

Message for May 17, 2020

Luke 24:13-35

“Poacher’s Pilgrimage: An Island Journey”. This is the title of one of my favourite books; indeed I have read it a couple of times since it was first published four years ago. The author is Alastair McIntosh and there is no better description of what this book is about than what is written on the flyleaf:

“The islands of the Outer Hebrides are home to some of the most remote and spectacular scenery in the world. They host an astonishing range of mysterious structures – stone circles, beehive dwellings, holy wells and ‘temples’ from the Celtic and prehistoric eras.

Over a twelve day pilgrimage, often in appalling conditions, Alastair McIntosh returned to the islands of his childhood to explore the meaning of these places.

Traversing moors and mountains, struggling through torrential rivers, he went from the southerly tip of Harris to the northerly Butt of Lewis. This book is a record of his journey – a walk through space and time, across a physical landscape and into a spiritual one ...”

As the flyleaf says, this book records both a physical and spiritual journey and one of the things that makes this book so appealing to me is its sheer scope; it covers for example history, geography and theology. McIntosh even touches on the life and beliefs of Thomas Boston who may or may not be one of his ancestors. If only because Boston Church is named after him, I found this most interesting although I suspect that many of Thomas’ beliefs would shock and even horrify most of us today. Thomas Boston for example strongly believed that everyone is divided into two groups: the saved and the unsaved. The saved are destined to inherit the joys of the life yet to come but as for the unsaved? To quote Boston himself:

“They shall be cast into the lake of fire ... to be shut up there without coming forth again forevermore. There will be wailing, weeping and gnashing of teeth. The curse shall enter their souls and melt them like wax before the fire; it shall sink into their flesh and bones like boiling lead, and torment them in every part ... No pity, no compassion shall be shown anymore ...”

In McIntosh’s own words: “Jeepers! I wonder what’s the difference between God and the Devil ...”

Perhaps the thing that I found most interesting about McIntosh’s book however is his exploration of what I would call ‘authentic’ Celtic Christianity as opposed to the type that is popular with so many people today. There is nothing wrong with this ‘popular’ version of Celtic Christianity as it does offer many valuable spiritual insights. In many ways though it is like North American Chinese food when compared to the ‘real thing’. So often ‘popular’ Celtic Christianity takes some aspects of authentic Celtic or Gaelic Christianity and then blows them all out of proportion. McIntosh however does not do this and one aspect of authentic Gaelic Christianity and spirituality that he touches on is known as *am miann* which is pronounced ‘am mee-an’. Translated from Gaelic, *am miann* simply means the burning, ardent, almost overwhelming desire to know and experience God. To have or experience *am miann* is one of the key aspects of traditional Gaelic or Celtic spirituality and this may be its greatest gift to us today.

We are learning more about the Bible and the universe around us all the time and as we do so, we are learning more and more about God himself. To know *about* God however is not the same as actually *knowing* him and this is one of the ironies of modern Western Christianity; even as we are growing in our knowledge about God, many of us actually know him less and less. This being the case, the question is how can we better know and experience God? How can we possess or experience what Gaelic Christianity considers to be the greatest goal of all, *am miann*?

Today’s scripture passage is taken from Luke’s gospel and is his account of what happened on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. Two

of Jesus' followers had left Jerusalem and were walking to the village of Emmaus which was located about eleven kilometers west of the city. The two men were sad and discouraged. They had really believed that Jesus was the Christ but it appeared as if their faith had been totally misplaced; why Jesus had been arrested, tried and even executed like any ordinary man! Earlier that day some women had told a fantastic tale that Jesus had been raised from the dead but quite understandably they did not believe it.

Luke tells us that a mysterious stranger joined them on the way. After finding out why the two men were so sad, the stranger explained to them why the Christ had to suffer, die and then be raised. This stranger of course was Jesus himself but the two disciples did not recognize him. When they reached Emmaus, the stranger acted as if he was going to go further but the disciples convinced him to stay with them. Then, in Luke's own words: "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him ..."

They recognized him; they knew that he was Jesus because they had seen him do the same thing just three evenings earlier! The mysterious stranger wasn't a stranger at all! It was Jesus! He really had been raised! He really was the Christ and their faith hadn't been misplaced after all! Eagerly the two men returned back to the city to share their experience and how they had recognized Jesus. This in fact is the key to the entire episode.

Sometimes people read today's scripture passage and focus on why the two men didn't recognize Jesus earlier. Was it because they didn't expect to see him? Was it perhaps a case that the risen Jesus looked different from the earthly Jesus? The most implausible unconvincing explanation that I have ever heard is that since Emmaus was to the west of Jerusalem, the two men didn't recognize Jesus because they were blinded by the setting sun! To preoccupy ourselves about why they didn't recognize Jesus sooner though is to miss the point that Luke was making. Quite simply, Jesus was recognized and was known through what we now call the Sacrament of Holy Communion or, to put it in more general terms,

worship. Worship in fact is one of the key themes of Luke's entire gospel; God is to be known through and by worship. Yes, we can and hopefully do learn *about* God in worship through such as the hymns, scripture lessons and sermon but even more so, it is through worship that we actually come to *know* him. If however this is the case, and I believe that it is, then how can we better know God when we are, out of necessity, not allowed to gather together to worship him at the present time? How can we experience or grow in *am miann* during the present pandemic?

We cannot come together as a community of faith at this time but even so, that doesn't mean that we can't worship. We may for example worship by watching and participating in a service on TV or perhaps one being live-streamed on the internet. Is this as good as what we normally do, physically coming together in our church on a Sunday morning? Probably not but even so, if we engage in these services as opposed to just watching them, then they can and will be acts of worship.

We can also worship God more personally through such as scripture reading, prayers and listening to religious music. The key with these activities though is that we try and clear our minds and be still. Instead of being busy telling God what is on our minds, we should let God speak to us. To all of these activities we can add an appreciation of the wonder and glory of God's creation; through it we can know and experience God. As George Washington Carver famously said, "I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in".

Can any of these truly replace our physically coming together whenever possible to worship God on a Sunday morning? Not fully. At best they augment or complement Sunday morning worship. Having said that though, living in the times that we are, activities such as these are the best we have. Indeed at the present time such activities are crucial because it is through them that we do not just grow in our knowledge about God; it is through them that we come to know God better and experience the greatest goal of Gaelic and Celtic spirituality; *am miann*.

