

31st October 2021

Ruins

“Of all ruins that of a noble mind is the most deplorable.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, His Last Bow, 'The dying detective'

When I reflected yesterday on the ruins of the medieval Nunnery on Iona, the quote above from Arthur Conan Doyle came to mind. How do we cope with the ruins we see around us, when minds are no longer able to function as they once did? Are these ruins “the most deplorable”?

Arthur Conan Doyle published *His Last Bow: Some reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes* in 1917, as a gathering together of some previously published Sherlock Holmes stories. However, the preface from one “John H Watson, M.D.” assures us that, although Holmes is long retired from his detective work, he is still alive and well – albeit suffering from “a touch of rheumatism”. The quote above, therefore, points to an important truth about Conan Doyle’s eponymous hero – his body may be failing, but his “noble mind” is far from being in ruins.

You and I know, however, that there are those around us whose minds *are* in ruins – sometimes in parallel with the deterioration of the body, but often while physicality hasn’t yet been compromised. Dementia is one example of this. But ruins of “a noble mind” are more than dementia, as the growing awareness of mental health concerns has evidenced for us. When we talk about “wholeness” of body, mind and spirit, and the “integration of being”, as someone once called it, we know that the disintegration of the mind can affect everything else, and whole lives can be left in ruins. So, when we come across *these* ruins, what are we to do?

Like the ruins of the Iona Nunnery, we can remember what they stand for, a mind that was noble in a life that still matters. But, *unlike* the Nunnery, if we are concerned for people’s mental health, do they have to remain ruined and derelict? Might they not, one day, like Iona Abbey, be restored to completeness thorough the diligence, patience, understanding, hard work and insight of those who care?

Ruins will always have their place. Sometimes they’ll offer us glimpses of past glories. But often they’ll remind us of the noble fullness of life and mind to which, one day, they could yet be restored.

A prayer for today

Speak to me, God, even from the ruins, of all that is cherished and valuable. Amen