

LIVING LETTERS OF THE WORD

Readings & meditations
from the Iona Community

Neil Paynter

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publications



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A mouse can do little but a nest of mice can work great havoc.

George MacLeod, Founder of the Iona Community



INTRODUCTION

Each day of the month Iona Community members pray for one another, for the wider work of the Church, and for the Community's shared concerns. Like *This Is the Day* and *Gathered and Scattered*, this book explores some of those concerns.

These readings and meditations were gathered over the past few years, during which I've been working as an editor at Wild Goose Publications and as Editor of *Coracle: the magazine of the Iona Community*.

Some of these readings are taken from Wild Goose books; some are from *Coracle*; some are from the *Iona Community e-zine*; many are original to this publication. Also included are short prayers for each day, and a list of scripture readings which readers might like to work through as part of a daily discipline.

The Iona Community believes *'that social and political action leading to justice for all people, and encouraged by prayer and discussion, is a vital work of the Church at all levels'* (from the Rule of the Iona Community).

I hope that these readings and meditations will aid in prayer and reflection, and serve to encourage thoughtful, committed action in God's world.

The collection is again dedicated to all who believe in the power of the Word (and of words), and to all those who are working to make their communities more just and peaceful places.

Living Letters of the Word is the final book in this series of daily readings. Thank you to everyone who contributed to them; and to everyone at Wild Goose, especially Sandra Kramer.

Neil Paynter, Biggar, 2012

MONTH 1



Month 1 Day 1

NEW WAYS TO TOUCH THE HEARTS OF ALL

Returning home

Alone in an inner wilderness
and burdened by regret,
a place where the heart can rest
seems a long way off –
a distant country, barely remembered.

For when the soul is lost and
all around are disconnections,
battered hopes,
mounting failures,
and the pain of abandonment
is our daily companion,
we know that we are far from home.

Yet even in this darkness
the heart longs to return,
to find release,
to be touched by resurrection.

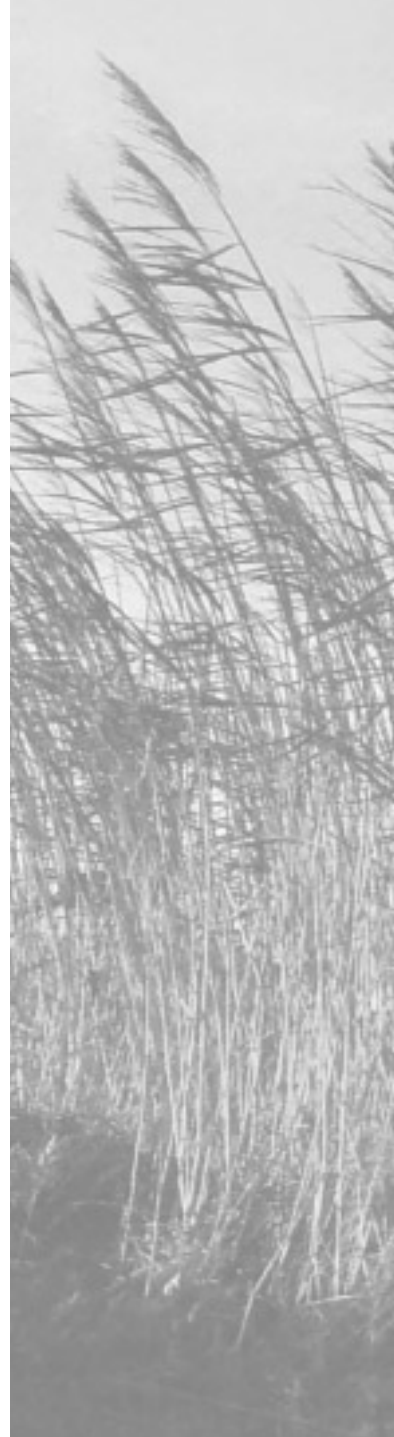
For our spirit
ultimately rebels against
these imprisoning disconnections

and the lifelessness of false desire.
We glimpse a different path
even when far from it.

