

“The Flame and the Struggle: Energising and Earthing the Celtic Vision.”

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Introduction

“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes? What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” (Matt 11:7-9)

For many of us the Community of Aidan and Hilda has a prophetic role. It offers a re-imagining of what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century - reconnecting the Scriptures and the Spirit, the saints and the streets, the seasons and the soil. We are a people led by a vision which is electrifyingly expressed in the words of the First Voyage of the Coracle: “God is giving you a vision of a spoiled creation being restored to harmony with its Creator, of a fragmented world becoming whole, of a weakened church being restored to its mission, of lands being healed and lit up by the glorious Trinity.”

A vision is both the glory and the problem of this thing which we call “Celtic spirituality” and this movement which we call the Community of Aidan and Hilda. The trouble with visions is that they are everything and nothing. We see something vividly but of course it isn’t really there. It’s just a vision. We see something which could be but which doesn’t yet exist. For a moment we are there in this revealed possibility but if we blink we miss it and it’s gone.

A vision is nothing unless it is earthed in action. If not it is just a dream which fades when we wake up, and at worst it can become an escape or a delusion to avoid realities which we would rather not face. Ian Bradley, one of the advisors to our Community, in his book *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, ruthlessly exposes the ways in which over the last thousand years different people have used these gleams of light from the Dark Ages which we call Celtic Christianity as accessories for their own agendas. For many people “Celtic Christianity” means nothing more than Enya and Irish mists, romance and escapism rather than reality and engagement.

I first visited Iona in 1994. We crossed over on a boat from Staffa, having stepped ashore at Fingal’s cave and watched the puffins burrowing on the top of the island. I was wondering what I would find when we got to this place about which I had read so much. As the Abbey came into sight across glinting sun-soaked seas, a thought suddenly, vividly, and unexpectedly came into my mind as clearly as the light sparkling on the water: *“the past is the quarry from which we fashion the building blocks of the future.”* If Iona was to mean anything it had to be about resourcing what is and what will be rather than a mere romanticising about a better vanished past. That is what makes Celtic Christianity a vision rather than a dream. Going back to the first age of saints is only of value if it helps us to create a new age of saints. It is the

difference between going on a wild goose chase and genuinely chasing the Wild Goose.