

14<sup>th</sup> May 2021

## Walls

**“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know  
What I was walling in and walling out,  
And to whom I was likely to give offence.”**

*Robert Frost, Mending Wall*

Our neighbours are having their garden wall rebuilt, and it’s being done by a proper, official, artisan builder-of-walls. He’s a local stonemason, well known for his sculptures around the area, including a carving of miners digging coal in a deep seam, as a monument to East Lothian’s mining history. For days now, I’ve been fascinated by the careful construction of the wall, and how he fits together stones of different sizes, shapes and colours. Sometimes he’ll take a stone, and it’ll fit right away. And at other times he has to chip pieces away to make sure it fits properly.

In conversation with him, I recalled a story told by George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, about the rebuilding of the living quarters of Iona Abbey in the 1940s and 50s. As he watched the stonemasons haul huge stones onto the scaffold ready to be fitted into a wall, he would sometimes see them put a stone to one side. If it didn’t fit immediately, they wouldn’t throw it back down. They would keep it until a place emerged where they knew it would be a good fit. No stone was ever rejected. Each one, large or small, had its place.

I told my local stonemason that story. “I do that too,” he said, “though my stones don’t have to be hauled up a scaffold. So I just put them back in the pile to be used later.” And then he paused, and with a big grin said, “The trouble is, I can’t always remember where I put them. I *know* there’s a stone somewhere that’ll fit this space but blow me if I can find it when I want to. The trouble isn’t the stones. The trouble is me!”

The trouble isn’t the stones! What George MacLeod saw was the truth of that. Each stone had its place. None of them needed to be thrown back. But the trouble is me – or you, indeed! There are any number of stones waiting to be used, but we can’t remember where they are, so we can’t play our part in making sure they fit where they’re needed.

When we’re “walling in and walling out”, stones can’t fit themselves into a wall by themselves. The trouble isn’t the stones. The trouble is me!

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, might I give offence by excluding an important stone from its place in the wall?*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon* Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>