

Invisible We See You

Tracing Celtic threads
through Christian community

Nancy Cocks

Extract



WILD GOOSE PUBLICATIONS
www.ionabooks.com

Copyright © 2003 Novalis Publishing, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada

UK edition first published 2006 by

Wild Goose Publications,

4th Floor, Savoy House, 140 Sauchiehall St, Glasgow G2 3DH, UK.

Wild Goose Publications is the publishing division of the Iona Community.

Scottish Charity No. SCO03794. Limited Company Reg. No. SCO96243.

www.ionabooks.com

ISBN: 978-1-905010-29-5

Cover design © Wild Goose Publications

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed by Bell & Bain, Thornliebank, Glasgow, Scotland

Invisible we see You, Christ above us.
With earthly eyes we see above us, clouds or sunshine,
grey or bright.
But with the eye of faith, we know You reign...

Inapprehensible we know You, Christ beside us.
With earthly eyes we see men and women,
Exuberant or dull, tall or small.
But with the eye of faith, we know you dwell in each...

We are Your living temple,
by grace alone we are Your living body...

—from a prayer by George F. MacLeod
in *The Whole Shall Cry Glory*
(1985, Wild Goose Publications)

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Introduction

Waking up to wonder

A hand tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned around to face a smiling stranger.

“You’re the girl who preached in Iona Abbey on Sunday,” he said, nodding eagerly.

For a moment, I was taken aback. In Canada, someone might have recognized me but no one would have called me a “girl”! Yet, here I was, waiting to board a ferry to the Scottish mainland, miles from anywhere I could call home. I did not expect to be recognized, but the stranger was right. The previous Sunday I had preached in Iona Abbey for the first time. I hadn’t anticipated what my role there might mean.

I found my tongue. “Yes, I am,” I smiled.

We chatted as we walked up the ramp to the ferry. This man, an English tourist in his early seventies, had come to the Abbey as part of a bus tour. Buses from the mainland scheduled their Sunday morning trips across the Isle of Mull in order to drop passengers at the Iona ferry in time to make worship in the Abbey.

“I’m not much of a churchgoer at home,” he said. “But the Abbey is really something special.”

Iona Abbey is truly something special. Steeped in centuries of history, it is surrounded by the stark beauty of the Isle of Iona. Lying off Scotland’s west coast, Iona is a tiny island, three miles long and a mile and a half wide. Yet, for generations, it has been a place of Christian pilgrimage. These days it’s also a popular bus-tour destination. My brief encounter in that ferry queue began the reflections that led to this book. That day, I was just a few weeks into a contract position with the Iona Community, one of its full-time staff working in and around Iona

Abbey. As a member of the resident staff, leading worship at the Abbey became a regular part of my activity. As one of the ordained ministers on the staff team, I often marvelled at the privilege of celebrating communion in that holy and historic space. My encounter with this eager stranger opened my eyes to the considerable responsibility that accompanied that privilege. Day by day and week by week, we invited constantly changing congregations of people from all over the world to engage the mystery of God's presence in worship. Neither staff member nor stranger could anticipate how any of us might be moved by our encounters in that special place.

"Invisible we see you, Christ above us." These words come from a prayer written by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community. MacLeod had a marvellous way of weaving strands from Scotland's Celtic heritage into his provocative and political prayers. It was humbling to think that some of my words would join his within the invisible tapestry of prayer woven by generations of worshippers at the Abbey. So often we enter worship aware of the broken threads and incomplete patterns in our own attempts to pull our lives together. Yet the longer I listened to guests and visitors on Iona reflecting on what happens in worship at the Abbey, the more I came to trust that God's Spirit would work with us there, no matter who we were or how we'd gotten there. Somehow we would be awakened to wonder. George MacLeod often referred to Iona as "a thin place" where "only a tissue paper" separates the material and spiritual worlds. The Spirit opens people's eyes in that holy place – not only to things we've never had the opportunity to see before, but also to things we have overlooked in our own lives. Above all, the Spirit awakens us to the invisible company of Christ.

Learning to see

One Saturday afternoon, I was walking from the Iona ferry to the MacLeod Centre where I worked, chatting with a newly arrived guest who had been to Iona many times. We walked

slowly for she struggled with the inclines, resting on her cane from time to time. She also had trouble with her eyes, she told me.

“But every time I come here, I feel like I can see better. The light is different here. Maybe this time God will heal my eyes.”

