



INTRODUCTION

I keep a box of ‘treasures’ in my attic. These are personal possessions that are of little monetary value, but which remind me of a precious family member who has died. They are priceless ‘treasures’ that link me to the past, but also point me towards the future – my life is entwined with the lives of my family throughout generations. In a similar way, Christianity has an incredible spiritual heritage that stretches back not only through the generations but also across centuries. In the Bible, the life and death of Jesus in the New Testament only reveals its full significance when viewed through the lens of the Old Testament. The new always builds on the foundations of the old.

Many pilgrims exploring the ancient paths have gained insight and wisdom from the Celtic Christian tradition. I became interested in Celtic spirituality some years ago, drawn by its deep Christian heritage and the rich foundations laid by the saints. But it was when I attended a series of talks given by Roy Searle, one of the founding

**Your heart will
always be where
your treasure is.
MATTHEW 6:21 [CEV]**

leaders of The Northumbria Community – a network of people brought together by a sense of calling to the Celtic monastic legacy – that I was inspired to write *Celtic Treasure*, a gift book that uncovers some of the great riches of the Celtic way. In the busyness and confusion of our twenty-first century world, Celtic Christianity, with its holistic approach to finding God in all of life and its inclusive attitude to both men and women, offers a spirituality for our time. As the prophet Jeremiah reminds us:

**Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.**

JEREMIAH 6:16 [NIV]

UNEARTHING CELTIC TREASURE

CHAPTER

I

**The life of a person
leaves an imprint on
the ether of a place.**

JOHN O'DONOHUE

Some years ago I spent an extended period of time travelling across Britain, visiting Scotland, Northumbria and Ireland while writing my first Celtic gift book, *The Celtic Heart*. As I journeyed from place to place I found myself increasingly drawn to, and inspired by, the radical faith and lifestyle of the Celtic saints. They have left a lasting impression on



Landscape has a secret and silent memory, a narrative of presence where nothing is ever lost or forgotten.

JOHN O'DONOHUE

the landscape, and have touched the hearts of countless people across the centuries. When I sailed to Iona, in Scotland, I felt a profound sense of connection with these saints and the passion that fuelled their own spiritual journeys – even the difficulty we had anchoring that day reminded me of the dangers the saints had faced as they embarked upon the seas.

My next visit was to the stunningly beautiful tidal island of Lindisfarne. As I spent time there, I realized that though I had begun my trip as a tourist, I had become a pilgrim in search of 'the ancient paths'. My outward journey had led to a transformational inner journey that was changing the course of my writing.

Life is aptly described as a journey, but journeys involve risk as well as growth and change. The monks who once dwelt in the places I visited, some of whom have come to be remembered as the Celtic saints, risked their lives sailing on the open sea. Their coracles or currachs were just small, light boats ribbed with wood and strengthened with iron and animal skins, but their passionate faith drove them to embark upon these voyages for the love of God. The dangers facing them were so great at times that they prayed special prayers for God's protection on the way. St Patrick's Breastplate Prayer is one of the most well known of these, and is still prayed and sung across Britain and Ireland today:

ST PATRICK'S BREASTPLATE

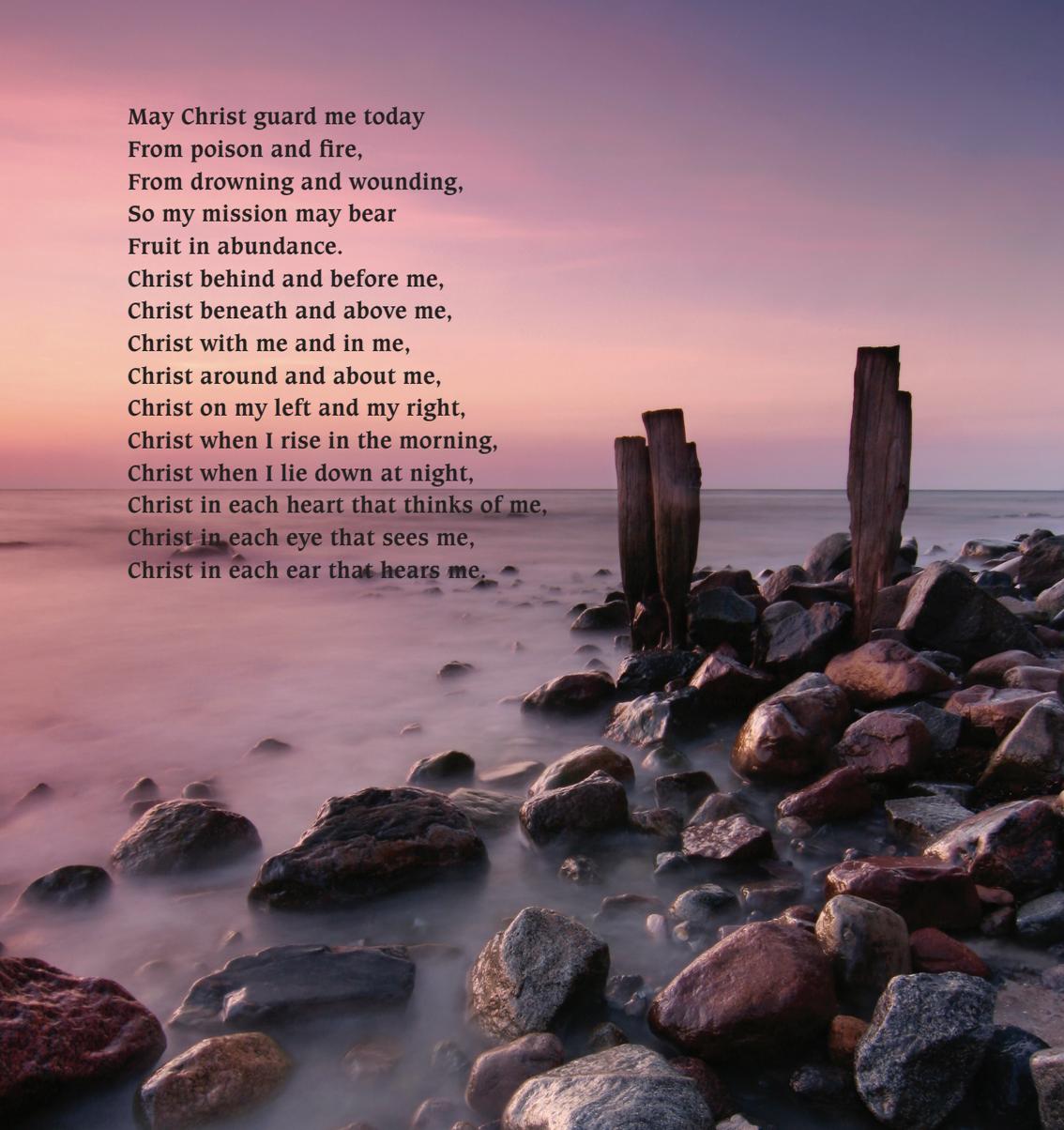
I gird myself today and with the might of heaven:

The rays of the sun,
The beams of the moon,
The glory of fire,
The speed of wind,
The depth of sea,
The stability of earth,
The hardness of rock.

I gird myself today with the power of God:

God's strength to comfort me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look after me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to lead me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's angels to save me.

From the snares of the Devil,
From temptations to sin,
From all who wish me ill,
Both far and near,
Alone and with others.



May Christ guard me today
From poison and fire,
From drowning and wounding,
So my mission may bear
Fruit in abundance.
Christ behind and before me,
Christ beneath and above me,
Christ with me and in me,
Christ around and about me,
Christ on my left and my right,
Christ when I rise in the morning,
Christ when I lie down at night,
Christ in each heart that thinks of me,
Christ in each eye that sees me,
Christ in each ear that hears me.

The Celtic saints, seeking to imitate Jesus, chose remote natural places where they could spend time alone with God in prayer. Celtic Christians believed that the veil between heaven and earth was 'thin' in these holy places and so it was easier to sense God's presence there. Pilgrims have continued to flock to these locations for centuries, not just because of their natural beauty, but also to walk the ancient pathways, in search of wisdom and enlightenment as they try to make sense of their lives. The Celtic 'thin' places of Iona and Lindisfarne have left a particular impression on myself and on many others.

The purpose of pilgrimage is to tread in the shoes of Christ or his saints in order to make contact with the many rich experiences that are inevitable when we travel with him.

