

ST ADOMNAN OF IONA

Another kind of celebration

On 23rd September 2004, the 1300th anniversary of the death of St Adomnan of Iona was marked in Edinburgh by a number of people, not, as here on Iona, by conferences and lectures given, but by their processing from the east end of Princes Street up to the High Street, to Parliament Square, site of both the national cathedral, St Giles, and of the Scottish Law Courts. There, they took part in an act of worship, a liturgy commemorating his life, and especially the promulgation of the *Cain Adomnan*, the Law of the Innocents. Then they processed on down the High Street, to the newly completed Scottish Parliament building, and repeated the liturgy there. As they went, they handed out leaflets explaining what they were doing, and during the worship, they rang the Iona Community's replica of Adomnan's bell, which was gifted to us by the Corrymeela Community, with whom we have close links.

It was fitting that this gift should have come from Corrymeela, which is a Northern Irish community, both Catholic and Protestant, with centres in Belfast and on the North Antrim coast, which exists to promote peacemaking and reconciliation across the communities in Northern Ireland. For it is the theme of peacemaking which joins the Iona Community and the Corrymeela Community, and which links the Iona Community most closely with Adomnan in its present-day life, and of course, Adomnan himself is representative of the strong links between Iona and Ireland.

The people who celebrated Adomnan's anniversary in Edinburgh came from two groups. The Adomnan of Iona Affinity Group is made up mostly of members of the Iona Community who are affiliated to the Trident Ploughshares movement. That movement campaigns against Trident nuclear-armed submarines across the world; the Adomnan of Iona group is particularly concerned with the presence of Trident in Scotland. The Scottish Trident base is at Faslane, on the road between Iona and Glasgow. Affinity groups consist of people, perhaps a dozen to twenty, who share this goal, and who commit themselves to supporting one another in non-violent direct action against Trident, for which they undergo a period of training. Such action may vary from letter-writing and lobbying through demonstrations and marches to peaceful civil disobedience at Trident bases. It is always sustained by a strong spiritual base of prayer and meditation, and draws inspiration from the spiritually-based non-violent movements of people such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

The other group celebrating in Edinburgh yesterday were from the Women in Black, a worldwide peace network of women who bear witness against the cruelties of war dressed in black. Women In Black stand in silent vigil in public places to protest war, rape as a tool of war, ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses all over the world. Their silence is visible. They invite women to stand with them, reflect about themselves and women who have been raped, tortured or killed in concentration camps, women who have disappeared, whose loved ones have disappeared or have been killed, whose homes have been demolished. They wear black as a symbol of sorrow for all victims of war, for the destruction of people, nature and the fabric of life.

Women in Black vigils were started in Israel in 1988 by women protesting against Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Women in Black has developed in

countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, Britain, Azerbaijan, Colombia, and in former Yugoslavia, where women in Belgrade have stood in weekly vigils since 1991 to protest war and the Serbian regime's policies of nationalist aggression. Women in Black groups have formed in many cities in the United States since September 11th. Many Iona Community members are also part of Women in Black in Scotland.

The Justice and Peace Commitment of the Iona Community

Peacemaking and opposition to militarization has been a central part of the Iona Community's life since its beginning in 1938. Its Founder, George MacLeod, had a holistic theology that did not just express itself in rebuilding on Iona, or in ministry in urban slums. It led him into a healing ministry, but one which was social as well as personal, for 'it is blasphemous to pray for Margaret with bronchitis, if we take no action about the damp housing which is causing her illness.' It led him to an increasing ecological concern, and he was the first, and to date, the only Life Peer to sit in the House of Lords to represent the Green Party. And it led him, who had enlisted at the age of 19, and who had been awarded the Military Cross in the trenches of the First World War, to then become a convert to radical non-violence, and to sustained and costly opposition to militarization, nuclear weapons and the arms trade. This commitment to non-violence shaped the Iona Community in many ways, and resulted in the adoption by the Community of the Peace and Justice Commitment which is one part of the fivefold Rule of faith and life to which all members adhere. The Peace and Justice Commitment was adopted unanimously in 1966, and is only changed by the consent of all the members. A clause was added in 1987, and another in 2002. This is our Commitment:

We believe:

1. that the *Gospel* commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the *Gospel*;
2. that work for justice, peace and an equitable society is a matter of extreme urgency
3. that God has given us partnership as stewards of creation and that we have a responsibility to live in a right relationship with the whole of God's creation;
4. that, handled with integrity, creation can provide for the needs of all, but not for the greed which leads to injustice and inequality, and endangers life on earth;
5. that everyone should have the quality and dignity of a full life that requires adequate physical, social and political opportunity, without the oppression of poverty, injustice and fear;
6. that social and political action leading to justice for all people and encouraged by prayer and discussion, is a vital work of the Church at all levels;
7. that the use or threatened use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is theologically and morally indefensible and that opposition to their existence is an imperative of the Christian faith.