Her conviction was so deep! Yet, it wasn’t an easy week. The weather was foul and the sea was rough. Not a great time for walking in the light she cherished. The conversation was good, though, and the week unfolded with its rhythm of daily worship, chores, program sessions, meals and quiet chats around the fire. We didn’t have another chance to talk until the final evening, when her group reflected on what they were taking home from a week on Iona.

“New friends,” said one. “Stones!” chuckled another. (The beaches of Iona are generous with their supply of sea-polished “gems.”)

Then she spoke quietly, into a waiting pause. “I’m going home with a reason to go on living.”

Her eyesight hadn’t improved in those few days, but deep within, this woman knew what George MacLeod meant when he prayed, *“Invisible we see you, Christ beneath us.”* She may well have met MacLeod on one of her earlier trips to Iona, for she had been coming to the island over many years. I encountered him only through his writing, however. There I found candour and a challenge in his words about the mission of the Church, and about how the Church often failed to attend to the world outside its doors. Like MacLeod, I am a Presbyterian minister, but one shaped by vast Canadian landscapes, not the subtleties of Scotland. Still, I was drawn to his prayers with their arresting images and powerful appeals that resonated not only with my love of language but also with my passion for faith that embraces God’s hurting world. George MacLeod’s vision for the Iona Community has inspired several generations of creative and committed ministries, not only on the islands of Iona and Mull but also in city cores and housing developments. In reading its stories, I sensed a community of companions in the Spirit, wrestling with the kinds of questions I met on the streets of my neighbourhood, too.

I originally came to Scotland to work as a volunteer with the Iona Community as part of its unique ministry of hospitality on Iona, to see what I might learn and share. I found myself drawn more deeply into the mystery of how God opens us up to fresh insight and new possibilities when we share “time out of time” with each other. I stayed longer than I had planned. I am not the first to have had my plans revamped while I was there. In that thin place, God will rearrange lives! Like the guest who found something she hadn’t known she was looking for, I have come away from Iona with a new reason to go on in my ministry. Perhaps it is fair to say I have learned a new way of seeing, a new way of recognizing signs of God’s renewing grace in the give and take of community life.

This book explores my reflections for worship and about worship at the Abbey as I take a second look at the three years I spent working and worshipping there. If you come along with me, we will be reading between the lines together, meeting some of the people who opened my eyes to God’s Spirit at work in the nooks and crannies of this world. By spending virtual time on Iona in these pages, I hope we will also meet the invisible Christ, Word made flesh in both the ordinary and the extraordinary gifts of living in community.

A common surprise

In Canada, the Iona Community is known for its passionate commitment to justice-making and for its lively insights into worship and music. These gifts of the Community are shared around the world through its publications and by the work and witness of its members and staff. What is harder to share are the life-changing possibilities God creates when people join in a few days of common life at one of the Community’s island centres. The centres invite people to discover who God is calling them to be, using a design that weaves friends and strangers together through worship, work, conversation and creative activities. Though a week on Iona will include holy space and prayerful times, we do not make spiritual retreats there in any classical sense

of that term. Rather, guests and staff are challenged to look at the world afresh because of the person we've just met – at a meal table, climbing over ancient rock, or even cleaning a toilet! In this collection of resources, I hope to show readers some of the faces of Iona, faces of both friends and strangers. You are not likely to meet these folks in person, yet theirs are the faces beside you at your own bus stop, the very faces God wears to gain our attention.

They caught me as I came into the MacLeod Centre after our morning staff meeting. One had bucket in hand, the other pulled off her rubber gloves, having just finished morning chores. “Could we see you today? For an hour? Even half an hour?”

We agreed to meet just before lunch. I puzzled about this young couple over the morning. What made them so keen to talk?

They were prompt. And eager. “We’d like to have a little service this week to reaffirm our wedding vows,” he began.

“Would you help us plan it?” she went on. “We don’t know where to start.”

I had to catch my breath and think what to say. “Tell me about yourselves,” I said. “Is there a special reason for a service this week?”

The couple exchanged glances. She nodded at him. He began to tell their story. They’d been through a difficult patch. Pressure at work. Very young children demanding high energy at home. They’d drifted apart. An act of betrayal had led to separation.

She took up the story. “We came here to decide whether or not we could go on together. And it’s just amazing, what’s happened. We want to stay together. We know now we can.”

He continued, “It’s not just one thing that happened. But talking to other people, you know they can see a future, no matter what they’ve been through. And we can see a future together, too.”

