

An Comonnachadh

THE COMMUNION. It was always referred to as "the communion", thus setting it apart from the other Sundays of the year. And there were many things that set it apart. To begin with, communion was celebrated only twice a year—once in the winter and once in the summer—but it was the summer communion that was so special to us as children in the Hebrides.

It was spread over a whole week with services held not only in the church but also in schools and halls throughout the villages in the parish. Ordinarily, on a Sunday in the summer-time we walked the three miles to the church—and three long, weary, dusty miles it was to young feet—but on communion Sunday we hired a car. The car, its make a mystery, was much bigger than a car—probably more like a van—and was known simply as "the big yellow car." Into this we scrambled, Free Church and Church of Scotland alike, and were rattled swiftly over the three, long, weary dusty miles and deposited at the church doors.

It was a plain grey stone kirk. No stained glass windows here—just plain frosted glass; no mighty organ filling the church with sound—just a man known as "the precentor" standing at the front of the church singing the first lines of the psalm and the congregation coming in solidly behind him; no robes for the ministers (usually there were three, our own and two visiting ministers), no pomp, no pageantry. But it had a majesty, a solemnity that filled our young hearts with awe, that lowered our voices to whispers, that slowed our impatient feet to tiptoe.

We went first to the English service in the church hall, dropping our collection on to a white cloth-covered plate by the door before self-consciously crossing to one of the long wooden seats which always proved so numbing to the bottom. The serving of the bread and wine only took place in the church where the Gaelic service was already well under way.

And it was in the church itself that the real atmosphere of the communion took hold of us. We entered the stone porch leaving the brilliance of the sun for the muted light within. Two elders stood at the door to show us to our pews. They were familiar to us on ordinary days as men in rough tweeds: as men who laughed and joked; as men who ploughed and harrowed and fished but on this day they were almost strangers. The rough tweeds were replaced by sober black or navy blue suits faintly redolent of the moth balls which preserved them for weddings, funerals and communions. Gone was the laughter—only the laughter lines round their eyes remaining—and their normal voices were replaced by the whisper such a solemn occasion demanded.

And as we took our seats in the familiar pews the "fencing in" of the communion tables was started. This was the highlight of the service—the spiritual skeleton, so to speak, on which the

structure of the communion tables, the giving and receiving of the bread and wine, was built. To an imaginative child it was a terrifying ceremony.

There were the passages from the Bible (Galatians, Chapter 5, Verse 19 onwards) depicting the sins of the flesh (and in the sonorous Gaelic they sound even more wicked and sinful) and 2nd Peter where sinners are likened to "wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever". Already the flames of hell were leaping high and young hearts thundered in young breasts as we listened.

But the verse that we waited for was still to come in 1st Corinthians, Chapter 11, Verse 29, which proclaimed that "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body". And the flames of hell crackled and leapt higher in young imaginations.

The precentor stood and led the singing of the psalm during which the communicants made their way slowly to the front pews which were spread with snow-white cloths and on which the bread and wine stood. The singing, rising and falling as mournful and haunting and heart-rending as the waves that moaned ceaselessly on the sea below the church; the slow procession of men and women of God, familiar and yet unfamiliar, who had passed the "fencing in" test; the headstone, blurred by the frosted windows, of a former minister still, in death, keeping endless watch over his flock—it was a solemn, awesome, never-to-be-forgotten day.

And afterwards the wonderful sense of release. Outside the church the unfamiliar became the familiar again. The strangers at the church door became again the men who laughed and joked and tweaked our hair. Friends greeted friends, relatives gossiped together while the children darted about as bright and beautiful as tropical birds in a flock of ravens. I think the Highland mothers themselves unable by tradition to wear bright colours at the communion, consoled themselves by decking out their children, especially the girls. Derby Day or Ascot fashions could not have been planned more carefully. Many hours must have been spent in the preceding weeks poring over catalogues choosing prints or cottons as gay and colourful as the wild flowers that bloomed so profusely in the island hedgerows. And the hats—pale biscuit and creamy straws with broad ribbons or delicate forget-me-nots—with white socks and shiny, new, brown sandals completed the outfit.

They are gone now, those men and women with sun-seamed, laughter-lined faces, those hewers of wood and drawers of water. A lot of the bright-eyed children too are gone and the rest scattered throughout the land. Only a handful of people attend the grey stone kirk. But as you tiptoe up the overgrown path and open the creaking heavy wooden door to stand again in the stone porch, the past rushes back and blends with the present.

Once again you see the familiar unfamiliar elders at the door; once again you smell the mustiness peculiar to churches; once again you see the muted light with the shadowy outline of the headstone beyond the windows; once again you hear a bumble bee sizzling angrily to itself as it seeks the way out to the sunshine.

Once again your heart comes into your throat and the tears start to your eyes as you hear the familiar haunting psalm tune and imagine the slow procession to the front of the church. And once again you hear the dread echoes from the "fencing in" ceremony "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily. . . ."

Once again you are a child at the communion. □