

Iona Pilgrimage

Recently I spent a week's pilgrimage on the Island of Iona. I was with a group of people, some from Riding Mill others from different parts of the county. I had been to Iona once before in October three years ago when the wind and rain buffeted the island. This previous journey didn't prepare me for our visit second visit. This time the weather was good which added to our enjoyment but as soon as I stepped off the ferry I felt this was something special.

Some members of our party we had never met before but we all got on so well, we ate together, some of us went to the Abbey and worshipped together, we had fun together, a few of us went swimming in the clear, chilly water and on one occasion we travelled by boat to Staffa where we were escorted by dolphins. On approaching the island we saw the caves and the basalt columns which are synonymous to Staffa, and an amazing part of God's creation. On landing we walked next to the cliff face to Fingals cave before being entertained by puffins. On our previous visit to Iona and Staffa the sea was very rough and one member of our group was unwell. However, this did not put her off coming with us this time when we enjoyed beautiful views of islands that we passed, clear blue skies and calm waters.

There is a community on Iona which was founded in Glasgow and Iona in 1938 by George MacLeod, minister, visionary and prophetic witness for peace, in the context of the poverty and despair of the Depression. From a dockland parish in Govan, Glasgow, he took unemployed skilled craftsmen and young trainee clergy to Iona to rebuild both the monastic quarters of the mediaeval abbey and the common life by working and living together, sharing skills and effort as well as joys and achievement. That original task became a sign of hopeful rebuilding of community in Scotland and beyond. The experience shaped – and continues to shape – the practice and principles of the Iona Community.

Iona is a tiny and beautiful Hebridean island lying off the west coast of Scotland, barely 3 miles long and 1 mile wide, it is a cradle of Christianity in Scotland, where in 563AD the Irish monk Columba established a monastic settlement that evangelised large parts of Scotland and the north of England and became an important centre of European Christianity. In the Middle Ages it became the site of a Benedictine abbey, and over the centuries it has attracted many thousands of people on their own pilgrim journeys.

We in Northumberland probably know that King Oswald requested that missionaries be sent to Lindisfarne, Holy Island, from Iona instead of the Roman-sponsored monasteries of Southern England. At first, they sent him a bishop named Cormán, but he alienated many people by his harshness, and returned in failure to Iona reporting that the Northumbrians were too stubborn to be convicted. Aidan criticized Cormán's methods and was soon sent as his replacement.

Iona remains a centre for pilgrimage and tourism; the daily services of the Iona Community in the Abbey church and worship elsewhere on the island are open to all. Services are held in the Abbey morning and evening and while we were there although wearing masks we were able to sing which were such joyful occasions that we appreciated all the more this year.

There is a year-round population of over 100; long-established island families as well as more recent arrivals, including those who work for the Iona Community in its centres as staff or volunteers. The islanders, the Iona Community and Historic Environment Scotland work together to maintain Iona as

a place of welcome. They certainly welcomed us, we would all experience it in different ways but it could be described as a 'thin' place, where God is never far away whether we were in the Abbey or relaxing in the sun taking in the wonderful views.