That afternoon they planned the service, using prayer books and the language of love rekindling within them. It was my great honour to bless those vows in God’s name. It was my delight to receive a picture from their family vacation a few months later.

This story gives you a little taste of life in and around Iona Abbey week by week. It points to the significance of setting aside our private worlds and preferred habits for a while, to take a risk on what God has in store for us. This couple experienced God's grace through the give and take between guests around the island centres. The Iona Community does not place any of its staff in the role of spiritual director or counsellor. Instead, the Community trusts that the direction of the Spirit will emerge when hearts open up to each other in the risky business of experiencing community. The common surprise during time spent together on Iona is how often God introduces us to the very person who has a word for us.

Both the Abbey and the work of the Iona Community inspired my writing on Iona. For readers who don't know too much about Iona, past or present, I want to sketch the layers of history and tradition that overlap in Iona Abbey before presenting the resources I developed there. I'll start with a glimpse of St. Columba and his work on Iona in order to set the Abbey itself and its later significance in perspective. Then I'll say a few words about the restoration of the Abbey in the twentieth century and how George MacLeod and the Iona Community became involved. Finally, I'll describe some of the current features of worship and common life at the Community's island centres, which provide the backdrop for the resources I've drawn together in this collection. Readers who are already familiar with the cast of characters at the Abbey and in the Community's centres may want to skip over these sections to the final part of this introduction. You'll learn more about how I drew these particular resources together and what I hope they can offer, beginning again with the section entitled *On Our Heads and Our Houses*.

To link the various fragments of history that follow, I've used phrases from services in the current *Iona Abbey Worship Book* as section titles. Many of these phrases come from Scripture, the spiritual source common to the many generations and traditions reflected in Iona's Christian history. However, this book doesn't intend to be a history of Iona Abbey or

the Iona Community. For readers interested in more historical detail, there is a short bibliography of well-researched resources at the end of the book. I hope this glance through Iona Abbey's family album will help readers who are not as familiar with Iona keep the characters and generations straight.

The world belongs to God

The Irish monk St. Columba secured Iona's place in Christian history long before an abbey appeared on the island's landscape. In 563 CE, he set sail from Ireland with a few companions, eventually landing on Iona and choosing to settle there. Details of his journey have been obscured over the centuries, his reputation polished through the storytelling of faithful followers. Even his reasons for making the journey are disputed. Columba may have been banished from Ireland by his abbot for contributing to a conflict in which blood was shed. Then again, he may have set out on a pilgrimage as an act of commitment to go wherever God would take him, like many Celtic monks of that era did. Celtic pilgrims would truly have affirmed the words of Psalm 24, that the world belongs to God, as did their very lives. Columba had a powerful sense of doing God's bidding, whatever the truth of his motivation. He founded a community of monks on Iona that grew in significance and influence throughout the British Isles and beyond. Part of his influence was due to Columba's roots in an Irish noble family. The saint knew how to engage the leaders of his day! His faith also challenged him to keep moving into different regions of the mainland. Many holy sites in Scotland are linked to his mission travels, or to those of his students and successors on Iona.

There are just a few visible remnants of this early Christian settlement in the fields surrounding the Abbey, enough to make me pause in gratitude for the monks' tenacity to remain on the island in the face of a fierce climate and some equally fierce visitors. It takes a little imagination, however, to picture what Columba's community might have looked like in their daily life, praying at prescribed hours of each day (and night!),

copying and illustrating manuscripts of Holy Scripture, growing crops and tending to the needs of pilgrims. It was not an easy existence. Yet this community continued its work and worship for at least 400 years after Columba's death in 597. However, Viking raids, which began around the coast of Britain in the eighth century, took a heavy toll on the monks over the years. One of the white sandy beaches on the north tip of the island is thought to be the site of a massacre of monks waiting unarmed to greet unexpected visitors, as their rule of hospitality required. The remainder of Columba's community finally withdrew from the island after another particularly gruesome attack in 986.

The Abbey as it now stands was not yet on the horizon, but through Columba's connections Iona had already become a centre and a symbol of Christian power. Its holy ground became the burial site for many generations of kings and chieftains from Britain and northern Europe. Their grave markers, which now rest in and around the Abbey, offer silent testimony to the skill of Iona stone carvers, as do the standing crosses nearby. The intricate knots and turns characteristic of Celtic design frame figures of influence, identities once well known now obscured by the effects of sea air on stone. The original burial ground, lying to the south of the Abbey, draws a regular tide of visitors looking for the definitive resting place of Macbeth, that famous Scottish king. However, it is also the resting place of the beloved of *this* generation. Iona's holy ground is tender and precious as much for those whose names and places are known to current islanders as it is for the prestigious ones of centuries past.

