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Journal from England and Scotland (Part 1)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week, I'm traveling through Scotland and England on a national speaking tour about Jesus and peacemaking. Here is a little journal account of the first half of my journey. Next week, I'll post the second half.

Wednesday, Aug. 22, Edinburgh, Scotland

I arrived this morning from Amsterdam after a long journey and rested for a while at the Jesuit house on Lauriston Street near the Grassmarket plaza at the foot of the famous Edinburgh Castle. I know the Jesuits here from previous visits and feel at home in this beautiful city. It claims to be a city of peace, and because it hosts the world's largest arts, drama and literature festival every August, I think it just might be worthy of the name. Thousands of people come from all over the world to attend this monthlong festival, which features more than a thousand programs.

In the midst of it all, little St. John's church at the foot of the castle offers its own monthlong Spirituality of Peace program, featuring music, prayers and speakers on every aspect of peace. They invited me to speak this evening.

The weather is perfect -- sunny, warm, breezy. I walked through the city streets and enjoyed a cup of coffee in one of the cafes before my evening event at St. John's. It was billed as "a conversation on the spirituality of peace and nonviolence" with Kathy Galloway, the former director of the Iona Community and current director of Christian Aid of Scotland, one of the world's largest Christian charity organizations, and me. Activist Brian Larkin, director of the Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre, hosted us and moderated the conversation.

We had a lovely evening, talking to a good crowd about our life journeys and the Christian life of peace. I

spoke of the Beatitudes and the call to be peacemakers. Kathy talked about love as the basis for our work, and gave us concrete examples about how she maintains her peace -- baking bread, tending to the garden, taking time for prayer. Kathy is a lifelong peacemaker, a respected church leader and a great writer, the author of many well-known books on spirituality. Afterward, we both enjoyed the reception at the peace and justice center. A wonderful evening and a good start to my British pilgrimage.

Thursday, Aug. 23, Cheltenham, England

Brian and I were out late for dinner in the New Town section of Edinburgh, then I was up early to catch the train south across England to Cheltenham, near Gloucester and Oxford, where the Greenbelt Festival is to be held. But the jet lag continues, and I couldn't sleep. So I got up at 5 a.m. and walked the streets of Edinburgh as the sun rose. A glorious city, and another unusual clear British day. Britain has been hit hard this summer by climate change. It's been the wettest summer in recorded history. But today looks promising.

The 8 a.m. train chugged south along the east coast past Newcastle-on-Tyne and the ancient monastic ruins of Lindisfarne through the north country, past Durham and Leeds to Birmingham and then south to Cheltenham, where I settled in to the Thistle Hotel for my stay.

On the train, I read about the growing antinuclear movement in Scotland. Britain bases its Trident nuclear submarines in Faslane, Scotland, where there's been a steady protest for years. Three British ships in that Scottish port hold 144 nuclear warheads. The vast majority of Scottish people are against nuclear weapons, and most Scottish politicians vote against them. I'm hoping and praying that Scotland will set an example for England, the U.S. and the world by outlawing these horrific nuclear weapons. Edinburgh friends continue to organize against the presence of these nukes, and they hope that one day soon, they will be banished.

Edinburgh's Cardinal Keith O'Brien is probably the world's most antinuclear church official. "Nuclear weapons are capable of destroying all life on earth, and their use or threatened use is morally reprehensible," he says. "Policies of 'nuclear deterrence' are a moral failure, and the only viable policy on nuclear weapons has to be one which leads to their complete elimination." Amazing to hear his clear voice for peace. So different from church officials in the U.S.

Friday, Aug.24, Cheltenham, England

Advertisement

We have nothing like the Greenbelt Festival. About 20,000 Christians have gathered over four days to hear rock stars, theologians, activists, scholars and ordinary church workers perform and reflect on Christian life today. Thousands of people -- children, teenagers, parents and the very elderly -- wander around England's famous race course, where every kind of gourmet food vendor offers tempting meals and dozens of stages and venues offer enticing events. Almost everyone is camping in a little tent. The program for this festival, the 39th, is an entire book, and it's hard to choose which talks and concerts to attend. What a celebration of life!

