

# Parables of Northern Seed

Anthology from BBC's *Thought for the Day*



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wild goose  
publications



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## Introduction

*'The seed must move from north to south.'* These were the words that dropped from the mouth of an old crofter who I found harvesting his fields at Durness one late September's afternoon in 2007.

We were halfway between London and the Arctic Circle. I'd been invited by my friend Mike Merritt to speak at his award-winning John Lennon Northern Lights Festival. Lennon had holidayed in the village as a child. Yoko Ono had endorsed the gig. John's sister Julia Baird was guest of honour. Nizlopi and the Quarrymen (forerunners of the Beatles) were headline acts. And here was this denim-dungareed crofter telling me that he liked to get the seedstock for his oats from Orkney, even further to the north, because this gave his crop the hardiness required to flourish on his weather-blasted ground.

Those words played poetry in my mind. They spoke in metaphor, suggestive of renewal flowing from the wave-washed rural edges to the parched metropolis, and I pondered on another phrase I'd once heard someone use: *'When the centre collapses the periphery becomes central.'*

So it was that the seed of yet another *Thought for the Day* was sown, and as a Free Church clergyman on the Isle of Lewis is fond of saying: *'The field looks no different at the end of a day's sowing, but harvest is the proof of faith.'* As for my linking this to parables, that's because I cut my teeth with liberation theology when I was in my twenties and thirties working in the South Pacific. One day in the Solomon Islands I asked a visionary Catholic priest, Fr John Roughan: 'Why did Jesus talk so much in parables?'

'A parable,' he mused, 'is an armour-piercing missile. It penetrates the outer crusts of ego and explodes its meaning softly down through ever-deepening layers within the human heart.'

I present *Thought for the Day* on Radio Scotland about ten times a year and, less frequently, *Prayer for the Day* on Radio 4. ‘Why privilege religion in public broadcasting?’ some ask. Well, why business reports? Why sport? Why not the ‘God slot’ as a faith reflection on current affairs for listeners to whom it speaks?

As a Quaker, my ‘thoughts’ are usually Christian but I also love to draw on other faiths based on love. After all, Jesus in John’s Gospel said: ‘*I have other sheep that are not of this fold*’ and ‘*in my father’s house are many mansions*’. For me, there’s also many windows in those mansions and each lets in the light from its own distinctive angle. None of them is perfect. Some were once meticulously crafted but now the frames have rotted and they rattle in the wind. Others were once blasted through by cannonball and yet, given ample time to compost in God’s garden, even soils of sourest disposition can issue forth sweet blossom.

The day before I’m due to present a thought one of the editors from the BBC’s religion team phones up. We turn over whatever’s trending in the news. I try to bring an attitude of spiritual discernment. What matters is not to push a line, but to listen for the promptings of the Spirit; for that of life as love made manifest. To me, that inspiration stamps the hallmark on a good *Thought for the Day*. We’ll settle on a topic and by early afternoon I’ll e-mail through to my editor a first draft. It’s only a single page and yet, as the layers and resonances build up, it often takes me all day to fine-tune.

Delivery goes out live from Good Morning Scotland’s studio. The night before, I set my alarm to rise at some ungodly hour. I know I’ll keep on waking up for worry of sleeping in and so my wife, long-suffering, evicts me to the spare room. It’s not so much the fear of letting down the nation that bugs me. More, the fear of what my octogenarian mother in Stornoway would say. Just imagine her getting behind the microphone in riposte. That

would make a cracking *Thought for the Day*!

Over the past nine years I've produced a hundred broadcasts, and what a privilege it is to work with these women and men at the BBC who have helped so much to polish up my scripting and intonation. Sometimes there's an 'ouch' when they pull me up, but I must admit: they're nearly always spot on.

The anthology in your hands was suggested, selected and lightly edited by Neil Paynter at the Iona Community. I thank him and his sharp eye warmly. But let me close with one last word from Durness.

Some weeks after my northern seed broadcast I was e-mailed by a local lass called Sophie Anne Macleod. She was seeking a quote for her classroom project about the Northern Lights event.

Bursting with youthful enthusiasm she said: 'The old man that you were talking to is my high school bus driver, Michael. I see him every day.'

Now, to me there's something curiously armour-piercing in such a simple human connection. It brings an honest-to-life quality that often grounds *Thought for the Day* in the plainsong truths of real people in real places in real time.

I listen to my many co-presenters, and their best thoughts are far more than mere descriptions or opinion. They're deeper ways of seeing and being. They're observations that have required a spiritual presence to the undercurrents of a situation. That is what cracks the husk around the hardy grain and, once winnowed with the editing team, reveals life's inner kernel.

I watch some of those kernels grind to flour and rise to bread '*in memory of me*'. I watch others bubble in the ferment of the copper pot and trickle through as essence from the winding tube. That's

a *Thought for the Day* at its very best. The distillation of the land itself and all that it contains.

A form of working in the Spirit – I'd call it Scotland's other whisky industry.

Said Luke and Matthew: '*For the Son of Man comes eating and drinking.*'

Eat, drink, and I sincerely hope that you'll find savour in these *Parables of Northern Seed*.