These stones will shout aloud

Construction of the Abbey was sponsored by the Lord of the Isles, Reginald MacLean, at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The ever-changing allegiances between chieftain and Church meant that the Benedictine order, not Columba's successors, was invited to establish its community on Iona. According to architectural historians, the Abbey was not built following the most common Benedictine plan. Likely the

landscape of Iona's ancient "second beach" insisted on some of the Abbey's unusual features – cloisters to the north, the altar set much lower than the entrance. (The beaches of Iona were carved by ice age and wave action long before any human settlement took hold on the island. For the geologically inclined, I recommend a little reading about the ancient rocks, too!)

I love this building, perhaps because Iona Abbey has long refused to conform to anyone's convention. Its walls and floors show the dedication and decisions of so many generations – abbots, architects and artists of all sorts. It is the resting place for humble brothers and honoured elite; shelter for weary traveller and adventurous sparrow alike. There is faithfulness and patience in the very stones that have survived so many changes: a parable of God's faithfulness to humankind and holy patience with our commitment, which ebbs and flows like the tides of Iona. Even during the periods when the Abbey fell into disrepair, still pilgrims came. Stories from the nineteenth century recount small gatherings for worship within its crumbling walls, rafters long since rotted away. Iona has a holy pull, as contemporary visitors also attest.

"Nancy, what are we going to do? A peregrine falcon is trapped in the Abbey."

A worried staff member caught up with me as I waited on the jetty for the next boatload of guests one Saturday afternoon. By the time I reached the Abbey, someone had called a bird sanctuary for advice. Peregrine falcons are a protected species in Scotland. It might be coaxed down from the rafters with fresh meat, the expert suggested, once it got hungry. Until then, we should take care not to frighten this guest.

I stood just inside the Abbey for a few minutes, watching. The huge bird swooped restlessly from rafter to rafter. I wondered who would frighten whom!

To give the bird time and space to settle, we held worship in the Abbey refectory that night. In the morning, the bird was still in residence. We set up Sunday morning communion in the cloisters. The congregation gathered under the cloister roof and on the grass under open sky. "With earth, sea and sky, we sing

When God is with us

Here is a sermon based on Psalm 139 and Luke 6.27-8, 32, 36, preached in Iona Abbey one Sunday morning. The lessons are from the *Revised Common Lectionary* readings for that particular day of the year. It is the custom in the Abbey to read one or two of the designated lessons each Sunday. The Sunday liturgy includes the celebration of Holy Communion each week. For this service, I chose a musical setting of Psalm 139, written by Ian Pitt-Watson, from *The Church Hymnary* of the Church of Scotland, which we sang as the hymn before the sermon. The last verse of that hymn became the prayer that led us through this exploration of the psalm, inviting us to wonder about God's far-reaching presence and the intimacy with which God knows us. I hoped that singing this refrain would give us all a little time to face some of the things we like to avoid in our own lives and in our relationship with God. I also introduced comments from my research with children about their sense of who God is, in dialogue with lines from the psalm. I wanted listeners to recognize that the themes of Celtic Christian tradition, which frame my interpretation of the psalm, also find echoes in the instinctive wonder children bring to God's world.

Celtic spirituality.

Many folk come to Iona in search of something they identify with this term.

When I lead workshops on this theme, people talk about art –
Celtic interlace and knot work, carved crosses,
illustrated manuscripts.

People talk about music –
haunting melodies or dancing tunes of flute and fiddle.

And very often, people mention God's presence in nature –
the mystery and wonder of the world
speaking of God's mystery and wonder.

To be sure, these features can be found in the faith of many Celtic cultures.

Prayers and poems gathered from the Scottish highlands
confess faith in God

whose power embraces us in the fierce beauty we see all around us
on this holy isle.

Voice One: Where can I flee from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

Voice Two: If I take the wings of the morning
And settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
Even there your right hand shall hold me fast.

Many ancient peoples wondered at the presence of God
encountered in the depths of a starry night
and revealed in the colours of rock and the vast expanse of the sea.
No wonder the Celts had an affinity for the psalms of ancient Israel.
But others also wonder about God's presence around us.

