



# Prayer: When the ‘Whole Thing’ Becomes ‘the Whole Blessed Thing’

Perspectives on George MacLeod and the  
Founding of the Iona Community<sup>1</sup>

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## Opening prayer: The whole earth shall cry Glory

Ron Ferguson’s biography of George MacLeod strikes the right balance between affectionate criticism and informed narrative. His explanation of MacLeod as a radical in politics who was contentious in peace activism, is based on one of the key insights into the man, and the spirituality that generated the vision, energy and tenacity to restore Iona Abbey. In the process he restored to credibility a way of following Christ that is deeply rooted in a vision of all reality as sacramental, because infused by the presence of the Word ...

‘all things were made through him and without  
him was not anything made that was made.’

The holy dwells at the heart of life – a spirituality that moves from holiness, to wholeness to holiness. *The whole earth is full of thy glory.*

To handle MacLeod’s personal papers (I mean to touch as in ‘be in touch’, and feel as both imaginative sympathy and tangible contact) is to sense again through old pieces of paper, graced devotion from another age and place. MacLeod’s spiritual seriousness and purposeful prayerfulness, his vibrant and passionate love for this world and its Creator, this all-too-human world and its all-too-loving Redeemer, is made vivid and given voice in prayers composed as praise to affirm

and hymn the Triune God. The living reality of the Holy Trinity is glimpsed in a world, replete with moral and spiritual possibility, touched through with the glory of the One God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The written prayers, now held in the National Library of Scotland, come in neat blue archive folders. Inside each is a pile of old papers in no particular order, some organised and typed on A6 loose-leaf folder paper, many scribbled on envelopes and scrap paper salvaged in an early policy of re-cycling, some incorporated into full manuscript orders of service, many of them prepared for Holy Week services in which the Passion of Christ is the focal theme. They provide a paper trail of the key performance indicators of the spiritual life – the labour of love that is prayer.

The best of them are aesthetically imperfect – he had no delete button to hide his footprints, no laser printer to justify and render his typing into flawless print – so these fugitive pieces of prayer composition show the changes he made, the words scored out, the extra phrase inserted, the arrows rearranging the order of thought, paragraphs typed over, signs of a ribbon hammered to inklessness – they never reached a final proof stage, they remain written wrought testimony of a mind and spirit for whom words were themselves sacramental, to be handled with reverence, to be addressed to God with due care for meaning, rhythm and spiritual resonance. Like another Scot, MacLeod knew it is hard for words to ‘stretch to the measure of eternal things’.<sup>2</sup> Phrases like ‘Give us a substantial faith’ correct those too keen on ‘spirituality’ for its own sake; ‘the eternal seeping through the physical’, suggests for Scottish folk the dampness, the drizzle, the mist that slowly but surely, well, seeps through our most protective layers; the church too preoccupied with its buildings and fundraising, is guilty of ‘short changing in spiritual things’; and the remarkable petition, heard perhaps with a reverently suppressed guffaw by a Govan congregation, ‘And You [O Lord] are love; uncalculating love. When we kick You in the teeth, Your sole concern is whether we have stubbed our toes’.<sup>3</sup>

The spiritual potency and psychological precision of these prayers can be attributed to MacLeod’s instinct for what is doctrinally decisive. Many of his finest prayers are structured on the loving action of the Trinity invading creation with divinely redemptive intent. But

the graced purposes of the creator God, and the life and ministry of the Redeemer are rooted in earth, woven through nature, as matter is sanctified through incarnation, and as creation is made responsive to the movements of the Spirit. It is that sense of creation suffused with glory, broken but beautiful, fallen but graced, that encourages MacLeod to describe the world around with such words as ‘vibrate’, ‘pulsate’, ‘radiate’, and to see in the created order Christ the light and life, the One who in Incarnation touches creation with energy and physicality, fusing the spiritual with the material, the historical with the eternal.

