

1st September 2021

Upwards

“The way of life winds upward for the wise.”

Bible, Proverbs 15:24

Among the many fascinating features on the Island of Iona – religious, historical and environmental – there is the remarkable phenomenon of “The Spouting Cave”. On the west of the island, facing the Atlantic Ocean and about a mile’s walk from the village, there’s a stretch of grassland called the *Machair*. This is, in geological terms, a “raised beach”, but for practical purposes it serves as common grazing land, and – if you can find the holes – doubles as the island’s golf course. But for many it’s the starting point for exploring the west and south of Iona, including Loch Staonaig, Columba’s Bay, The Marble Quarry *and* the Spouting Cave.

At its best after a strong north-westerly wind and at half-tide, the Spouting Cave can be seen from the *Machair*, but it’s worth a closer look for those who have the energy to clamber over the rocks. The guidebooks tell us that “you can safely get quite close, without getting soaked”, and those who are prepared to make the effort can witness a fascinating sight. As the waves roar in and batter the cliffs, they come to a narrow fissure of rock, and, as the water is pushed in forcibly, it shoots up through the fissure and is thrown several dozen feet in the air. It’s a must-see feature.

“Onwards and Upwards” is a common phrase nowadays. In his poem from 1845, *The Present Crisis*, The American poet, James Russell Lowell, gives us, perhaps, the origins of this epithet:

*New occasions teach new duties: Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.*

We are innately designed, I believe, to look upwards, to strive for betterment, new knowledge, a more complete understanding of who we are and what sustains us. Sometimes “onwards and upwards” is a struggle and takes all our effort and energy. But sometimes, thankfully, reaching upwards brings mystery, wonder and gasps of amazement, like the sea that rises up through Iona’s Spouting Cave. So, as *we* look upwards today, let’s not be surprised when we reach heights that even we never expected, and believe that the way of *our* life might be “upward for the wise”.

A prayer for today

Let me be “upward still, and onward”, to keep abreast of the grace of God. Amen

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