Voice One: God is in the room with you but you can't see him.
He's in *every* room.

Voice Two: Can astronauts see God or angels flying around?
God will have to wear an air mask because there's no air
in space.

Today's children give voice to that ancient sense of God's mysterious
presence,
as near as this room and as far as the reaches of outer space.
When I interviewed children in Canada and here on Iona
about God,
I heard a very Celtic sense of God's presence.
Lorne, age 9, said to me quite confidently, "God watches over us."
But then he asked me whether God could see him
when he and his younger brother fought over their toys!
This is an important consideration,
whether we listen to this psalm as seekers after a Celtic sense of the
world
or as children suddenly aware that God's amazing presence
means God is witness
to those moments when we'd like to give our little brother a shove.
There are three visions of God in Psalm 139,

and each contains a challenge for us.

When we marvel at the God of the cosmos,

do we hope that such a mysterious creator is *so* vast
as to let us off the hook for the way we behave?

Celtic Christians of ancient days would not allow us to neglect our
neighbours

or mistreat our little brothers

without a sense of contrition before God, our Creator.

Voice One: You are acquainted with all my ways.

Voice Two: Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

Small wonder that confession of sin is also part of Celtic Christian
prayer.

No solitary search for God's presence in the beauties of nature

lets us away with causing harm to neighbour or ignoring a stranger.

And so, as we sing with the psalmist, we invite God to examine our
daily affairs:

Chant: *Search me, O God, search me and know my heart.*
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
Keep me from any path that gives thee pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Natalie was walking to the north beach with me.

Suddenly she stopped and gestured at the sky.

“God isn’t just up there, you know. He’s down here with us. He’s in
my heart.

And your heart.”

She paused and looked into the field. “He’s in the sheep’s heart.”

As she looked at the ground, she nodded.

“And he’s in the stone’s heart, too.”

Natalie hadn’t read anything about Celtic spirituality.

She was just four years old that day.

But she certainly holds the second vision of God
common to both the Celts and the psalmist.

Voice One: You knit me together in my mother's womb.

Voice Two: I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

The psalmist paints such an intimate picture of God's connection
with us.

Here is the tenderness we know

when we marvel at the perfection of a baby's fingers.

Here is Natalie's confidence that God knows her – and the sheep in
the field –

from the inside out.

But the psalmist also recognizes:

Voice One: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

Too wonderful, perhaps,

for those of us who live uncomfortably in our bodies,

unsure about our shape and look;

tempted to quiet our self-doubts with comfort food or some other
substance.

Such knowledge

that God has a concern for the intimate details of our physical life

gives me pause to think about my daily details.

Is the way I look after my health and well-being

as much a form of discipleship as coming to worship

or offering money to help those in need?

Is choosing a well-balanced diet and regular exercise

a spiritual discipline like prayer?

The psalmist asks God to search our hearts,

remembering that each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made.

*Chant: Search me, O God, search me and know my heart.
 Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
 Keep me from any path that gives thee pain,
 And lead me in the everlasting way.*

We haven't heard the third vision of God voiced by the psalmist.
 The scholars who proposed the reading of Psalm 139 for this
 Sunday
 carefully left out the messy bits.

Voice Two: O that you would kill the wicked, O God.
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

Voice One: I hate them with perfect hatred.
 I count them my enemies.

Eek.

Such sentiments in Holy Scripture make us uncomfortable.
 Yet we ignore them at our peril,
 for they are our sentiments, too, at least from time to time.
 Let us not forget that tradition suggests St. Columba's voyage to
 Iona
 may well have been an act of penitence
 for a bloody battle between royal households in Ireland
 for which Columba was partly responsible.
 Asking God to take vengeance on our enemies has long tempted people
 of faith.
 Such sentiments fill our world these days,
 when people of differing religious traditions point to people of *other*
 traditions
 as enemies of God.
 Sadly,
 people are ready to kill those whom they name as God's enemies.
 But listen to the voices of today's children.
 Anna, age nine:

Voice Two: God wants us to forgive each other.
If people never forgave each other, it'd be a cruel world.

Six-year-old Sandy:

Voice One: God has love for everyone in the world.
He has the most love of all.
I only have enough love for some people.

Sandy, with a child's honesty, has put her finger on the truth.
We cannot manage to love everybody on our own.
And so the words of Jesus stand as a constant challenge to us
just as they stood as a challenge to the psalmist's anger.