A path on which
our search for light,
our awareness of failings,
our yearning for another way
are in themselves
propulsions to new possibilities.

To the possibility
that our tears are being witnessed,
that our cries are being heard,
that our soul is being healed,
by the One who accepts, understands
and tenderly invites us Home.

Peter Millar



Month 1 Day 2

ECONOMIC WITNESS

On money

A few years ago, with a couple of promotions adding substantially to our income, I decided, with my family, that rather than getting used to ever-increasing amounts of wealth and the standards of living that went with them, we would draw a line somewhere around the national average wage (it varies depending on whom you consult, but tends to be around £26K) and that would be our income. The rest we would give away.

This was not a hasty decision but one taken in the light of many conversations about money with friends and in my community. The second aspect of our Rule of life as members of the Iona Community calls us to account to one another for our use of money and resources and this includes a calculation, together, of our baseline commitments and a discussion, in our local Family Groups, about the decisions we have made and about our giving to a common pot, to the Community and to wider good causes. A rule of thumb for us remains the injunction to tithe, to give 10%, but this is not hard and fast and through the process of accounting to one another adjustments are made. Some of our number have chosen to live lives of poverty; some have not, but do because their circumstances place them in poverty. Some of our number are wealthy, and middle-class professions number in the jobs done by members in various parts of the UK and abroad.

The application of this Rule to our lives was one of the structures supporting our decision. A second was a series of pleasant and provoking, somewhat disquieting evenings we had over a year with two other sets of friends exploring the spiritual power of money in our lives. We spent time reflecting on the relationship our parents and families had to money, how it was used to control or to

free, to force or facilitate. We considered the experiences we had had of learning to use money, of having it and of not having it. We told stories of first wage packets, of poverty in all our family histories, of mothers going without food to feed children and of surprising acts of incredible generosity. A feature of these stories was often the way provision was made at a point when least expected and most needed, provision that was just that, provision of enough, often anonymous or from surprising, generous sources. We studied the scriptures and especially the Gospels and the sayings attributed to Jesus warning of the spiritual dangers of wealth, and we considered how we might go through the eye of the needle, or store up spiritual treasures, or give a widow's mite or live with the knowledge that the poor are always with us. Such sayings run deeply through us, with their own proverbial power to taunt and test.

Together, in these groups we came to the realisation that money is rather like prayer: it requires discipline and right relationship. It is easy to put off this right relationship for the 'right time' for adjustment or amendment. It's also easy to fall prey, as a giving person, to a certain pride in the giving, a sense of power at supporting good causes with surprisingly sized cheques. Talking about this, accounting to one another, as friends and through the more formal processes of our Iona Community Family Group, means, for me at least, that the power of temptations to pride, to poverty, to greed, to belief in our immunity to the spiritual dangers of wealth could be, at the very least, offset somewhat and held up for scrutiny before others.

Spring is the time of year when we account to one another in our Family Groups for the use of our money. It fits with the annual tax year end and means looking hard at what we have spent, and what these spending decisions tell us about our lives and our values. As well as giving, which represents our most significant spending, we see how our decisions about food, travel, clothing, hobbies and fitness, books and maintenance are nuanced, expanded through ethical decision-making, and where we have had no easy control. We also see where the surprises come – the sudden, unexpected gifts of generosity to the legal fees we have had as we have tried to keep our adoptive daughter safe from harm,

covering, to within £5, the bill from our careful lawyer, *'because we were praying for you and thought you should not be doing this all on your own'*. It's not been easy and we may not be able to sustain the commitment easily every year into the future. Our concern and care for asylum seekers and refugees in our home and neighbourhood means that our resources cannot be easily under our control in the rather too solid way they may have been in the past. The poor are with us and are ours to care for, especially as the state withdraws even the pitiful amounts of support it may have previously given. It is from the much that we have been given that much is expected, hoped for or just needed. We'd like to try to continue in this way though we know that ours is not really in any way a radical commitment. It's just a decision to have the average rather than to unthinkingly take all we are being paid through decisions made by arbitrary others.

