



GREAT FROM THE
PRAYERS
IONA COMMUNITY

SELECTED BY NEIL PAYNTER



WILD GOOSE PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I went to Iona Abbey I couldn't get in! I'd just arrived on the island to volunteer with the Iona Community for four months. I'd walked over to the Abbey from the MacLeod Centre to go to the evening service. I wanted to see what it was like – what I'd got myself into. But I couldn't even get in the door. The wild Iona wind was blowing in such a way that the door was sealed shut. At first I thought it was locked: *Typical of a church*, I thought. I pulled and pulled, and yanked on the heavy door, but couldn't get in. It seemed like a sign. A sign I wasn't welcome, that this church, too, 'wasn't for the likes of me'. *Oh well*, I thought, and walked down to the North Beach. Clouds were roiling across the huge sky, the wind was spirited – the whole landscape felt alive ...

I went back the next day for the morning service, and entered the Abbey, and heard this great prayer, by Kate McIlhagga:

The shadow of the dove

When dawn's ribbon of glory around the world returns
and the earth emerges from sleep –

The shadow of the dove is seen
as she flies across moor and city.

Over the warm breast of the earth she skims,
her shadow falling on
the watcher in the tower,
the refugee in the ditch,
the weary soldier at the gate.

The shadow of peace
falls across the all-night sitting of a council,
across the tense negotiators
around a table.

The shadow of hope
is cast across the bars of a hostage cell
filling with momentary light
rooms tense with conflict,
bringing a brief respite,
a sliver of gold across the dark.

She flies untiring
across flooded fields,
across a city divided by hate and fear,
across a town wreathed in smoke.

The shadow of reconciliation,
the dove of peace
with healing in her wings,
is felt and seen and turned towards
as she makes righteousness shine

like the dawn,
the justice of her cause
like the noonday sun.

*Holy Spirit of love,
bring healing, bring peace.*¹

I couldn't believe I was hearing such beautiful, relevant, poetic words in a church. It really surprised me at the time. Words that addressed justice and peace issues in the world and that touched the heart and soul. It made me curious. These words, and others like them, became a way in.

There's a line in a Dick Gaughan song about Pastor Jack Glass:

*I don't know if Jack believed in God, it's kind of hard to tell
He never mentioned heaven much, he seemed obsessed by Hell.*²

That's how I felt about the Church, before I came to Iona.

Whenever I went to church back home there was little, or nothing, in the services about the wonder and joy of life – or just the basic mystery of being alive, under the great changing sky, on the good, rich earth. And little, or nothing, about justice and peace issues. Church felt lifeless, irrelevant and smug. God was judgemental, and so was his boring son, Jesus Christ; and when he wasn't being judgemental and life-denying, he was sappy-

sweet. The language was archaic, and the rhythm, stiff and dreary. There was a dusty, fusty, sometimes sterile smell coming from something, a dead religion maybe, being covered up.

What's the point of going to church if you don't find nourishment? Who would give a stone to a child who asks for bread? You might as well go find God, Christ and the Holy Spirit down on the North Beach. I was so hungry for mystery, wonder, community, challenge – Life – when I came to Iona. I was so hungry for food that would strengthen and inspire me to reach out and love.

And that's what I found in the community and worship there: Bread for body, mind and soul. Life in all its fullness. (*John 10:10*)

Not that there wasn't space for confession in the liturgy; that's essential. But you felt that sin wasn't something lodged inside you, like a bad seed; like something you were born with. Or like a pocketful of stones you hobbled through your one precious life with. Sin was more about not recognising and confessing your complicity in the injustices of the world – not acting to help feed the hungry, clothe the freezing, free the imprisoned and oppressed.

In the Iona Community's daily Act of Prayer, we say together:

With the whole church
WE AFFIRM
THAT WE ARE MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE,
BEFRIENDED BY CHRIST, EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT.

With people everywhere
WE AFFIRM
GOD'S GOODNESS AT THE HEART OF HUMANITY,
PLANTED MORE DEEPLY THAN ALL THAT IS WRONG.

With all creation
WE CELEBRATE
THE MIRACLE AND WONDER OF LIFE;
THE UNFOLDING PURPOSES OF GOD,
FOREVER AT WORK IN OURSELVES AND THE WORLD.³

When I first came to Iona, I viewed the Church the way popular culture and the media *still* views it – sin-obsessed, judgemental, life-denying, anti-nature, anti-women, anti-gay ... I don't know how to spread the 'gospel of Iona', other than by trying my best to live it, and through books like this one.

It was very hard to choose only 50 prayers from the Iona Community. This anthology (like all anthologies) is subjective, I admit, although I hope I've chosen some prayers that anyone editing a collection like this would have included.

It's interesting, but not surprising, that the majority of these prayers were written by women – more evidence that the Church would have much more heart, guts and spirit – would be more fully Christ's body – if it was less male. Well, that change in the shape of the Church is slowly happening. Isn't it?

Some voices here are male, like George MacLeod's. I thought of just including passages from George's prayers, but the whole prayers are so rooted and soaring and glorious I couldn't do it; maybe didn't dare. To me, George MacLeod's prayers are of a time and will always transcend time:

In You all things consist and hang together:

The very atom is light energy,

the grass is vibrant,

the rocks pulsate.