In the speakers' lounge, I catch up with friends Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, evangelical preachers and teachers who have spoken here many times before. Shane and Tony have just published a new book of conversations between them on every aspect of Christian life, *The Red Letter Revolution*.

Shane Claiborne, 37, is a progressive evangelical from Tennessee who now lives and works among the poor of Philadelphia with his community, The Simple Way. His books have made him one of the most popular young Christian speakers on the planet. He's tall and thin with dreadlocks that go down to his waist -- an unlikely evangelical preacher and one of the nicest people I know. We sat and shared coffee for several hours, comparing notes about life and travels and hopes and worries. He's quite hopeful because everywhere he goes, he hears from young people who are forming grassroots communities to live alternative Christian lives dedicated to the poor and social justice. Later, I heard him speak in "the big top" tent about Gospel economics and sharing what we have with the poor. Amen, brother.

The day concluded with a powerful concert by Canadian rock star Bruce Cockburn, who has appeared many times at Greenbelt. About 10,000 people cheered him on, standing on the great field. Luckily the rain held off, and the music was fabulous. Bruce Cockburn is one of our great Christian poets and musicians, and just hearing him lifted everyone's spirit, including my own.

Saturday, Aug. 25, Cheltenham, England

This morning, I gave a talk on my new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, in the Galilee tent, and it was well received. But it was rainy and muggy, and about 500 people were crowded into the tent. At one point, someone in the back passed out. Later, I heard they thought he had dropped dead. Most of the crowd didn't realize what was happening, and I didn't, either, until the paramedics arrived. They got to work and quickly revived him. Soon, he was up and about, just like Lazarus. Thank goodness. Later, I signed books at the "Church Times" tent.

Afterward, back at the hotel, I visited with Bruce Cockburn, who is reading my book and likes it. We have many mutual friends. Between a lifetime of concerts and recording, Bruce has traveled the war zones of the world on missions of peace from Central America to Vietnam to Afghanistan. He writes provocative lyrics to push us to the essential questions. I like him and respect his efforts for peace and justice. He's surely one of our most prophetic voices.

I spent the afternoon in town having an early dinner with my friend Fr. Chris Boles. Chris is a Scottish Jesuit, passionate about peace, justice and the environment. He spent the last decade in Edinburgh, where he founded the Jesuit Centre for justice and peace on Lauriston Street, and helped Cardinal O'Brien write his strong statements against Scotland's nuclear weapons at Faslane. These days, Chris works in London for the Jesuit British Province. It was good to catch up with my friend.

Back at the hotel, I stayed up late talking with Kathy Galloway, who also spoke today, and with Garth Hewett, an Anglican priest and rock star who has performed or spoken at every Greenbelt Festival for the last 39 years. In 1981, the rock group U2 opened for him. He continues to write and sing, but these days, he puts most of his energy into Amos Trust, a Christian charity he organized to benefit street children in Africa and Latin America. A marvelous person, full of life and energy and hope.

Sunday, Aug. 26, Cheltenham, England

This morning, Greenbelt offered an ecumenical service for thousands of Christians based on the four elements -- earth, wind, water and fire -- to highlight the biblical call to protect creation and resist the horrendous catastrophe of global warming.

In the afternoon, I visited with my friend Ciaran O'Reilly of the London Catholic Worker, a Plowshares activist who's also known for his waist-length dreadlocks. Originally from Brisbane, Australia, Ciaran is banned in the U.S. because of his antinuclear work. His Irish Plowshares group made headlines after they

were found not guilty. Now he lives and works in London, where he founded the Guiseppe Conlon Catholic Worker house. This evening, we went to see The Proclaimers perform on the main stage to 20,000 people. They were terrific. This Scottish band, led by twin brothers, is mainly known for their big hit, "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)."