Voice Two: Love your enemies;
do good to those who hate you.
Bless those who curse you,
pray for those who abuse you.

Voice One: If you love those who love you,
what credit is that to you?
Even sinners do the same.
Be merciful, just as God is merciful.

Psalm 139 opens with amazing wonder
for God's creativity and inescapable purpose.
It paints tender images of God's intimate presence
with us from our vulnerable infant beginnings.
Its unsettling outburst of anger is hard to take.
But the *silence* of God's voice in this psalm
suggests to me that God rejects this cry for vengeance.
For God responds to human anger and outrage
with the challenging mercy of Jesus Christ.
Here is the challenge we must take up in the present moment.
Too many innocents are being lost or betrayed in campaigns of religious
anger.

The psalmist asks God,

Voice One: Search me, O God, and know my heart.
Test me and know my thoughts.

Voice Two: See if there is any hurtful way in me
And lead me in the way everlasting.

The psalmist's anger is honest, to be sure,
but it is also hurtful.

The way everlasting is the way Jesus walked.

The way that resists – even rejects – retaliation.

The way that risks love for enemies.

His is the way of goodness and mercy for all God's children,
not just for some.

Chant: Search me, O God, search me and know my heart.
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
Keep me from any path that gives thee pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Reading between the lines

Psalm 139 is one of my favourite psalms. I love its immense vision of God's presence. When I left the west coast of Canada for the west coast of Scotland, settling "at the farthest limits of the sea" seemed an appropriate image for me. Whichever direction you look from Iona's shores, you can appreciate the expanse of the world that God embraces in all its colour and beauty. It is no wonder that the prayers of Celtic Christians, collected over many generations, convey the same appreciation of God's presence, read from the text of the natural world as well as the psalms. My work on Iona involved leading sessions on St. Columba and Celtic Christianity with guests at our centres. The more research I did for these discussions, however, the more strands of Christian tradition I had to weave together to create the full texture

of the faith of Scottish Celts. This sermon attempted to draw some of those strands together.

Psalm 139 was the psalm assigned for the Sunday I preached, but only certain verses were proposed for reading. Four verses toward the end of the psalm, ranting against enemies, had been left out. This was no surprise. So often when we read psalms in church, we leave out the parts that disturb us. The same is true for some seekers after “Celtic spirituality” who visit Iona. They want a spirituality that fits an ideal – honouring the beauty and wonder of the natural world and, perhaps, affirming the goodness of human life. But confession of sin and responsibility for one’s neighbour are very often missing from the attributes of Celtic faith named by participants in my workshops. Given that many of the themes of the psalm resonate profoundly with Celtic Christian piety, I thought the missing bits of the psalm might remind us of important realities we prefer to avoid in our spiritual searching.

As I wondered how to draw people into reflection on both the beauty and the challenge in the psalm, the voices of children came to mind. I interviewed many children in Canada and on Iona as part of a research project on children’s questions about God. In that project, reported in my book *Growing up with God: Using Stories to Explore a Child’s Life and Faith*, I was struck by children’s honesty about the hard parts of their relationships. In our conversations, children often reflected on difficulties in friendships and in getting along at home. Sometimes they also puzzled about world situations and cruelty reported in the news. Their honesty and their expectation seemed to add an important voice to the dialogue between the psalm and its Celtic connections.

When I was working with the angry verses of the psalm, I was struck by the intensity of its emotion and parallels I was hearing all around me. In the United Kingdom, the so-called war on terror had ignited deep feelings against Muslims, who were being perceived in their neighbourhoods as a like-minded group bent on violence. They were easily identified as “enemies,” at least by some. At the same time,

people judged to be complicit with America's occupation of Iraq had become kidnap targets in that country, some beheaded by angry captors. Enemies targeted once more. The day after I wrote this sermon, a school in southern Russia was seized by terrorists, apparently as part of an ongoing ethnic and religious struggle in the area. A huge number of children who had gone to school for the first day of a new term became victims of vicious brutality. The words of the children I had chosen for the sermon rang out in the abbey in sad tribute to their innocence, lost to flames of adult anger. The killing of children is the kind of travesty that can surely ignite the outrage expressed by the psalmist. But if the world is ever to be a safer place for a new generation of children, we must take up the challenge in Jesus' teaching about enemies – long before another school comes under siege or another passenger plane becomes a deadly weapon.

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