



## Green Pilgrimage Network

# Church of Scotland theological statement on green pilgrimage

### Theological Statement – Faith, Conservation and Pilgrimage

In undertaking a pilgrimage journey, we are bound to encounter a stranger. We are also certain to pass through new and unknown territory. Both the stranger and the unfamiliar place can unsettle us and render us fearful, for they take us out of our comfort zone.

However, it is just such encounters and journeys that the Spirit is prompting us to make in the days through which we are living. The Age of Plunder has divided our world and decimated entire species and landscapes. Business as usual is not an option politically, economically or environmentally. The times demand that we break with old patterns and destructive habits and remake our world and our relationships nurturing, tending and serving the earth (Genesis 2:15), as an antidote to the patterns of dominion (Genesis 1:26) that have so dominated our thinking.

When the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus by night looking for answers (John 3), Jesus told him to listen to the wind, for he knew that this faithful teacher of the Law required a “reorientation of the soul” (St Benedict) even though he knew the scriptures and traditions inside out. When the Rich Man (Dives) and Lazarus (Luke 16) had their exchange across the abyss, Abraham reminds the Rich Man that even the faithful, (who believe in the resurrection of the dead), can remain hard hearted, for the Rich Man never even noticed poor Lazarus at his gate through all the years he must have passed by him.

The Spirit of the risen Christ often comes to us when we break free from familiar patterns and anticipate gifts that come to us unbidden, unanticipated and outside our familiar zones of comfort and familiarity. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews understood that doing that which is not familiar and comfortable can be a source of blessing, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”, (Hebrews 13: 2). Anticipating gifts, finding newness and rethinking our



*Visitors walking along the Green Pilgrimage Avenue in Luss, Scotland*

patterns and habits comes when we see our faith as a pilgrimage that will lead us to places of newness and even strangeness where we might not expect to find blessing or insight.

It is in the territory of the unfamiliar and in the face of the stranger that we frequently encounter the risen Christ. It is often the most unlikely person, the “empty handed stranger” who turns out to be the bearer of the most priceless gifts. “Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise” (Ancient Celtic Rune). Also, it is in the unfamiliar place, in the territory of newness and the place apart that we begin to see our familiar places (and familiar friends) in a new light. Think of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17: 1-3; Mark 9: 2-13; Luke 9: 28 – 36) who saw Christ as he truly was, but perhaps for the first time in all the years they had known him.

The great philosophers of the ancient world often thought that they had nothing to learn by going into the green open spaces of the countryside. The intellectual ferment of the city was their preferred place. But, in venturing out, their wisdom and insight deepened as they connected with nature and saw that the patterns of their own thought originated in the glories of the created order. They discovered that they were part of nature not above it. We are God’s big brained people, able to glimpse glory, to be that part of the Universe that is conscious of itself and we are able to think and reason. But the Age of Plunder has dulled our sense and our conscience and, as Bill McKibben asks, “is there a big enough heart connected to that big brain that will enable us to heed the warnings not just of science but also of our conscience? Will we, gazing out at the growing array of “natural disasters”, figure out that we’ve got to make a change?” (Resurgence Magazine no. 268 September/October 2011, p15.)

Scotland’s Christian story begins with Ninian and his Candida Casa at Whithorn in Galloway but such places were built on sites already infused with a sacred significance, “turn but a stone and an angel moves, cleave the wood and God is there”. Pilgrims visited Whithorn, Luss, Tain, St Andrews and many other places for healing and as an act of repentance (rethinking life). And today, that spiritual narrative is capturing the imagination of a new generation. As we begin to wander through our landscape, we reconnect not just with ancient narratives of faith but with the idea of God inhabiting all things, “the journey is more than mere miles through moors and wild headlands above the sea – it can also be an inner journey of discovery, a deeply healing experience, an escape from the bustle of city life to hear the breath of God in quiet places” (Andrew Patterson – A Way to Whithorn, St Andrew Press 1993).

The rediscovery of pilgrimage in Scotland is an opportunity for people to reconnect with a rich spiritual narrative that gives meaning and depth to human experience. It can be an opportunity for the church to “find new ways to touch the hearts of all”; but most of all pilgrimage can help us to reconnect with the Spirit of life, that Ground of Being who inhabits all things, in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17), who is the source of life. As we reconnect on the pilgrim way, the Spirit whom we encounter on the journey holds out the promise of healing our relationships with each other, with the earth, with our own selves and with God.