

3rd February 2022

Houses

**“Then a mason came forth and said, speak to us of Houses.
And he answered and said: Build of your imaginings a bower in the
wilderness ere you build a house within the city walls.”**

Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet, ‘On Houses’

When I walk in the remoter parts of the Highlands of Scotland, I’m not surprised when I come across the ruins of a homestead or a complete village. The movement of population to towns and cities, the devastation of the “Highland Clearances”, economic hardship and endemic poverty, have all been contributing factors. So, all over the Highlands, there are ruins of houses, a legacy of a past age. The Isle of Islay is no different.

On the Oa peninsula on the Southwest of the island, a few miles from the village of Port Ellen and above the cliffs of Kintra, there are the ruins of three villages – Frachdale, Ghrasdail and Tockmal. Scattered stones from fireplaces, chimneys, a corn-drying kiln, byres, lie strewn around, the remnants of what were once living communities. I was sad as I sat in these ruins. I could picture a population dwindling, until the last house was vacated. I could understand tears, even anger, at what had happened to people’s familiar lifestyle. Why did it have to be this way?

Then I heard another voice. The people may be silent, but these stones could shout aloud. They spoke to me of tranquillity and beauty, remoteness and self-sufficiency, being close to the land and the sea, and a love for the mystery and wonder of creation. And I recalled words of the Lebanese spiritual writer from the first half of the twentieth century, Kahlil Gibran, when he spoke in *The Prophet* of what houses mean.

Would that I could gather your houses into my hand, and like a sower scatter them in forest and meadow. Would the valleys were your streets, and the green paths your alleys, that you might seek one another through vineyards, and come with the fragrance of the earth in your garments.

The glens round these homes were their streets, and the green paths their alleys. So I had walked the pathways of these people. And I had the smell of the earth in *my* clothes, just as the residents of these villages did all these years ago. Ruins? There’s no getting away from that. But lessons to be learned in this “bower in the wilderness”? Oh yes! That too!

A prayer for today

Lord, you know about being in a wilderness. So I thank you for being in mine. Amen