Material poverty is a scandal but, as Leonardo Boff has said, faith involves a constant conversion to the way of the poor. I believe our economy needs radical redistribution of wealth. I believe that there is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed. I believe that the wages paid to me as a professor in higher education are unnecessarily high, and I'd happily trade some of them in to secure a future that contains people capable of careful, deliberative thinking, capable of speaking many different, even obscure languages, analysing a work of art, understanding the patterns of life in regions of the world remote in time or geographical distance, or spiritual expression. I'd happily trade them in for more days with my family and friends, or digging my garden and away from the treadmill of e-mail production. I believe the research showing that in countries where the gap between rich and poor is lowest the well-being of the country is greatest. I believe this is part of what my family have been discovering through our commitment to cap our wealth and give, without strings, to others, perhaps so that others may have benefits that would not otherwise be possible, but far more so that we might know what it is to give and receive from others in due measure. I believe that the poor may well always be with us but that is no excuse for staring wealth in the eye and not blinking. *'We are all in it together,'* says David Cameron as he attempts to take money from the poor and slightly above average to give to the

already very rich. Money is a political matter but it is also, perhaps primarily for me, a spiritual matter. And that includes *my* money. I believe that it doesn't matter what I believe about money if I don't find ways of trying to practise it.

Alison Swinfen

Month 1 Day 3

YOUTH CONCERN

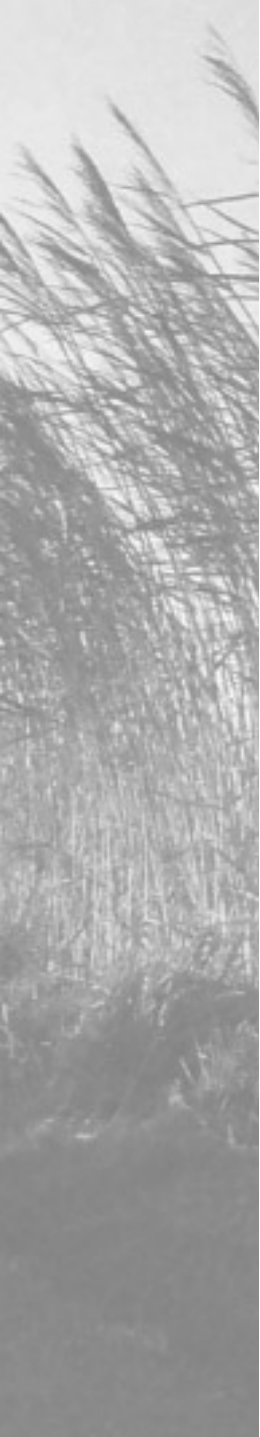
Jesus was young (a sermon)

Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example for the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith and purity.

1 Timothy 4:12 (GNB)

Jesus was young. That fact always strikes me with some force whenever I remember it. At least, young by Western standards, though judged by Ethiopia or Bangladesh you might say he was getting on towards middle age. But in Britain, he would be too young to be the Prime Minister, or even the leader of a party, too young to be a general or a bank manager or the chairman of the board, and eyebrows would certainly be raised, and are, when someone of his age is appointed the president of a trade union or the headmaster of a school. Our society would consider him too young for real power.

And not only was he young, he didn't even show any of the marks of the rising young man, any of the signs that might have endeared him to his elders. He was unemployed, and, what was worse, he had voluntarily given up a perfectly good trade to go wandering round the countryside with no fixed address – a kind of early



New Age traveller. He had no home, having left his family with some rather ungrateful and not at all ‘family values’ comments about anyone who did God’s will being his family. He was not married, had no children, and was a perfect target for accusations of irresponsibility and refusing to play his part in the upholding of society.

His friends were questionable, and in some cases downright disreputable, including as they did criminals, drunks and prostitutes. He spoke out strongly against the status quo, the establishment, and corruption in high places – in the government, in the military, in the church. He refused to take part in a military uprising, and would not defend himself when attacked. He spoke a great deal more about money than he did about sex. He did all the things that we warn our children against doing, and very much about him went completely against the standards of success and status we set for young people. And not only did he do these things himself, he also actively encouraged other people to do them too. He invited people to go and give away all their money to the poor and join him in his vagabond life. He told them to leave their jobs and their families and their security and opt for a life of uncertainty. If we met him today, we might be warned against him as a bad influence on young people, and there would probably be a police file on him.