Anticipating the theology of Jürgen Moltmann’s ‘Crucified God’, MacLeod followed the clue to the heart of the Triune God all the way to the cross. Calvary, Golgotha, is the precise place, the decisive event, where the coalescence of heaven and earth, the collision of sin and judgement, the scene of glory through ignominy, becomes the defining reference point where God’s eternal purposes are realised and demonstrated, by forgiving mercy overcoming implacable rebellion, through loving surrender. And if MacLeod is passionately persuaded that at the cross the communion between heaven and earth was established, he is just as persuaded, as we shall later see, that the Communion table is the place where that union of spirit and matter, of divine and human, is celebrated as love redeeming the lost, and is affirmed and believed as a transformative act of grace that infuses lives with the love of Christ that radiates outward in benediction.

The day I spent reading MacLeod’s prayers and peace addresses was the day of the vote on the renewal of Trident. That day I handled the manuscript of MacLeod’s address in the Trident debate at the General Assembly of 1986 when he was 91 years old. It is an artefact, a *locus classicus* of Christian resistance to nuclear weapons – reasoned in a way unreasonable to the military mind, informed about the destructive capacity and payload specifications of weapons of mass destruction. MacLeod hated the bomb for reasons that were profoundly theological. When he called it a blasphemy that wasn’t rhetoric; nor was it an application to a physical object of a term usually reserved for spiritual defilements. Many of his prayers betray a deep sense of the sacral nature of creation, the sacramental importance of sea and sky, of clouds and waves, of trees and rocks, of birds and grass.



## **Prayer 2: The glory and the grey**

The imagery of a world that oscillates between glory and greyness, between sunshine and cloud, between eternity and history, between beauty and brokenness is everywhere in MacLeod's prayers. It was his way of seeing the world; in that sense, for MacLeod, Christian doctrines were never merely of credal significance, propositions to which intellectual assent was required. For MacLeod creation, incarnation, atonement, resurrection and consummation, were truths that formed in the worshipping mind a worldview, a cluster of realities that provided the cumulative key to all Reality. So in communion he prays as he celebrates:

How grateful we are that in the perpetual mystery You are walking and speaking with us now ... and what You are Lord of, is a dance and not a dirge ... so that we too can dance wherever we may be. ... You come to us as we grasp that this bread is vibrant with You, who inhabits all things, and this wine pulsates with You ... dark with your continuing sacrifice ... and therefore elixir of our spirits and seal of our right to dance ...<sup>4</sup>

It is this close affinity between communion and Christ's real presence, between created things and the uncreated but incarnate Lord, that is the clue to MacLeod's implacable resistance to nuclear weapons. The reality at the heart of all things, the power and energy that holds all things together is Christ the light and life, the energy and vitality of the universe. When the constituent element of matter, locked into the atom, is split to release the creative energy of the cosmos, and then that same energy is harnessed for purposes of mass killing, then something happens which transcends science, technology, politics and military hubris. Matter is defiled, the substance of the physical world, sanctified by the creator, incorporated by the Word become flesh, is now turned against flesh. Creation is thrust into reverse, human life faces obliteration, and humanity created in the image of God pursues power over others with suicidal intent. One of his addresses on peace

indicates the theological and moral outrage of one who always saw atomic war as inexcusable blasphemy, the abomination of desolation, the holiness of created matter commodified into the searing sacrilege of a mushroom cloud.

Spirit and Matter. [Christ] is both these because he is the Light and Life of the world. He is ‘in and through’ the material, [all things]. We have so spiritualised our message, that when atomic warfare was first used we did not grasp its appalling nature. The day that Atomic warfare was first employed (at Hiroshima), happened to be the Day of the Feast of the Transfiguration, when Jesus revealed himself to His chosen disciples as both physical and spiritual. What we did at Hiroshima was to take the Body of Christ and use it for bloody Hell.

The aeroplane shot up to 33,000 ft and in seconds the mushrooming cloud from the explosion encircled them even at that height. Captain Lewis, the co-pilot, amazed at the cloud going so instantly above them looked up and said, ‘My God what have we done?’

