

30th June 2023

Gathering

“Jesus said, ‘How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you are not willing.’”

Bible, Matthew 23:37

As the Iona Community’s “Member in Residence” in Iona Abbey this week, I’ve had time both to watch people walking round the Abbey, and to do some new observing for myself. Many of the visitors concentrate on guidebooks, focussing on the main features of the restored Abbey and its precincts. Others have headphones on, or mobile phones to their ear, as they listen to a commentary, seeing what they’re told to look for. Occasionally, someone will rush in, fire off a flurry of photographs and rush out again, perhaps to catch a ferry, or go for a coffee. Only occasionally do people take time to absorb what’s around them.

But I have time, and I’ve been using that time to be aware of things. Yesterday, I became fascinated by the patterns in the flecks and lines of green in the Iona marble which forms part of the Abbey’s Communion Table. And today, I discovered something I’d never noticed before ...

I was leading a service of Prayers for the World, when I realised that the arms of the oak leader’s desk at which I was sitting ended in intricate carvings. The carving on the left side was a close representation of the quotation above: a bird bending over a nest, feeding chicks which had open mouths. To be honest, I’m not sure it was a hen – as in Jesus’ reference. Indeed, it looked more like a golden eagle to me. But the symbolism was enough. For here was a mother feeding her young, protecting her brood with shelter, providing them with food. Here was the hen – or the eagle – gathering her chicks under her wing. It was a visual symbol of we do here on Iona: wings spread in welcome; a head bowed in protection; a beak open for the feeding. And all so that chicks can be safe.

This Abbey, and what the Iona Community offers, in its hospitality, inclusiveness, creativity, worship, and openness, is the living embodiment of the bird that gathers her chicks, the children that Jesus longed to see gathered together in nurture and safety. “You are not willing”, he said scathingly. And here? Thank God there’s a willingness to do it differently.

A prayer for today

*God my mother hen, today I live in a nest of your providing,
and give thanks for your gathering. Amen*

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