RAY SIMPSON

**Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.**

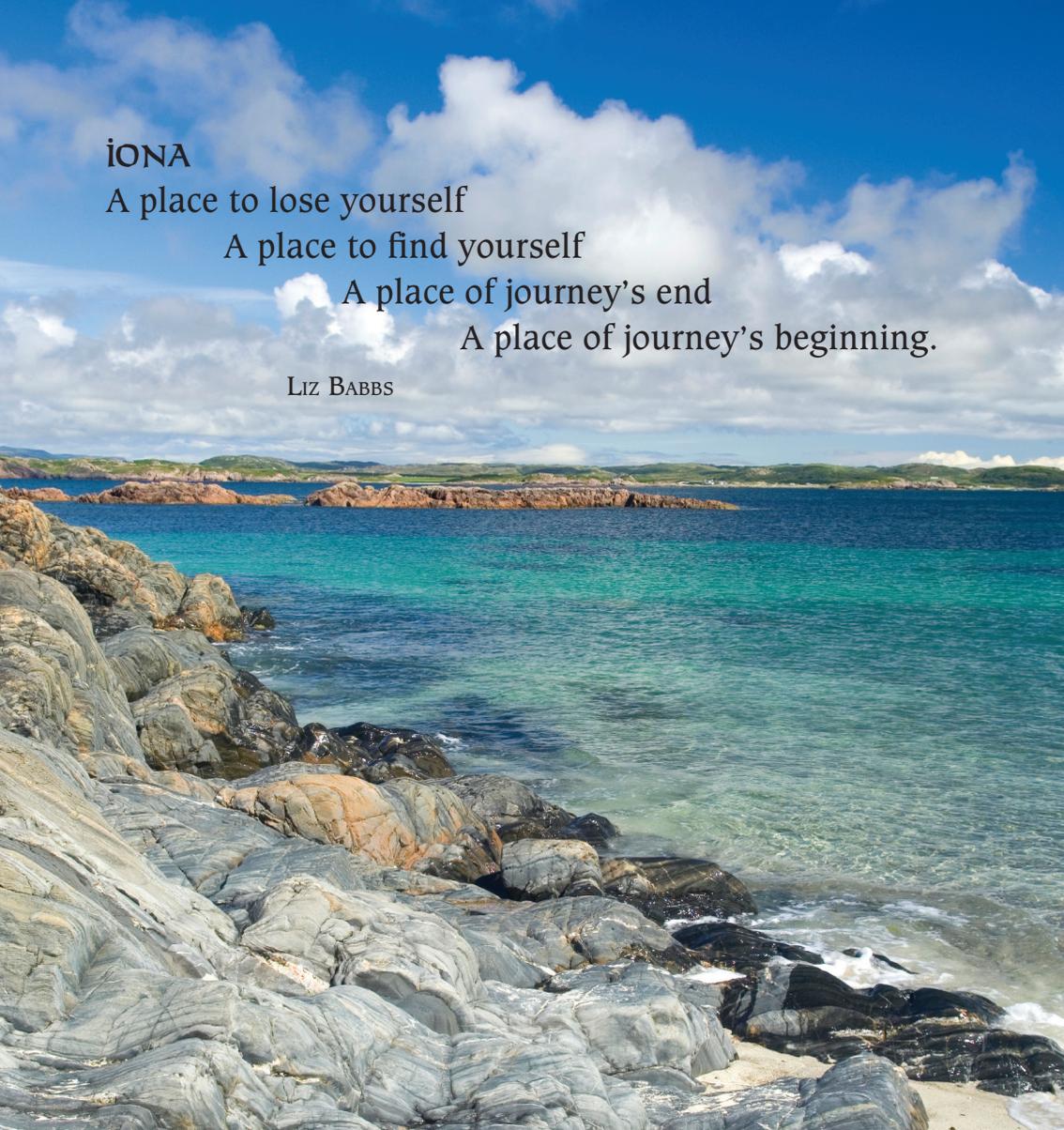
PSALM 84:5 [NIV]

Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

EXODUS 3:5 [NIV]

The island of Iona was home to St Columba and St Aidan. In AD 563, St Columba, along with twelve other men, founded a monastery that later became famous as a centre of mission. This Celtic monastic community remained on Iona until the thirteenth century, and was only dispersed when the Benedictine abbey was built there. The Benedictine settlement was subsequently destroyed during the Reformation, but amidst growing interest in Celtic Christianity in the twentieth century, the abbey was rebuilt. In 1938, Reverend George MacLeod visited and founded The Iona Community, a new monastic community that is still active today. Fiona MacLeod wrote of Iona in *The Divine Adventurer*:

A few places in the world are to be held holy... One such is Iona... It is but a small isle, fashioned of a little sand, a few grasses salt with the spray of an ever-restless wave, a few rocks that wade in heather, and upon whose brows the sea-wind weaves the yellow lichen. But since the remotest days, sacrosanct men have bowed here in worship. In this little island a lamp was lit whose flame lighted pagan Europe. From age to age, lowly hearts have never ceased to bring their burden here. And here Hope waits. To tell the story of Iona is to go back to God, and to end in God.