*Alastair McIntosh,*  
*Govan, 2014*



## Saint Columba and the Cross today

Tradition holds that 1450 years ago this weekend, St Columba brought his Christian message from Donegal to Iona.

Amongst the celebrations marking this will be a conference of the Islands Book Trust on the Isle of Lewis exploring pilgrim links between Ireland and the Hebrides – and, this coming Sunday, a special thanksgiving service at Iona Abbey.

Afterwards, Historic Scotland will unveil the newly restored St Oran's Cross, now made whole again from fragments long-since broken.

When I stand beneath Iona's crosses, which have weathered nearly two-thirds of Christian history, they press me with a question: 'What might be the meaning of the Cross for us today?'

The answer lies in their ornate carvings – spirals hinting at the wellspring of Creation, interwoven knotwork revealing that all is one, and serpents that remind us that we only find a new life if we shed our outworn skins.

It was said to be the destiny of Saint Columba '*to lead the nations unto life*'.<sup>1</sup>

Today's Iona Community also celebrates a founding anniversary in 2013 – its seventy-fifth year of seeking '*new ways to touch the hearts of all*'. Like St Oran's Cross, restoring fragments of a world broken by poverty, violence and cruel discrimination on such grounds as race, sexual orientation or faith.

George MacLeod, who founded the Iona Community, had no doubt about the meaning of the Cross today. It stands, quite simply, for '*a power of love that's greater than the love of power*'.

That remains this holy island's message, 1450 years on from St

Columba's arrival. These high crosses – these stones that shout aloud from out their silence – call both nations and ourselves to life itself – to that *power of love that's greater than the love of power*.

*Note:*

1. Adomnán of Iona's *Life of St Columba*, Penguin Classics, 1995, III:3, p.207

## Reality: real or virtual?

This is the first week in July, and when I was a boy on Lewis it used to be the most exciting time of the year – because it was the start of our summer holidays.

We'd be out in the boats with the old men hauling up the haddies with handlines, scrounging jammy pancakes and glasses of Creamola Foam from one another's mothers, and as we helped the neighbours gather in their peats we'd be hoping that Aitch wouldn't tell our dads if he caught us hitching a lift behind his tractor trailer on our bicycles.

Perhaps I was lucky, perhaps I have rose-tinted glasses, but I don't think I'm alone in remembering those days as a time when childhood meant innocence and trust, where doors were left unlocked and no one had to be told that it takes a whole community to raise a child.

But what about now? So many folks are working, so many are stressed and worried, that in the villages, and also on the city streets, it's difficult to build that important sense of community.

Children spend more time online, twittering with their Tweeter machines and with virtual reality standing in for the real thing.

There's even been a study in the news lately suggesting that the average age at which children first encounter pornographic

content online is six, and there's the worry that the ease of availability normalises violence and exploitation in relationships.

It sets me thinking of the black American feminist Audre Lorde, who wrote that true love celebrates the sensual but with the heart engaged, while the merely pornographic seeks sensation but without the heart's connection.

Could that be a metaphor for how we choose to live our lives?

Seeking that of God within rather than just using one another?

Jesus loved the little children, and with the summer holidays I'm wondering what it means to care for children better, to cultivate their qualities of heart and build a world of empathy, and reality – not just virtual, but meaningful.

*Note:*

Audre Lorde can be heard reading her essay 'Uses of the Erotic' at this link: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFHwg6aNKy0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFHwg6aNKy0)

## Seat of the faeries

We're full swing into Scotland's festivals with easily a hundred of them taking place this summer. They're good for entertainment and for the local economy, but I suspect they're also good for something in the soul, the imagination.

When academics try to study Scots creativity they quickly hit upon a sense of magic, so much so that leading scholars hold that the realm of *faerie* is '*a metaphor for the imagination*'.<sup>1</sup>

Last weekend my wife and I went walking in the Blackwood of Rannoch. We booked into a B & B at Dunalastair and our room looked out directly on the concave pointed summit of Schiehallion.



Our host was a retired surveyor. ‘So, what does *Schiehallion* mean?’ I asked at breakfast time, playing the daft laddie.

‘It means,’ he said, with a puff of pride: ‘*the Seat of the Caledonian Faeries.*’

‘Oh? And do you believe in the *sìth*<sup>2</sup> – the faeries?’

‘Yes!’ he proclaimed, followed quickly by: ‘Well, OK – you don’t believe in the faeries. But you don’t disbelieve in them either. *They might be watching!*’

Of course, we were pulling one another’s legs – kind of – but truth be told I’d sat up late the night before and watched a waxing moon rise up and hover in the mists above the mountain.

As I turned in I’d thought: *Here is what is meant by the sìth – a byword for beauty in nature.*

That night I had a dream. It was about the need for love to be woven in with all our economic activity. So wondrous was the imagery that I was shaken to tears and woke up thinking: ‘My goodness – is this what happens when *I to the hills will lift mine eyes?*’

The Scots imagination grows from qualities hidden deep within this land. May such creative roots be shared at all our summer festivals – and remember – *they might be watching.*

Notes:

1. John MacInnes, *Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2006, p.467

2. *Sìth*: pronounced shee-h