



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Wee Drive around Scotland

October 2, 2016

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

So, we took a wee drive around Scotland. I say "wee" because everything in Scotland is "wee," Children are wee bairns, one might stop by a pub for a wee dram, there was a wee traffic problem when the sheep wouldn't move off of the road. And the Olympics was a wee sporting event in Brazil. I say "we drove", but really I mean Peter. He did yeoman's work staying the right lane, shifting with his left hand and navigating thousands of miles of very wee roads. We had only one wee spot of trouble when a wee bus forced us off of one of those wee roads into a wee ditch. It all turned out fine.

We went all over that extraordinarily beautiful country - from charming villages by salmon filled rivers, to the gentle farmlands of the Kingdom of Fife, to the dramatic mountains of Skye, to wide sandy beaches, the standing stones of Brodgar and the heather covered hillsides of the Highlands. We enjoyed the people, the Scots seemed to get pleasure from our delight. They wanted to know where we'd been, what we'd seen, and learned. We found the Scots to be very open and friendly, and often joyous.

If the people were wonderful, the animal life of Scotland will charm even the hardest heart. Highland cows, pronounced "Hailand' coos" are quite a presence. Their shaggy coats with long bangs that fall down over their eyes are set off by some serious horns. They are gentle, placid and very big, especially when standing in the middle of a single lane road. I have the photos. On the Isle of Mull, there are otter crossing signs on many roads, unfortunately, that was all we saw, but I knew they were nearby and that was good. Sheep are everywhere. Many golf courses consider them a part of the grounds crew. And then there were the puffins. We took a boat ride out to Staffa, which is rock in the ocean that boasts Fingal's Cave, and amazing volcanic wonder, and a colony of puffins that are the most adorable, comical birds you can imagine. And they are absolutely unafraid of people. If you sit still, you can be within an arm's length of them and they pose most charmingly. I now own a book about puffins, puffin bookmarks, a fuzzy toy puffin who will take up residence on my desk, a puffin tea towel, a puffin coffee mug and a beeswax puffin candle that will never be lit. I may have to admit that I have a problem.

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Two things that one encounters simultaneously in Scotland are the natural beauty and the history. We already knew about the beauty and just kept soaking it in. We knew that we didn't know enough about the history to have a good picture but that came somewhat organically. You encounter a bit of history and learn as you go and pieces start to put themselves together. Different people tell the stories differently. A hero in one version is a villain in another. The castles, and I think we were just about in all of them, are often crumbling witnesses to the failure to see Christ in one another. They tell their stories of battles and sieges and prisons. They show the concentration of wealth and how expendable were the simple people.

The saddest stories came from what is known as the Clearances. In the 18th century, politics and economics conspired against the Highland culture. First the British attempted to finally subdue the fiercely independent clans so that there would be no more threat of Jacobite revolt. At the same time, the global demand for wool and other commodities rose dramatically. So much of the rural population, small crofters, were evicted from their homes to make room for large sheep farming. We stayed in one place that had been particularly hard hit up along the northern coast. There is a small museum in the town of Bettyhill that tells the sad story of The Clearances. People became refugees in their own country and were either forced to the coasts on land that could not feed a family or to the cities. Many of them also left for the new world. The Highlands became the most thinly populated region in Europe. It's still empty because the land was apparently not really suited to lots of sheep. In places it has a desolate, haunted feel to it.

But Scotland is so much more than any one story. It has a spiritual history that still shimmers through around the edges. Christianity first came to Scotland with St. Columba in the 6th century. He created an abbey and spiritual community on the tiny island of Iona that eventually spread throughout the country. Iona became a sparkling center of spirituality and art. The Book of Kells, the most famous manuscript of the Gospels with its magnificently painted illuminations was created on Iona.

As monasteries thrived, they too became targets. History seems shot through with the idea that having nice things means that someone will come and try to take it from you. The Vikings, raiders from Scandinavia loved the monasteries of the British Isles. They visited them often, looting and ransacking. There is a beach on Iona that is the site of a brave stand by a small group of monks trying to hold off the Viking hoard. It didn't go well. But today the place is peaceful and beautiful. People come to experience the peace, to study and pray and learn. Iona is now a place dedicated to the creation of a just and peaceful world.

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I told you before I left that I would be praying a lot about what God might be expecting or hoping from us as a church community in the coming years. I realize now that that might have been too big a plan because what I learned was more what God is expecting from me personally. It began in July when we were in the Borders region of southern Scotland. We stopped in the charming town of Melrose. The ruins of the Abbey there are so hauntingly lovely that the town is always filled with people coming to visit, to stand among the arches and walls and imagine what it was like in its day. It was built in the 12th century by King David I of Scotland and the monks there developed new agricultural systems and a successful wool industry. When a famine came, the Abbey was able to feed hundreds of hungry people for months. Of course, its success made it a prize and a target. While Melrose was often caught in the political cross hairs, it still vibrates with a love of God that reduced me to tears, as if every stone was carved for the sole purpose of imitating God's beauty. I'm not the only person to feel that. Robert the Bruce, the hero of Scotland, had his heart buried there.

The reading from 2 Timothy says "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you" I stood in the Abbey and I realized that I have been so focused on doing my job here, trying to do a good job, trying figure out how to help Trinity thrive that I forgot the real treasure. In that moment I realized that I had been forgetting to love God. It was a hard thought to have.

Fortunately, I had planned to attend a gathering of a most extraordinary spiritual community. It's called the Ceile De and it is an ancient Celtic tradition dedicated to loving God in Christ, in the earth, in each other and in ourselves. And they saved me from my despair. I learned to pray and sing in Gaelic and to engage my own spiritual journey with, as the letter to Timothy said, "not with a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." I know that this is what I have needed and I have made the commitment to myself that I will continue in the Ceile De tradition and learn what they have to teach me. So, I may not have a clear understanding of what we are to do together, but I know that I will be a much better support to you as you all decide how we as a spiritual community will be taking part in what God is doing here and now to help the kingdom come.

I thank you. Peter and I thank you for the gift of time that you gave to us. It was precious and we are a wee bit better for it.

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