He had qualities which we tend to ascribe to youth (often in order to dismiss them) – idealism, a quick temper, a tendency to do things on the spur of the moment (have you ever noticed how often Mark’s Gospel describes Jesus as doing something ‘immediately’, and how often he changes his plans, when he had any, that is?). What an irritant, how infuriating he must have been to the power-holders and power-brokers, this young upstart from an unfashionable place.

The church, most of the time, has tried to pretend that Jesus wasn’t young. Sometimes, it has just ignored the fact, and has acted as if Jesus was a grave, sober, impressive elderly man. Many Protestants like this

notion of Jesus. Elderly men in black suits preside over what bears more relationship to a funeral than a celebration, and dignity is the most important thing. We are exhorted in suitably elderly, even archaic language, to adhere to ways of doing things that have happened for generations, without the question ever being asked if this way of doing things is actually speaking to the real needs of people.

Or sometimes, the church has acknowledged that Jesus was young, but has still managed not to let it make a difference, by saying, in effect, well, yes, true, he was young, but he was different, so it doesn't count. As if it were accidental, a little mistake on God's part. But isn't the Incarnation, the life of Jesus, about the fact that Jesus was born like us? So, if he was young, not an old man in disguise or some kind of freak young man, then he really was a young man, with all that that implies. Is it not the case that what was different about Jesus was not the nature of his humanity, but the choices he made about its expression? Young man as he was, all the humanity and youthful quality of his life was offered up to witness to a radically different understanding of the world from that in which he stood. By being who he was, not in spite of who he was, he did what he did. The unique quality of a young man's love offered other possibilities for justice, for transformation, for a new way of being human. Freely choosing not to act out of his own urges for self-fulfilment, not enslaved to the gratification of his own desires, but equally not bound to any political or social system, any religious orthodoxy, not imprisoned in any dogma or doctrine, he chose a way that led to pain, humiliation, dreariness and death. Not because any of these things were good or desirable, because none of them are, but because they were the consequence and cost of that way. I find demonstrated in that way, at one and the same time, both a sacrificial commitment to the value and worth of people, and indeed of all that is created, which we might choose to call unconditional love, and a profound assertion of his own calling, worth, freedom, self. At the moment of most complete self-surrender, he was most completely himself.

Did he struggle with these choices? Every step of the way. Did he find them easy, pleasant, inevitable? Not according to the Gospels. He fought with God and angels and demons, as well as with great social and political forces. He dissented,

groaned, sweated, shouted and despaired. No wonder he needed times of deep solitude – and no wonder that he liked parties and feasts so much, when he could simply relax and let things just be. But through all the tension and conflict, he returned again and again to that freedom and that demand which would not let him go. And from the abandonment of all ambition for his own happiness, success and power came the new life of resurrection, in which all that is surrendered is given back in new, mysterious, but real ways.

The very fact of Jesus' age makes this self-surrender all the more an act of love. It is hard to let go of life at any age. But voluntarily to give up all the possibilities that youth offers, to choose not to drink the cup of living to the full – there is a choice few of us would make willingly. Too many have that decision forced on them. It is not twenty-year-olds who decide to make wars, but they are most often the ones sent to fight and die. There is nothing good or noble about the curtailment of life by war, hunger, injustice, cruelty. And for Jesus, aware of the power he had, and could have to a much greater extent, feeling perhaps that there was so much good he could still have done, the pain of surrender must have been acute. Renunciation, for anyone, and for the young man Jesus too, is never easy. Only love and the exercise of freedom gives it any meaning.

I stress Jesus' youth not to slight or offend older people. For the rest of my life, I will be older than Jesus. And his good news, and the invitation to be part of the community of faith, was to people of all ages. But it is important that we allow ourselves to be challenged by the person of Jesus, in a world where being young is often seen as being a barrier to real responsibility, and where we think we can lay down what our young people should be like from a desire to relive our own youth.