Well what had they done that Aug 6? You remember another cloud that circled the Mount of Transfiguration ... Jesus the atonement between heaven and earth; His body translucent; a sort of preview of His Resurrection Body. Was He spirit or was He matter? He was the atonement between spirit and matter. He is the Life of the World and the energy of the world.<sup>5</sup>

So when MacLeod exploits all the imagery of Scotland’s natural beauty, its contrasts of grey and glory, of often wet and occasionally sunny, of steep braes, and lonely mountains, of the sea as symbol of life’s ebbs and flows, its calm and turmoil, this isn’t some early nineteenth-century Romantic visionary indulging in pantheism as if nature itself **is** God – this is a minister of the Kirk, a man whose spiritual values are shaped by ministering in Scotland’s great cities and by understanding Scotland’s natural beauty and bleakness.

We glory in Your Creation, Father:  
 In Your buying us back from the pawnshop of death:  
 Christ.  
 In Your supporting: Spirit of uplift.  
 But we do not make this clear to men on earth.  
 Rather do we grossly defile Your creation,  
 lightly presume on what it cost You to win us back  
 till we assume it is our zest and jollity that keeps us high.  
 Have mercy.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout MacLeod's prayers, the topography of Scotland, moor and mountain, glen and river, sea coast and island are allowed to inform the mood and content of prayers rooted in the Scottish spiritual experience. There is an entire history of Scottish geographical realities being subjected to the trivialising unreality of consumer tourism; shortbread tins, arrays of miniature whiskies, tartan-toting West Highland White terriers, accordion squeezing musicians grinning from CD covers, singing impossibly innocent songs about "Grannie's Hielan Hame", or improbable political songs like "Flower of Scotland". Yet for MacLeod, the land of Scotland, the contours and colours, the bleak often silent beauty of moors and the outspoken majesty of the hills, answer to something in the spirituality of a people who understand the extremes of human experience, who can be at home with either lament or praise as life dictates, and whose religious expression can swing from mystical beauty to maudlin sentiment. MacLeod could wax doxological on mystical beauty; maudlin sentiment he simply despised.

The climate of Scotland, the seeping drizzle and dampness of the west coast, or the chronic persistent rainfall that Scots find hard to believe is a symbol of God's extravagance; it dampens spirits and worldviews as well. The long dark winters but also the lengthening summer nights, the glint of winter sunlight, the baking heat and trapped sunshine of a Highland glen, are examples of naturally recurring patterns of weather, in both the inner and outer world of human experience. The Scottish climate, changeable rather than reliable, benign only in fits and starts, dangerous if ignored by fisherman or hill-walker, is yet an omnipresent, seasonally variable and suggestive

background which often reflects, and affects, the religious mood, intellectual tenor and psychological temper of Scottish spirituality. All this imagery and resonance gives MacLeod's prayers a texture which, if not tartan, is as finely woven, as varied in colour and tone, and as Scottish in origin.

When he famously spoke of Iona as a thin place, it was because he found there an exaggerated and immediate sense of that spiritual awareness that discerned the purposed proximity of the Triune God in the natural world, the vibrant, pulsating energy of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Conceived of the Holy Ghost ... Born of the Virgin Mary ...  
 One Person ... the atonement ... The clue to everything. That is  
 what Matter is ... the whole thing cries GLORY ... there is no  
 longer the secular and the sacred ... the whole thing becomes  
 the whole blessed thing ... this is my body broken for you. The  
 whole creation is groaning waiting for the revealing of the Son  
 of God. There is no secular. It is all sacramental.<sup>7</sup>

George MacLeod lived long, fought hard for the Kingdom of God, relished the role of the prophet without honour till late in life. The prayers are honest about the cost, the risk, the loneliness of following after Christ.