All is in flux; turn but a stone and an angel moves ...

Not all prayers used on Iona are those that have been written down and crafted, of course. Many of the most heartfelt prayers I experienced were spoken. I remember a mother who stood up in the Abbey in a service celebrating God's gay and transgendered children. I remember open prayer during Communion at the end of each week; how those prayers in the peace and candlelight expressed so powerfully all we had shared journeying together

through those weeks. It's hard to capture those prayers in a book; they exist more in the moment, more in the Book of Life.

I've avoided dividing up these prayers into sections or themes or days. There's a flow. If you're looking for a prayer for a service it won't be hard to find one; if you're travelling with the book – somewhere in the flow of life and time – you can pick it up anywhere.

I hope that these prayers find their way into your church; and I hope that you carry this book with you out in the world. I know I'll carry it with me, on the train or bus to work, on demos and marches. I'll keep it in my rucksack or coat pocket; maybe leave it at a crossroads with a fellow pilgrim and companion on the way.

*May prayer feed your actions
and may your actions feed the world ...*

Love,
Peace,

Neil Paynter

*Biggar, Scotland
Trinity Sunday, 2009*

Notes

1. From *The Green Heart of the Snowdrop*, Kate McIlhagga, Wild Goose Publications, 2004. © Donald McIlhagga. First published in *The Pattern of Our Days*, Kathy Galloway (ed), Wild Goose Publications. Written after seeing a dove banner in Brechin Cathedral.
2. Dick Gaughan is a Scottish folksinger. The lyrics quoted here are from the song 'The Devil and Pastor Jack Glass', by Dick Gaughan, from the CD *Lucky for Some*, Dick Gaughan, Greentrax, 2008 www.greentrax.com
3. This affirmation was written for the 2001 revision of the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, by myself and the very patient and enabling Brian Woodcock, the then-Warden of Iona Abbey. The 'God's goodness' line was inspired by Philip Newell's book *Listening for the Heartbeat of God* (SPCK).

PRAYER FOR THREE VOICES

Voice 1:

God of justice, keep us silent
when the only words we have to utter
are ones of judgement, exclusion or prejudice.
Teach us to face the wounds in our own hearts

(Silence)

GOD OF JUSTICE, GIVE US POWER OF SPEECH
TO RESIST INJUSTICE, OPPRESSION AND HATE,
NOT ONLY ON OUR OWN BEHALF
BUT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE NOT HEARD.
MAKE US PEACEMAKERS AND RESTORERS OF THE STREETS.

Voice 2:

God of power, keep us silent
so that we may listen respectfully
to another person's pain
without trying to fade or fix it,
for you are present within each one of us

(Silence)

GOD OF POWER, GIVE US COURAGE
TO SHARE OUR GIFTS OF SPEECH
TO COMFORT, UPHOLD AND STRENGTHEN.
LET US BE A GLIMPSE OF YOUR LOVE TO THOSE IN NEED.

Voice 3:

God of love, in the silence of our hearts
give us words of welcome, acceptance and renewal
so that when we speak
our words come from you

(Silence)

GOD OF LOVE, GIVE US VOICES OF PRAISE
TO CELEBRATE EACH OTHER
AND THE GLORIES OF CREATION
BELIEVING THAT WE ALL LIVE WITHIN YOUR BLESSING.

Yvonne Morland

THE GLORY IN THE GREY

Almighty God, Creator:

In these last days storm has assailed us.

Greyness has enveloped and mist surrounded
our going out and our coming in.

Now again Thy glory clarifies,

Thy light lifts up our hearts to Thee,
and night falls in peace.

But through mist and storm and sunshine,
the crops have ripened here
and vines of Spain have grown.

Thy constant care in all and everywhere is manifest.

Almighty God, Redeemer:

Even as with our bodies, so also with our souls.

Redeemer, Christ:

Sunshine and storm, mist and greyness
eddy round our inner lives.

But as we trace the pattern, looking back,
we know that both darkness and light
have been of Thine ordaining
for our own soul's health.

Thy constant care in all, and everywhere,
is manifest.

Almighty God, Sustainer:

Sun behind all suns,

Soul behind all souls,
everlasting reconciler of our whole beings:
Show to us in everything we touch and in everyone we meet
the continued assurance of Thy presence round us:
lest ever we should think Thee absent.
In all created things Thou art there.
In every friend we have
the sunshine of Thy presence is shown forth.
In every enemy that seems to cross our path,
Thou art there within the cloud
to challenge us to love.
Show to us the glory in the grey.
Awake for us Thy presence in the very storm
till all our joys are seen as Thee
and all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments
in the universal temple of Thy love.

Of ourselves we cannot see this. Sure physician give us sight.
Of ourselves we cannot act. Patient lover give us love:
till every shower of rain speaks of Thy forgiveness:
till every storm assures us that we company with Thee:
and every move of light and shadow speaks of grave and
resurrection:
to assure us that we cannot die:
Thou creating, redeeming and sustaining God.

George MacLeod

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