Ciaron and I met 20 years ago, and he organized my 1998 speaking tour of England. We found ourselves recalling the public lecture he organized 10 years ago in Dublin for Daniel Berrigan and me. Dan and I were about to leave on a long, planned vacation to visit our many Irish friends when Ciaron wrote with plans for a national speaking tour instead. We reluctantly agreed at the last minute to speak on our first night in Dublin. Who could have predicted that a thousand people would show up and fill the hall, and another thousand would be turned away?

At one point, after I denounced the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine, an angry man in the middle of the audience started shouting me down. Another man a few seats over started yelling at him, and before our eyes, a fight broke out. Dan and I were stunned -- this doesn't normally happen when one speaks about nonviolence -- so Ciaron, our moderator, took the microphone, told everyone to be quiet or leave, and restored some semblance of order. The crowd was delighted. "It's not a successful lecture in Dublin unless a fight breaks out," one Dublin priest told us.

Later, I talked with my friend Gareth Higgins, who grew up in Belfast but now lives in North Carolina. He's trying to bring Greenbelt to the U.S. and has organized the last two annual Wildgoose Festivals in North Carolina, which I've spoken at. A committed Christian and a great organizer.

Monday, Aug. 27, Cheltenham, England

It's been raining off and on, and Greenbelt is a sea of mud. Somehow I managed to give my talk on Jesus and peacemaking this morning. I was scheduled to speak on one of the main outdoor stages right on the racetrack facing the gigantic race course stadium. I tried to cancel the talk because of the bitter cold wind and the driving rain, but the 500 hardy souls who turned up wouldn't let me. As I've heard over and over again: "We're British. We're used to cold rain. If it isn't raining and muddy, it wouldn't be Greenbelt." I was astounded. So I soldiered on and they responded well, and asked good questions about the work of peace. (Both my talks were recorded and are posted on the Greenbelt website.)

Back at the hotel, Gareth and I commiserated over the weather, compared notes about the festival, and plotted about future Wildgoose Festival events and speakers. A good day and a memorable weekend.

Tuesday, Aug. 28, Leeds, England

A travel day. Took the morning train from Cheltenham, north across the country to Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield and finally to Leeds where I was met by Fr. Simon Lodge, my host. He took me to the local airport, where he rented a car for me, and then led me to the lovely town of Ilkley on the outskirts of the Yorkshire Dales. There, the Sisters of the Cross and Passion run a retreat center. They've lent me their guest house at the edge of the property for a few days of rest and holiday.

Simon told me he organized this lecture tour because he was interested in my ideas about the nonviolence of Jesus. Earlier this year, he joined the annual Pax Christi Ash Wednesday protest in front of the Ministry of Defense in London. I remember speaking at that protest in 1998. Toward the end, he walked forward and wrote the word "Forgive" on the building wall when police tackled him and arrested him. It was his first act of civil disobedience. "What was it like for you?" I asked. "It was a moment of pure grace," he said.

Thursday, Aug. 30, Ilkley

Yesterday I wandered the streets of Ilkley, a lovely English town, and sat in a coffee shop and answered emails and did some writing. At noon, I drove over the desolate moors to Haworth and toured the Bronte parsonage. What a moving experience. Long ago at Duke University, I read the books by the Bronte sisters, and even studied Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte in a literature class, so it was thrilling to finally visit their home. Apparently, the three sisters sat up late every night for many years in their dining room, writing their stories together and reading them out loud, perhaps the first ever writers' club. Their house is surrounded by a graveyard, which is located behind the church and the narrow, cobble-stoned main street of town. I'm moved by their lives, their suffering and early deaths, and the inspiration they give to millions.

Today, Simon and I drove through the gorgeous countryside of Yorkshire Dales to Bolton Abbey, the 12th century monastic ruins still standing along a swiftly moving river in a green valley. Beautiful. Later, we shared a meal in Skipton, another quintessential English village in Yorkshire Dales.

