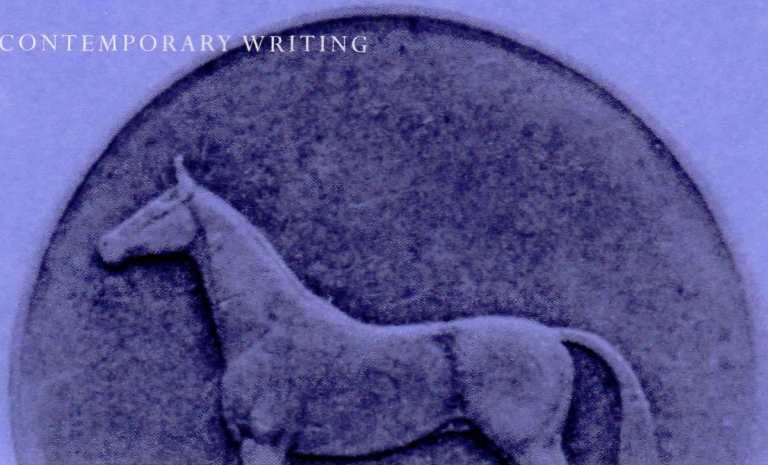


Alastair McIntosh - A Sixteenth-century Irish Sermon on COP 26

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A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SERMON ON COP26

Alistair McIntosh

Of heads and nails.

(Editor's Note: The basis of this "Sermon" took place at 6.00 pm on Sunday, 7 November in Govan, Glasgow as part of "Words & Music: An Afternoon with IRISH PAGES", held during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26, to mark the new issue of the journal, "The Anthropocene" [Vol 11, No 1])

I live in Govan in Glasgow, a mile away from where COP 26 took place in November 2021. And although I am a Quaker by convincement, I was raised in the highly Presbyterian Isle of Lewis, and I give this little bit of background to explain to my readers here why it was that the invitation to speak at an *Irish Pages* event in Govan's Pearce Institute was problematic. Problematic because, you see, the organisers must have been pagan Papist heathens or something like that, for they had invited me to speak upon the Hebridean Sabbath Day.

There was no way that I could accept. Not even for the cause of climate change. At least, no way that I could accept if the old folks back home found out, unless, unless ... and then the genius idea romped home to me ... unless I offered them *A Sermon*.

First Head – the Genesis of a Sermon

So it was, that we gathered in a hall that rests adjacent to Govan Old Church. It was from there, amidst the depressed shipyards of the 1930s, that George MacLeod, the twice-decorated soldier, turned Christian pacifist launched his mission to restore Iona Abbey, and to found the Iona Community. There had been music playing all afternoon. I studiously avoided it, because as they say, the trouble with dancing is that it leads to sex and the trouble with sex is that it leads to dancing.

I vividly recall one of our primary school teachers telling us that "dancing is a sin" because Salome had danced for the head of John the Baptist. I was

very happy with that particular Presbyterian teaching. A girlfriend later told me that I dance “like a spider in labour”. Others complained that I’d stand on their toes. Well, what are wellie boots for? But if John could get me off the hook of that particular social nicety, I was all for baptism.

But I risk digression. In John Buchan’s rollocking novel, *Witch Wood*, about Covenantor Calvinism, Royalist Catholicism, pagan frolicking in the greenwood, and the laird’s beautiful daughter (the Catholic girls are always prettier to Protestants), the Rev James C.G. Greig has an endnote in the World’s Classics edition that a proper Scots sermon has “three heads and an application”. I’ve already expended one head, musing on the answer to Question 60 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647, namely:

The sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.

That expenditure, however, in its reference to “works of necessity and mercy” justified my taking the pulpit, and administering unto the heathen masses of *Irish Pages*, a Sermon suitable to COP 26. Accordingly, let me share here at the invitation of the Editor (who is now clearly a Convert) how the said Sermon issued forth.

Second Head – The Hebridean Construction of Noah’s Ark

Now, dearly beloved assembled reprobates: in Hebridean legends as noted by Alexander Carmichael when he collected the *Carmina Gadelica* in the second half of the nineteenth century, and continuing to this day in the Catholic southern Hebrides (where they’re full of what we were taught to be “Papist superstitions”), there are to be three Great Floods. The first was the primordial inundation of the Book of Genesis, before God had separated the dry land from the oceans, “and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

The second Great Flood was, of course, that of Noah, brought on because, as Genesis informs us, “the wickedness of man was great in the earth and the Earth was filled with violence.” (Please note that that point is one about

which not many sermons are preached. Please note, also, that my references are to the King James Authorised Version of 1611 because, in the Presbyterian tradition, we were brought up properly.)