And so, when we read the Gospels, we need to look at our own communities and cities and ask, where is the young Jesus to be found? Is it in the seats of power and authority? Or could it be that we see him, as in the Gospels, questioning the status quo, offending the respectable, outraging and threatening the mighty with his revolutionary message of love and justice and forgiveness, with his continual call to change economic priorities away from favouring the rich towards justice for the poor? And where do we find Jesus' contemporaries in the church? Are they

pushed to the margins, denied a voice, unheard in the name of one who was too young to be a bishop or a church dignitary? Are our churches places where both young and old can meet a young Jesus, and not simply his pale ghost? If we are honest, we know that most of Jesus' contemporaries never come near the church.

They are to be found elsewhere. Instead of lambasting them for whatever imagined failing this denotes, we might more usefully consider what this says about the church and about our attachment to the past at the expense of the present. Many, perhaps most, of Jesus' followers were young, as many of those who have been prophetic have been. Perhaps their very youth allowed them to live more by trust and passion, and less by a conviction of their own wisdom and strength. Remember the Lord speaking to Jeremiah: 'Do not say that you are too young.' There are no barriers to discipleship. The young Jesus called young people. The church must recognise both that calling and the fact that it will not necessarily show up in the ways we think it should. The young Jesus does not need to be protected by us, but perhaps he sometimes needs to be protected from us.

Kathy Galloway, Iona Abbey, September, 1987





Month 1 Day 4

THE WORD

Steve the Satanist: unless a seed dies (a sermon)

John 12:20–33

He came into the church late one November afternoon.

It was pouring rain.

I'd just dashed in to get something from my office,
hoping to make a quick getaway.

'Can I use the phone?'

I looked at him more closely.

A young man, still in school, I thought,
not wearing a coat even in the pouring rain.

Thinking he'd had car trouble, I said,
'Go ahead, if it's a local call.'

As he dialled, he glanced around the church.

He chuckled and said,

'Imagine. A Satanist comes to a church to call for help.'

I swallowed.

A Satanist was using my office phone.

A Satanist stood between me and the door.

A six-foot-tall, strapping young Satanist
had me trapped in my office.

My Hollywood imagination conjured up a scene

as the young man spoke into the phone.
Would unsuspecting members of my congregation
find me sacrificed on the communion table
when they came to clean the church the next morning?
I began to edge toward the door.
This was not the kind of death
I would have chosen for myself.

Today is known as Passion Sunday in many churches.
It is a day to consider the death of Jesus
and its significance for us
as we move closer to the Cross.
Today's reading from the Gospel of John
provides an image of the kind of death Jesus would die,
an image to help us consider
the meaning of our own commitments in life and in death.

John pictures Jesus' death as a sign.
He believes that God is acting to reveal true glory
through Jesus' surrender of himself.
But this is not always the way people view Jesus' death.
Throughout history
and into our own generation,
Jesus' death has been seen as
weakness;
a tragic mistake;
a piece of gruesome history
covered up by rumours of resurrection.

Take my young Satanist, for example.
He was on the phone for quite awhile.
Then he asked if I would come and take the line.

'The youth worker wants to talk to you.'
My fear eased a bit.

I found myself speaking with a youth worker in the next city.
He explained he was part of a Christian team
advertised on radio stations that appealed to young people.

'We invite kids who are mixed up in Satanic ritual
to call us if they want to talk.

I'm going to come and talk to Steve.

I'll be there in an hour.

Will you keep him talking until I get there?'

I looked at the young man.

Steve the Satanist.

Somehow I'd imagined a name like Voltan or Draco.

Steve.

He was just 15.

And his mother's boyfriend had hit him in the face.

So he'd run out of the house in the pouring rain without a jacket
and come to the first place he thought he'd find help.

A church.

We sat in the sanctuary and talked as we waited.

Steve picked up a Bible

and flipped through it, glancing at the words.

He stopped when he read: Love your enemies.

'Do you believe that?' he challenged me.

'Yes,' I said.

'We believe that love is weak.

You should hate people who push you around.

Look here. It says turn the other cheek.