As Members and Family Groups we will:

8. engage in forms of political witness and action, prayerfully and thoughtfully, to promote just and peaceful social, political and economic structures;
9. work for a British policy of renunciation of all weapons of mass destruction and for the encouragement of other nations, individually or collectively, to do the same;

10. celebrate human diversity and actively work to combat discrimination on grounds of age, colour, disability, mental wellbeing, differing ability, gender, colour, race, ethnic and cultural background, sexual orientation or religion;
11. work for the establishment of the United Nations Organisation as the principal organ of international reconciliation and security, in place of military alliances;
12. support and promote research and education into non-violent ways of achieving justice, peace and a sustainable global society;
13. work for reconciliation within and among nations by international sharing and exchange of experience and people, with particular concern for politically and economically oppressed nations.

So it will be obvious to you why the Iona Community is involved with Women in Black and Trident Ploughshares. But why have this engagement under the name of Adomnan, and why draw attention to this anniversary of one who, to the vast majority of people, would be quite unknown, and even to those who have heard of him, would only be another obscure Celtic saint, best known as the biographer -and hagiographer- of Saint Columba.

Adomnan the protector of the innocents

The answer to this question is, of course, well known to many of you, but there may be some here who do not know the story, which begins in 7th century Ireland, a patriarchal society of constantly warring tribes. Violence and brutality were endemic. Women were subject to horrific oppression and exploitation. The Celtic church and its clerics were also vulnerable. In this situation, what authority could challenge the bloody killing fields, what could offer an alternative to the dominant warrior ethos, what hope was there for protection and justice?

Adomnan, successor to Columba as Abbot of Iona, was a key player in the ecclesiastical and secular politics of late 7th century Ireland. His *Cain Adomnain*, Law of the Innocents, was proclaimed and formally promulgated at the Synod of Birr in Munster in 697. It was a significant piece of legislation in many respects. It was formal not just customary; its authority extended throughout the whole of Ireland, and into those parts of Britain under the influence of Columban monasticism; and it declared clearly that clerics, women and 'innocent youths' were to be exempt from any duty of military engagement. But the main concern of the law was *'the freeing of women from encounter and encampment, from expedition and hosting, from wounding, from slaughter, and from the slavery of the cauldron.'*

The text of the Law is preceded by an introduction, most likely added in the 10th century, which tells a gruesome story of cruelty, hardship and bargaining. We learn that the real instigator of this Law was Ronnat, the mother of Adomnan, who used some extreme methods to persuade her son to take up the cause of 'the women of the western world.' A vivid picture is drawn of the hideous double burden - domestic servility and suffering in battle - which was imposed on women as 'slaveys'- *cumalach* or bondmaids. The Cain tells us that *'Cumalach was a name for women till Adamnan come to free them'* And it describes how *'that women had no share in bag or in basket, nor in the company of the house-master; but she dwelt in a hut outside the enclosure, lest bane from sea or land should come to her chief.'*

The work which the best women had to do, was to go to battle and battlefield, encounter and camping, fighting and hosting, wounding and slaying. On one side

of her she would carry her bag of provisions, on the other her babe. Her wooden pole upon her back. Thirty feet long it was, and had on one end an iron hook, which she would thrust into the tress of some woman in the opposite battalion. Her husband behind her, carrying a fence-stake in his hand, and flogging her on to battle. For at that time it was the head of a woman, or her two breasts, which were taken as trophies.

Ronnat, the mother of Adomnan, first draws her son's attention to the horrors suffered by women in war. Carried on his back, the two of them come upon a battlefield: *Such was the thickness of the slaughter into which they came to that the soles of one woman would touch the neck of another. Though they beheld the battlefield, they saw nothing more touching and pitiful than the head of a woman in one place and the body in another, and her little babe upon the breasts of the corpse, a stream of milk upon one of its cheeks, and a stream of blood upon the other.*

Adomnan's Law imposed sanctions for killing, injury, rape and sexual harassment - not just in battle, but in the context of women's daily life and work. Described as 'the first law in heaven and earth for the protection of women', it extended to children and clergy, and is an early attempt to protect non-combatants. And even-handedly, it also forbade killing by women of other women or of men. As such, it is a precursor of the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Thirteen hundred years on, it is a document of particular interest for two reasons. First, it provides a dramatic insight into the historical and mythological framework within which Columban Christianity operated during the early Middle Ages, and likely the Adomnan conference will explore this framework further. But it also challenges us to discern whether, and in what ways, we can engage constructively with the Celtic legacy which is so intimately associated with Iona.

