

## The Society for Ecumenical Studies

### **BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY**

A week for seeking new ecumenical inspiration on Iona, September 10-16, 2005

*A report by Oliver Coss, the Church of England*

*... a faith as precious as ours* 2 PETER 1:1

More than two thousand years ago, we are told, there was a non-descript stable with all the fixtures, fittings and trimmings one expects from first-century agriculture. But this notwithstanding in the midst of this stable there once stood a man and a woman clutching a child. And though governments rose and fell in the gentle ebb of the tide of history against time, the life of this simple child endured in the memory of such a great number that today we have the awesome privilege to still gaze, with a certain innocence, at that which holds the memory of Christ glorified.

And yet, as we have continued to gaze in awful reverence, we have, over time, become uncomfortably aware that there are others around us who see differently. Our discomfort is built from our experience of our own vision, an experience that has been shared with a community and exalted as first among those things that are valued. Experience to that point has, for us, been one that captures the inscrutability of the Godhead, explicates its elements and becomes to us a precious gift bestowed by the Divine. Our discomfort is a reaction to preserve the security that we have invested in the gift and in our experience of it. But if we are able to open ourselves to those who do see differently, we discover, lying in wait, a potential knock to this security; and that lies in the discovery that others too rejoice in that security. In a nutshell, that summarises my own interpretation of the ecumenical conversation that has been in progress during my adult involvement with the Church of England.

At a conference organised by the Society for Ecumenical Studies held at St. Alban's Abbey in 2003 Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity spoke of the importance of the 'precious gifts' that are so often brought by those who participate in ecumenical discussion. It was that train of thought (and many others besides) that a group of 38 people from a number of churches and groups in England and Ireland (and beyond) gathered at the Abbey, founded by S. Columba on the Isle of Iona to begin to unpack.

There is an enormity about Iona Abbey, which, drawing from the rule of the Benedictine order that once occupied its walls, allows one to drift past the inevitable trivia that so easily occupies ecumenical dialogue. It is, as many of my fellow participants noted during our week-long stay, in many senses the ideal place for discussions of this kind to take place. Upon a monastic foundation there is an unassuming diligence to an ascetic life that is opened up to the individual or the community that gathers in the midst of it. And it is upon the times of worship, prayer and communion that the firm foundations of dialogue and discussion are necessarily formed.

It is the daily task and common round of prayer and work that guests at the abbey share in that a collection of individuals is able to rapidly transform themselves into an organic community. Gathered in such a collection of diverse traditions in such an environment leads to the very realisation I spoke of above; that here are those who share an inheritance of faith that has been interpreted with different eyes. And it was with Kasper's words concerning 'precious gifts' that we came to visualise ourselves arriving on the island with a second suitcase containing all that is exalted by ourselves and by our churches as being first among those things that are valued. As time passes, we (knowing of our attachment to them) gently begin to unpack and offer for the community gathered on the island these holy things for scrutiny. We fear criticism, but we are asked to explain. Why is this holy? Why has this been kept for God?

During the course of the week there were a number of addresses given by figures from the Ecumenical Movement representative of the Iona Community itself, the Anglican Church, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church and with their assistance we were able to develop a reasoned picture of the dividing walls that have disjointed Christendom since the earliest times. Through five years of

involvement in a variety of ecumenical projects one develops a neat stack of paper, garnished with a strange array of post-it notes, stones that once build an ecumenical 'cairn' and numerous service booklets from ecumenical worship. None of this prepares a person for the pain and hurt that is found by taking the opportunity to peer over the dividing wall to find brothers and sisters in Christ unable to come and pray with you because of the obstacles that surround both you and them.

Iona, in my experience, has magnified my awareness for that pain and hurt many times over. It is not often that we witness the tears of a Quaker or Salvationist during a Presbyterian Communion Service. It might be even less frequently that we see a similar group being led to a Roman Catholic Mass by a Presbyterian who himself finds ease in shedding so many tears as the priest blesses him while conspicuously denying him the sacrament.

However, there are the signs of hope. Through common acts of worship and a common life that leads one to the service of another we were able to begin a unity of purpose that allowed us to realise that we are dependent on one another. No matter how idealistic or conservative a churchman might be, this realisation of dependence joined with constant and acute reminders of how successive generations – including our own – have tried to disregard that dependence leads us to find that no matter the strength of that which draws us apart, the unity achieved among us in Christ is stronger. One speaker used the words of Bartholemew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to explain this:

The "unity of the acknowledgment of the Son of God" spoken about by the apostle is the communion of an ontological nature with the Christ in Whom alone may unity be achieved.

Our beginning place and ending place for all this was at the Cross of Christ, indeed where else could we turn in the face of hurt caused in the endeavour to rightly worship Him? Iona, for us all, has not led to documents and statements but has led to a unanimous love which has transcended all that divides and even all that unites in order that in our journey toward unity we might allow Christ, and Christ alone, to be our light.

Rightly so, we have returned to our churches and resumed our delight in that which was in the suitcase we brought to Iona. But we do so with a greater knowledge of the price we have paid for it, and an awareness of where our Christian brothers and sisters have done the same.

The debt to be paid comes through Christ, to each other.