We know Thou art the way for us:  
 But we do not like the steepness of the brae.  
 We know Thou art the truth for us:  
 But we do not like the starkness of Thy word.  
 We know Thou art the life for us:  
 But still we fear that days would be dull  
 or too demanding  
 if we gave up ours.  
 [...]  
 Yea Lord, establish us with Thy free spirit:  
 The hill is conquered—Calvary is bare.  
 The truth has triumphed—the tomb is empty.  
 Life is abundant—the Law is dead.<sup>8</sup>

In prayer MacLeod often adopted this declarative mood – it wasn't his job to persuade people to faith through his prayers, but to speak to God out of a faith rooted and grounded in the certainties of Christ's risen glory. And there was no devotional triumphalism, as if our humanity was morally reliable and our faithfulness to the Gospel a foregone conclusion:

Lord Jesus, You are beneath us.  
 We believe it.  
 When we slip, You catch us.  
 When we kick You in the face, You just serve us.  
 And when we pack in and fall right down,  
 You come further down just to be beside us.  
 In awe we thank You.<sup>9</sup>

In prayer MacLeod also sensed the wholeness not only of creation, but of the Church. His impatience with all the reasoned justifications for a splintered Body of Christ was again a position embedded in a theology of communion, in which the logic of graceful inclusion, the experience of family belonging and the Eucharistic joy of the redeemed, found their focus in the one Body of Christ. This is not an ecumenical statement – it is a prayer, to be heard by God, and overheard by those who have ears to hear.



### **Prayer 3: Less worthy members**

Another prayer is even more explicitly critical of those attitudes that disguise themselves as spiritual principle, theological faithfulness, legitimately maintained diversity. In this prayer, as much as anywhere, MacLeod lays a pastoral ambush by words selected with craft and care, cherished denominational images and self-definitions debunked, the intention to bring closed hearts to the place of honest repentance:

There are too often moody Presbyterians  
 persistent that they shall not let their fathers down:  
 Lazy even to consider what their fathers might have said.



There are Roman Catholics callous in their calamitous claim  
that only they can know. Deaf even to listen  
to what their closest brothers now attempt to plead.

There are Anglicans so bedevilled to be a bridge  
that they are blind to the splitting timbers at either end  
that might make their bridge an island

And everyone of us here, from time to time,  
lazy, deaf and blind as any of them.<sup>10</sup>

No wonder some dubbed him an ecumaniac. But here again lies the clue to MacLeod's passion and prayer – he seeks the wholeness of things as they are reflected in the Body of Christ. The Communion table is the place where matter and the spiritual coalesce in sacrament, where the mystery of the Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Lord is celebrated with transformative power in the breaking of bread and pouring of wine; the communion of saints, whose identity and dignity is gifted by the grace that calls all people into the family of God, into 'a chaos of uncalculating love',<sup>11</sup> and within which differences of Christian practice are transcended by the reality of one Church, one Body, one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; the communion of creation suffused with the vibrant and vitalising life of the incarnate, crucified, risen, exalted and coming Christ, yet groaning and awaiting its redemption in the final revealing of the Son of God and the renewing life of the Holy Spirit:

The Celtic colour for the Holy Spirit is green. Creator Spirit, the Light Energy of the whole creation, is seeking us out again till 'the whole thing' becomes 'the whole blessed thing': 'the Christification of the earth'.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever Christification, that theologically clumsy and philosophically dodgy word, means to us, to MacLeod it was a recognition that God's purpose for creation is the final, ultimate and perfect fulfilment of an eternal love affair, in which all that is made is pervaded by the new

life of Christ, invaded by the Spirit of loving harmony, and drawn into the eternal communion of Father, Son and Spirit, in a consummation when God will be all in all.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Given at a conference on ‘Perspectives on George MacLeod and Iona’ at the Scottish Baptist College Centre for the Study of Scottish Christian Spirituality in 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London; Glasgow: Collins, 1965), 169.
- <sup>3</sup> George F. MacLeod, *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory: Iona Prayers* (Iona: Wild Goose, 1985), 29, 11, 38.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–3.
- <sup>5</sup> Address on Peace, Acc.9084/582, 2, 13.
- <sup>6</sup> MacLeod, *Whole Earth*, 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Peace Addresses, Acc.9084/586.
- <sup>8</sup> MacLeod, *Whole Earth*, 58.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.
- <sup>12</sup> George F. MacLeod, *The Future of the Traditional Churches: An Essay on Pentecostalism and Peace, September 1972* (Glasgow: NBT, 1972), 39.