in Jesus, as “Redeemer,” “Saviour,” or “Liberator,” trailblazer of “the Way”; God in the here-and-now, in the power and presence of the Spirit.

The perpetual challenge to those who are called to preach and lead prayers is how to do so with personal and intellectual integrity while exercising sensitive and helpful pastoral ministry—how to, at one and the same time, as has been said, “comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.” There is always going to be a gap between the state of our societies, our own personal lives and the vision of the kingdom, God’s shalom: within the community of faith, we have to live and cope with continuing “eschatological dissatisfaction”!¹⁴

The traditional pattern of prayers within public worship, flowing from adoration and approach to confession and supplication, then to thanksgiving and intercession, expresses this discontent—with the state of our lives and the life of the world—and moves into concern and commitment, seeking and hoping for healing and wholeness, the overcoming of barriers and divisions, the attainment of peace and justice, the fulfilment of our hopes and dreams. But I have come to ask myself increasingly if the customary form and language of our prayers (and of so many of our hymns) does

not tend to imply and encourage the belief that only God can bring this about, that somehow if we pray hard and often enough, God will sort it out? And accordingly our role and responsibility is reduced, marginalised, even excluded altogether. At the same time I acknowledge the force of the old truisms that we should “be careful what we pray for...” and that prayers are always “answered” but not in the way we may expect. And I accept that within this realm of unfathomable mystery, uncertainty, and risk are of the essence, there are depths of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual experience beyond explanation and articulation, and ultimately it all boils down to trusting, feeling, and indeed knowing in a profound way that “all manner of thing shall be well.”¹⁵

So in both preaching and preparing prayers for public worship, I seek to be true to my own convictions—with a message of vision and hope, but also provisionality rather than certainty, encouragement to “live with the questions” rather than expect conclusive answers. But I recognise too that our worship and prayers are offered within the community of faith, with its age-old, well-hallowed forms and traditions, and that among the congregation there will be a wide range of sincerely held beliefs, needs, aspirations, and expectations as well as views that I may regard as misguided. So I look to produce prayers that respect and are helpful to others but do not involve compromise or collusion on my part—a challenging task. It is perhaps especially in the prayers of supplication and petition and those of concern for others (intercession, the “prayers of the people”) that the challenge is strongest. Adoration, confession, and thanksgiving tend to be more straightforward! So far as possible I do not use personal images of God or address prayers to Jesus; I tend not to use terms such as “Lord” or “King,” but I find I cannot—nor would wish to—avoid attributing to God human qualities and values (e.g., “God of generosity and grace”) of which indeed God may be regarded as epitome and source; so themes of grace, hope, and trust are prominent.

In the prayers of confession and concern, I usually leave space for the congregation, whether silently or openly, to offer their own prayers, and, in the intercessions, without introducing a “shopping-list” or geographical tour of places of suffering and need, it is helpful, as well as naming individuals if appropriate, to focus on issues and situations that may be topical and urgent—appealing to conscience perhaps and raising awareness but without moralising through veiled social commentary. Most importantly, in framing petitions and intercessions, I try to avoid explicitly calling on God to intervene or act. While our prayers are directed towards God—are offered to God, take place in, with, and through God—they are essentially, whether individually or communally, an expression of our commitment and solidarity, our hopes, aspirations, and intentions despite our frailty and vulnerability: we are seeking “to transform the world not by getting power over it but by entrusting ourselves to God in prayer,”¹⁶ thus to change not God but ourselves—strengthened in and by God’s grace and by the support of our companions within the community of faith and beyond.

So the verbs in the prayer will be expressed in subjunctive rather than imperative form (to avoid implying God’s agency or requesting God to act)—“may our hearts be open,” “let justice roll down like waters,” etc. And yet alongside this, I am sufficiently conservative and conformist to repeat without difficulty the parts of the Lord’s Prayer that ask God to “do things” (“Give us today our daily bread,” “Forgive us our sins,” etc) and happily to share the words of the Iona Community’s “Office”—“Move among

us, O God, give us life; let your people rejoice in you. Make our hearts clean within us; renew us in mind and in spirit. Give us again the joy of your help; with your spirit of freedom sustain us.”¹⁷

At a time of crisis, where feelings of uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability, even despair are running high, there is inevitably a heightened urgency about our prayers. Within the United Kingdom, under last year’s Covid-19 “lockdown,” churches were closed on 23 March. Following representations, particularly from the Roman Catholic church, church buildings were reopened initially for “private prayer” and funerals with limited numbers (but many Protestant churches remained closed along with mosques, synagogues, and temples of other faiths); and it was only some weeks later that buildings could be opened for public worship and community activities, but even then subject to strict “physical distancing” restrictions. During the “shutdown,” churches throughout the United Kingdom responded very creatively by arranging on-line services, whether pre-recorded or “Zoomed,” meetings, workshops, Bible studies, and social events, and seeking, through social media, increased use of web-sites and phone calls, to ensure that contacts were maintained and pastoral needs attended to.