For the Iona Community there are elements which resonate strongly with our own concerns (and of course, we are not alone in these concerns) - compassion for those who are vulnerable and exploited; the struggle to find just and appropriate alternatives to cruel and wilful violence; the bell of Adomnan, which represents spiritual rather than physical force to confront, even to curse, the power of the dominant elite. It is hard to gauge just how widely the Law of Adomnan was actually adhered to and practised; as with the Jubilee laws of the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, which advocated the regular cancellation of unpayable debt, the redistribution of wealth and the resting of land, which were designed to prevent the accumulation of capital into ever fewer hands and the oppression of the poor, those with power don't cede it without a struggle. And much more recently, we have seen that those with power, and tame lawyers, will find ways to ignore the Geneva Conventions and the European Convention on Human Rights if they consider it is in their own interests. Nevertheless, such laws remain crucially important, not just because the protection of law is the best guarantor of freedom from oppression, but because they become an important part of changing a culture of violence to one which says, 'this is not acceptable.'

Gradually, the law is beginning to reflect in practice what it previously only reflected in theory; that women and children have the fullness of humanity, not just men, and are entitled in their own right to protection and equal treatment under the law. It is extremely encouraging that the Scottish Parliament took domestic violence as a priority for response in its first term. We are moving nearer to a time when the law may actually

be used to deliver justice rather than guard the interests of the powerful. The Law of the Innocents has been a part of this long and very slow process.

In Celtic Ireland, as in many other ages and places, 'protection of women' was bought at the cost of indebtedness and obedience to male hierarchy, economic and spiritual power, and definitions of proper female behaviour. In our own time and context, perhaps we can ring our wee true-judging bells to break that dependence, so that women, and others who suffer violence, may find their own power of resistance. This is the hope of those in the Iona Community who belong to Women in Black, who are engaged in campaigning against trafficking in women and sex tourism, who support those who experience domestic abuse and who work in the churches to ensure that gender violence is no longer accepted and covered-up.

Protection of non-combatants and the just war theory

The Cain Adomnan is also known as the Law of the Innocents, and was for the protection of non-combatants. It drew a clear line of differentiation between combatants and those whom we would now describe as civilians. That differentiation was important for other teachers and theologians of the church, from St Augustine of Hippo to St Thomas Aquinas, who attempted to legislate for, and limit, the horror and cruelty of war. Early Christian apologists were absolute pacifists, and conversion to Christianity for another saint important on Iona, St Martin of Tours, often described as the father of Celtic monasticism, meant abandoning his military profession for the practice of non-violence, for, he said, 'I am a soldier of Christ; I cannot fight.' In formulating and developing the theory of the just war, these interpreters shaped what was accepted by the 20th century as conditions under which a war could be fought:

- the war must be defensive and a response to unjust aggression
- all other methods of resolving the conflict must have been exhausted
- there must be a realistic chance of success to justify all the wartime sacrifices
- there must be some proportion between the moral and physical costs of the hostilities and the peace and better social order sought afterwards
- only military targets, not unarmed civilians, can be the targets of military strikes
- force may never be used as a means in itself or to brutalize the social order and the military personnel

It is the belief of the Iona Community, expressed in our Justice and Peace Commitment, that there are no circumstances in which the use of Trident would conform to all or even most of these conditions. The 20th century saw the proportions of civilian to military casualties grow inversely, so that in all the wars fought recently, and still being fought, civilian casualties outnumber military ones hugely. This would be particularly the case with Trident, and it is one of the reasons that the Iona Community, aligning themselves with Adomnan's Protection of the Innocents, have a fifty-year history of active opposition to nuclear weapons.

But beyond that, and because we are committed not just to the protection of innocents but to the belief that unjust and violent means do not bring about just and peaceful outcomes, we work through non-violence at every level for a change to the culture of violence. The notion of the just war may have some utility when getting into a war but it has much less in getting out of it. War itself is brutalizing; even its language dehumanizes. The evidence from Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib has demonstrated this starkly. This is especially the case when there are numerous factions involved in the

post-war dispensation, each with their own claim to legitimacy, and their different maps for the same territory. Such intractable conflicts have proved acutely resistant to imposed solutions elsewhere.

The practice of non-violence

There is another set of principles which are important to members of the Iona Community. These are the principles of non-violence, developed out of many violent situations as comprising:

- respect for the opponent as a fellow human being
- care for everyone involved in a conflict
- refusal to harm, damage or degrade people/living things/the earth
- if suffering is inevitable, the readiness to take it upon oneself rather than inflict it on others
- not retaliating to violence with violence
- belief that everyone is capable of change
- appeal to the humanity of the opponent
- recognition that no one has a monopoly of truth, so trying to bring together different truths
- belief that the means are the ends in the making, so the means have to be consistent with the ends
- openness rather than secrecy

Inadequately, and failing constantly, these are nevertheless what we seek to live by.

Adomnan, under severe pressure, it must be said, from his mother, chose against all the odds, and in the face of a fierce culture of violence, to become part of the solution. In a world in which the innocents are exposed and suffer in unprecedented numbers, perhaps the best recognition and tribute we can pay to his efforts is to try to become part of the solution in our time.

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