And the third Great Flood is that which, they say, has yet to come. But an old woman in South Uist told Carmichael in 1869 that there will be an “overflowing of the Atlantic and the submerging of certain places”, until the time will come to pass when “the walls of the churches shall be the fishing rocks of the people”, and amongst the resting places of the dead “the pale-faced mermaid, the marled seal and the brown otter shall race and run and leap and gambol – like the children of men at play.”

Notice, my dearly beloveds, that there is no need here for the predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and specifically, its recent Special Report on *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*. To think, I went to great pains to summarise it when writing *Riders on the Storm*, when in the end all I that I really needed to have done was to listen to that timeless font of both Hebridean and Irish wisdom, the *cailleachs*.

For now, let my attention fall upon the second Great Flood, for it is from that I suggest that we might find the vision of an opening of the way to the advantage of COP 26. Where, let us start by asking, did Noah build the Ark? The answer is self-evident. The shipwrights of the Holy Land knew only how to build for the gentle waters of mercantile trade. But the shipwrights of the Hebrides, now they were of a different mettle. So it is I tell you, that Noah’s Ark was built on my very own Isle of Lewis, and not only that, but in our parish of North Lochs.

I must support my case by academic referencing. The evidence is impeccable. In *The Apostles of the North*, published by the Stornoway Gazette Office, the Rev Norman MacFarlane of Juniper Green profiles the preaching of the Rev Robert Finlayson, who was the first evangelical minister to arrive in North Lochs in 1831. I have known an old woman in the parish – one Dolina MacDonald, herself a Lady of the Manse, who described to me his ministry as if it had been yesterday. The gravity of Mr Finlayson’s mission can be glimpsed from a mention in Macaulay’s *Aspects of the Religious History of Lewis* where we are informed that when a herd boy was asked if there were still any faeries in Lochs, he replied, “No, they all left when Mr Finlayson came.”

In MacFarlane’s “Notes of His Sayings”, Finlayson’s sermons “abounded in parable, allegory and dialogue, and in pictures of the spiritual life. It changed and flashed like a Kaleidoscope.” The sermon on Noah’s Ark is a good example.

As the boat neared completion, the carpenters came and knocked on Noah's door to get their wages.

"Is Noah at home?" they asked Mrs Noah.

"No, he's away at the stormy Butt of Lewis for a bull for the Ark."

A few days later they came back with the same question.

"No, he's away to hilly Uig for a ram."

[Author's Note: Sensitive readers might fear a patriarchal privileging of the male. But whereas it was incumbent for Noah to go elsewhere in Lewis to find perfection of the male, in North Lochs alone one finds extant perfection of the female.]

The third time that the carpenters knocked on the door, Noah was at home. He paid their wages, and off they went to ~~Babylon~~ Stornoway to spend it in the pub.

"They were shouting and singing their songs and dancing their drunken dance when, lo! a thunderbolt crashed and the rains began. What peal of thunders! The like was never heard before. The heavens poured in torrents. The public house was flooded and a river rushed through it and rose with appalling rapidity. Then did the mocking carpenters cry. But the Ark was closed and Mercy's Day had gone. O people of Lochs. God's Ark stands open for you today. But the day of the closed door is coming."

Third Head – The Best and Worst Nail in the Ark

At this point in our contribution to COP 26 I must turn to an Irish source, one that may be found as the third-last tale in Professor Jackson's magnificent Penguin Classics anthology, *A Celtic Miscellany*, and one that he sources as "Irish; author unknown; sixteenth century?". Permit me to relate it in my own telling, for just as "the gift must always move", so must old tales be let to breathe to open up the flow of life into our communities of today.

Meanwhile, as the last of the animals got on board the Ark, for Lochs is closer ground to Heaven than sea-level Stornoway, the master shipwright was disgruntled. He'd seen the passenger manifest. There was two of everything else, the red deer, the blue mountain hare, the lot of them, but not for him and his missus! And so he left an empty nail hole right down in the bilges, so that the Ark would slowly sink, and bye bye Noah.

Inevitably, the Devil was looking on: for what would we do without the Devil to demonstrate great spiritual truths. If he didn't exist, the bards would have had to invent him. I have just one problem with the Devil in this age of

gender equality. How come he's always a he? How come we've moved, as the late Mary Daly put it in one of her titles, *Beyond God the Father*, but feminism left the Devil unreconstituted?

[Author's Note: At this point in the Sermon, Luke Devlin of the Centre for Human Ecology, the event's co-host along with Irish Pages, had to interrupt proceedings. The janitor had just informed him that smoke had been detected inside the building. They thought that it was coming from outside. But if the fire alarm went off, the hall must be evacuated forthwith. But thankfully, the event was spared.]