Ruth Harvey, looking to the Iona Community’s future, has put it well in saying “We are known worldwide as a religious community that prays. And we have within our midst some fabulous prayers, leaders, reflectors. This is such a rich part of our history, and of our present life.... How do we bind ourselves together while also freeing us to explore and experiment in prayer?” This is the continuing challenge that faces us all. During these past months, we have had the opportunity to reappraise our priorities and also to reflect on social values and the future wellbeing of society. In this experience, we may have had the chance too to think about the nature, content, and transformative potential of our prayers—to deepen and strengthen our connectedness with God and the people and world around us, to learn anew to trust in the eternal mystery of God’s irresistible grace and steadfast love. Timothy Beaumont’s version of Psalm 91 (which I am always happy to sing despite the personal imagery!) sums it up so effectively:

Safe in the shadow of the Lord
possessed in love divine,
I trust in him,
I trust in him
And meet his love with mine¹⁸

Notes

1 “Prayer” (1) by the English priest-poet George Herbert (1593-1633), *The Poems of George Herbert* (London: The World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 1961), 44.

2 Members of the Iona Community are committed to a four-fold Rule, the first element of which specifies “daily prayer, worship with others, and regular engagement with the Bible and other material which nourishes us.” For information about the Iona Community (a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship) see www.iona.org.uk; also of interest may be Ron Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1997), Norman Shanks, *Iona—God’s Energy: the Vision and Spirituality of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2009), and Kathy Galloway, *Keeping the Rule* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2011). I am indebted to those members of the Community who, in response to my request, provided me with their own reflections on their experience of “prayer in the midst of a pandemic and national crisis.”

- 3 The Very Rev Lord MacLeod of Fuinary (1895-1992). See also Ron Ferguson, *George MacLeod* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001); *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory: Iona Prayers by Rev George F MacLeod* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1985); Ron Ferguson (ed), *Daily Readings with George MacLeod* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001).
- 4 From “Sermon on Prayer, July 1955,” Ron Ferguson (ed), *Daily Readings with George MacLeod* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001), 22.
- 5 Jan Sutch Pickard (ed), *Voices out of Lockdown* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2020), 7.
- 6 Peter Millar, *Candle in the Window; Reflections to Encourage Us in Tough Times* (published privately, 2020), obtainable by contacting ionacottage@hotmail.com.
- 7 In his introduction to *In the gift of this new day: Praying with the Iona Community*—Neil Paynter (ed) (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2015), 16. Ian Fraser, a Community member with a world-wide reputation within the ecumenical movement who died in 2018 aged 100, quoting the words of his mentor Professor John Baillie, said prayer is “*the practice of the presence of God*; living with the awareness that God is at hand; making ourselves available, both as persons and communities, to be so conformed to the mind of Christ that we pray and work for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven.”
- 8 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Cowley Publications, 2000), 73-74, quoted in Richard Rohr’s *Daily Meditation*, 25 June 2020.
- 9 I no longer find the approach that identifies Jesus as “best friend” or “companion” satisfactory: it strikes me as over-familiar and uncomfortably sentimental. However, I recognise and respect the fact that for many, this is an essential part of their personal faith.
- 10 *Ancient to Modern Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship*, 646; *Church Hymnary* (4th edition), 235.
- 11 *Presbyterian Hymnal*, 760; *Church Hymnary* (4th edition), 134.
- 12 *Presbyterian Hymnal*, 369; *Church Hymnary* (4th edition), 158.
- 13 Exodus 3.14.
- 14 This evocative, almost onomatopoeic phrase was, I think, first used by the English theologian R.H. Preston, but I have been unable to trace its precise source.
- 15 Mother Julian of Norwich; T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1963), 223.
- 16 Gilbert Markus, “Ring out your prayer: early Irish hand-bells” quoted in Paynter (ed), *Ibid*, 117.
- 17 *Iona Community Prayer Book 2020*; The Iona Community, *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2017), 63.
- 18 *Presbyterian Hymnal* 595; *Church Hymnary* (4th edition) 55.