That's crazy.'

As Steve repeated to me some things he'd learned
from what he called the Satanic Bible,
I heard many of the teachings of Jesus turned upside down.
Hate your enemies.
Hit them first.
Whatever else it does,
this movement cannot accept the crazy teachings of Jesus
that insist we serve others and put ourselves last, not first.
Steve was convinced that strength is a master,
not a servant.

But let us listen to Jesus.
"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
Whoever serves me must follow me."
He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.'

A seed must surrender its individual existence
in order to produce its fruit.
A seed gives life
by dying to its hard, smooth, perfectly packaged beginnings.
When the plant emerges from the soil,
the original seed has disappeared.
It has died to give birth to its crop of fruit,
its blossoms of beauty and the next generation of seed.

Jesus dares his followers to live by this pattern of paradox.
If we dream of life as a perfect package,
smooth, neat,
encased in a solitary shell of home and office

arranged for our own enjoyment,
we are like seeds that wither on the shelf.
Jesus challenges us
to plant ourselves in the common ground of God's world;
to give our energy-producing goodness
that feeds the goodness of the whole world,
not merely our own desires.

If we love life as a perfect package
and set our hearts on achieving it for ourselves,
Jesus says we will lose it.
We will know only the sterile loneliness
of a seed stuck in its own shell.
But when we die to the desires the world considers important,
when we give ourselves to others, for others,
our lives are enriched beyond measure.
It is a promise that only makes sense
once we have taken the risk and committed ourselves
to the messy soil of compassion –
loving our neighbours and our enemies.



Our fruitfulness,
our beauty and purpose
are only discovered in the midst of giving ourselves away.
Steve, my young Satanist,
could not understand this.

Instead,
he described sacrificing a bird
on the grounds of the church late one night.
'I had such a rush of power,' he said,
'as I watched it die.'
'Didn't you feel anything for the bird?' I asked.
He was silent.
He hadn't considered the bird until that moment.

I looked at him sitting beside me.
A bruise was forming on his cheek.
He was only 15.
He lived with people more concerned for their own interests than his.
He had little respect or support in his life.
The only power he could feel
was the rush of his own strength snuffing out a bird's life.

'Steve,' I said,
'I can only tell you what I believe.
I believe that love is the only force strong enough
to defeat evil in the world.
I believe that Jesus died for love's sake
and his love inspires us to care for others in every way we can.
Just remember that you came to a church for help on a rainy afternoon.
You can come back here if you ever need help again.
That's why we're here.
For Jesus' sake.'

I don't know what happened to Steve
because he didn't come back in my time at that church.
I pray for him
whenever I remember our encounter.
And I thank God for youth hotlines and youth workers
who are willing to invest time and energy and love for lives like his,
lives that know so little of hope and generosity;
lives that need some place to turn.

In his life and in his death,
Jesus reversed the values of the world.
Abundant life is not attained by the acquisition of things
or the triumph of force
or by achieving fame and popularity.
Abundant life is the gift God gives us
through the giving of others.
Jesus risked himself,
trusted himself
to the power of love that grows through patient self-giving.
A seed cannot see the results of its growth
when it surrenders itself to the ground.
We will not always see the results of our love



invested in lonely lives
and what seem like lost causes.

But if we would see Jesus,
then we are called to look into the midst of the neighbourhoods
where we are planted.

We are called to spend ourselves,
our time, our understanding, our money
growing relationships with vulnerable people:
with God's fragile world.

When we are rooted in the belief
that God's love produces abundance from tiny grains of generosity
and small seeds of compassion and commitment,
there is no other way to invest our lives.
We are called to be a place to turn.

Jesus died to promise us that God's love
can reverse the powers of death and destruction,
of greed and fear that have such a strong grip on the world.
Jesus committed himself to the fearless and hopeful generosity
held by every grain of wheat.

He died to feed the world with fearless, hopeful generosity
through which the true glory of God shines.

We taste it here in bread and wine.

We can share it wherever we go
if we trust the power of love to grow goodness
with fearless, hopeful generosity
even in the face of death.

Nancy Cocks