Now, as I was saying, the Devil was looking on, and he thought to himself that there'd be sport aplenty if he got on board. As the last of the animals got on, two by two, the elephant and the kangaroo, he too slipped up the gangplank and slid down into the bilges. But the trouble for the Devil is he's very rational. I've heard it said that the Quaker folks of old referred to him as being "the great reasoner". The trouble with reason on its own is that it overlooks the mystery, and therefore, fails to see such mysteries as blessing. And that's what, according to the original sixteenth-century Irish Sermon the Devil hadn't reckoned on. For as the unknown author of blessed memory tells us: just before he raised the anchor, "Noah shut the windows of the Ark and raised his hand to bless it."

As all good Protestants know, the Devil can withstand the red hot fires of Hell. He relishes it, though as the Orthodox tradition of Eastern Christianity teaches, the fires of hell can't burn off anything authentic. And this was what he hadn't banked on. For there he was. Trapped beneath deck. And when Noah raised his hand he felt the white hot heat of love. And as the 7th Issac of Nineveh put it, "those who are tormented in hell are tormented by the invasion of love." And as Christ said to Silvanus of Mount Athos, "Keep your spirit in hell and despair not." Because, as the Russian exile Paul Evdokimov explains:

The only message which could reach atheism today is that of Christ descending into hell. As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us.

So here's the Devil – as Thomas More put it, "The Devil ... the prowde spirite ... cannot endure to be mocked" – and there's Noah with his hand raised up in exercising exorcism, and the Devil's like, just, "Whaur's the Fire Exit?" And as the text explains:

The Devil found no other way but the empty hole which the shipwright had left unclosed, and he went into it in the form of a snake; and because of the tightness of the hole he could not go out nor come back, and he was like this until the Flood ebbed; and that is the best and worst nail that was in the Ark.

The Application – Climate Change

My most dearly beloved Heathen friends: I have set out my first head, which justifies as both necessity and mercy the delivery of my Sermon on this Sabbath Day. I have set out my second head, which localises the building of the Ark upon the Isle of Lewis. By reference to the Rev Finlayson, we can be assured of blessing from the Hebridean *cailleachs*. And what's the difference, you might ask when both speak Gaelic, between an Irish Catholic *cailleach* and a Hebridean Presbyterian one? It's very simple. The Irish have their mantel pieces lined with pictures of the haloed saints. The Hebrideans have their mantel pieces lined with pictures of their dog-collared ministers. And I have set out my third head, revealing how the Ark was saved, and thereby, how all life on Earth was spared the consequence of human *hybris*, to use the Greek for violence, from which we derive our word "hubris" such as drives the consumerism that drives climate change.

What, then, is the *application* of this sermon? The application can be gleaned by returning to the legend of the Three Great Floods, and specifically, the version summarised in Otta Swire's *The Outer Hebrides and Their Legends*.

Before the end of the world a great flood will sweep over and drown all the islands, "even Islay", but Iona will rise on the waters and float there like a crown and the dead who are buried in her will arise dry and be easily recognised at the Last Day.

What does Iona represent? Iona represents the holy of the holy sacred places of the Hebrides. Iona of Columba who came from Donegal. Iona represents the "crown" that is the spiritual life of humankind. That's what will keep our feet dry in the come-what-may of the come-to-pass of climate change. That's the message that we send from here tonight, to a mile further up the Clyde where COP 26 is taking place.

Climate change is the worst nail in our Ark. Let us take it as a spur to consciousness, to an opening of the way and ways. Let it call us to a deepening of our human being, for the survival of all being, to keep our feet dry for the Last Day, the coming “times of restitution of all things”, the apocatastasis of Acts 3:21. There, we have our work cut out. Holy, holy, holy. God bless and amen. And, pace Luke 7:34, “the Son of Man comes eating and drinking”.

Is the pub still open?

Alastair McIntosh is the author of books including Soil and Soul (2001), and on climate change, Hell and High Water (2008) and Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being (2020). A human ecologist, he is an honorary professor at the University of Glasgow and a founding trustee of the GalGael Trust that works with community renewal in Govan. He was deeply involved in the contentious campaign to purchase the Scottish island of Eigg on behalf of the islanders, which was finally achieved through the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust – a victory widely celebrated throughout Scotland as a blow against the country’s highly concentrated and absentee pattern of land ownership in rural areas. “Nobody takes Alastair McIntosh seriously” – the Scottish Landowners’ Federation. He lives in Glasgow.

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