Saturday, Sept. 1, Yorkshire Dales

My English holiday continues. Yesterday, I drove over to Liverpool and Manchester, places I've been before, and wandered around, but the traffic was so oppressive and the rain so heavy it wasn't relaxing. So today I returned to Bolton Abbey and walked along the rushing river near the abbey ruins for several hours in peaceful mindfulness, taking in everything, trying to live in the present moment of peace. Afterward, I drove north through the green, hilly countryside to Fountains Abbey, the famous ruins of a massive monastery, at one point the wealthiest in the world. Magnificent. Located in a beautiful green valley along the River Skell, it was built by the Benedictines in 1132, then taken over by the Cistercians three years later. Over course, centuries later, the murderous Henry VIII took it over, stole its goods, expelled the monks and sold the land. Now it's a park and a museum.

The grounds were full of hundreds of families, with hundreds of children and dogs running wild over the green fields by the river. Fountains Abbey would have been like Oxford, an enormous operation that served everyone for miles, especially the poor and sick. It was a little city, built around the church, centered in God. But as I sat in the corner of the mammoth church ruins -- a church that would have been larger than New York's St. Patrick's -- with green grass growing where there might have been a floor and the open blue sky for a ceiling, I felt sad. It symbolized for me the ongoing collapse of the church and the futility of war. Taking in all that history brought home the reality that we live in a decidedly post-Christian world, where the Sermon on the Mount is quite thoroughly rejected. Later, I walked along the river and let the breeze restore my hope.

Sunday, Sept. 2, Coventry, England

"War, nuclear weapons and violence are a complete failure and a total disaster for the world," I said this morning on the Sunday BBC radio show on which I was featured along with last night's gold medal winner in the London paralympic games. "We all have to join the campaign for the abolition of war, nuclear weapons, poverty and violence, and work for a new culture of peace and nonviolence. No one can claim to be a Christian and still support war and nuclear weapons," I added. "Those days are over. Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Christians are supposed to be peacemakers, not war-makers."

"But what do we do with all these politicians who push us into war?" the BBC interviewer asked.

"We have to speak out for an end to our war on Afghanistan, refuse to support war, not send our young

people off to kill, and build a global anti-war movement that calls for the abolition of war itself and the institutionalization of nonviolent conflict resolution, until finally our politicians join our campaign and help create a new culture of peace," I answered. "Change only comes from the bottom up, through grassroots social movements. What we need now is a new global grassroots movement of nonviolence that pushes all our politicians to work for a new world of peace. Everyone is needed if we're going to build a real global peace movement and create a more just, peaceful world."

The BBC interviewer seemed pleased. Afterward, I bid farewell to the Yorkshire Dales and drove four hours south to Coventry to visit the famous cathedral bombed by the Nazis on Nov. 14, 1940. One of the chaplains gave me a little tour of the new cathedral and told me about their programs for peace and reconciliation.

The ruins of the bombed-out cathedral confirmed everything I said on the BBC. Coventry stands as a sign of judgment upon us all. Where the altar once stood, two burned out wooden beams from the old ceiling have been formed into a cross. On the back wall, the words "Father Forgive" have been etched. Coventry reminds us of the futility and insanity of war. It calls upon every Christian to renounce war, to end all bombing raids and to take up Jesus' way of peace and reconciliation so that no one is bombed ever again. May its message be heard.

On Tuesday, I'll speak in Liverpool; on Wednesday, at the University of York; on Thursday, in Sunderland on the northeast coast; and finally on Friday night in Leeds. Next weekend, I'll head down to London for my last talk. I've received a message from Julian Assange asking me to visit him in the Ecuadoran Embassy, so God willing, I'll see him next Monday before my talk. More to come.

John Dear will lead a daylong retreat, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," Sept. 29 in Los Angeles. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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