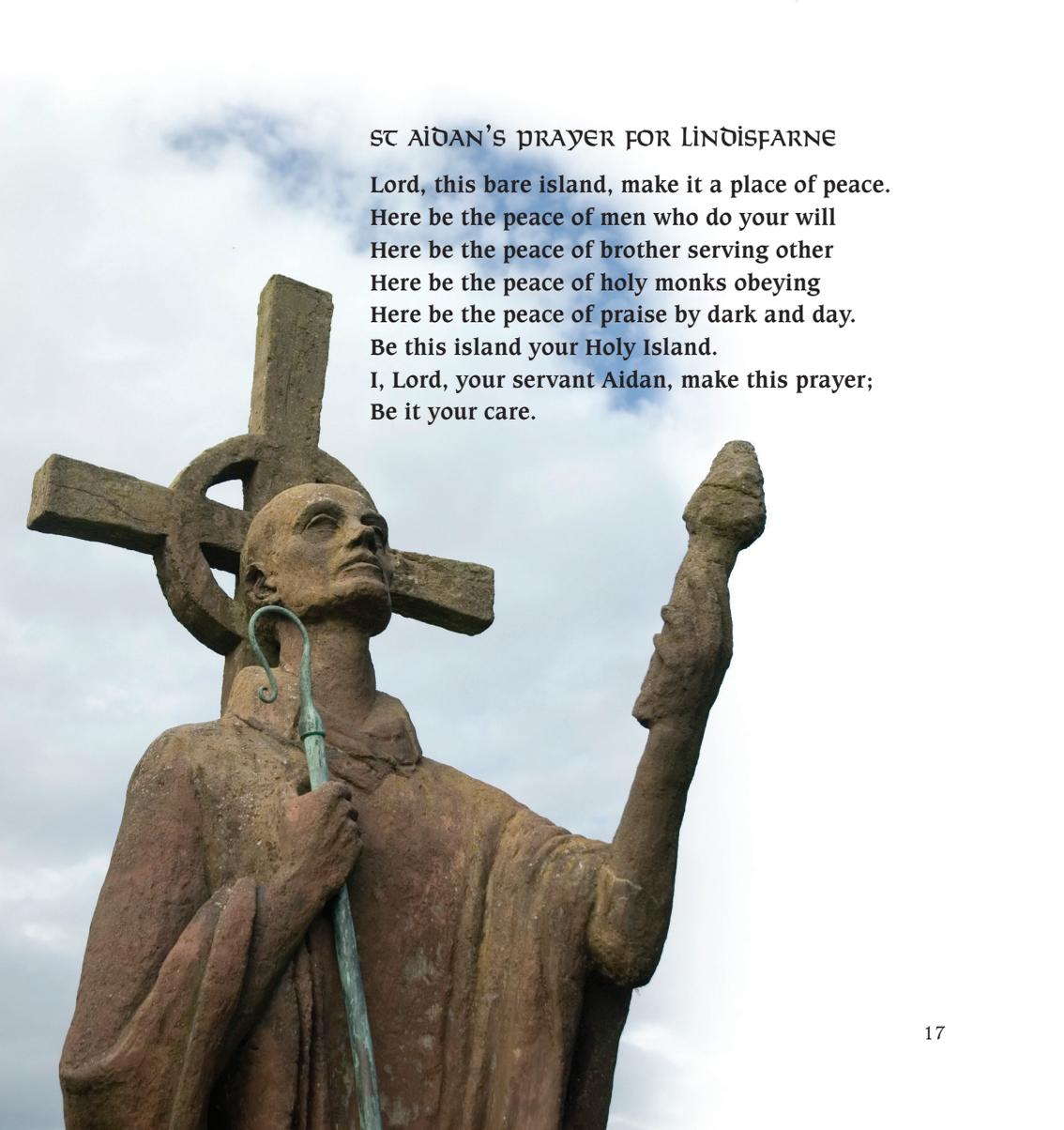
IONA
A place to lose yourself
A place to find yourself
A place of journey's end
A place of journey's beginning.

LIZ BABBS

Lindisfarne is sometimes called 'the holiest place in England', and it has even become known as Holy Island, because so many saints have lived there. It has also been described as the 'cradle of British Christianity' and is a place of immense historic and religious significance. Describing this tidal island, St Bede wrote:

As the tide ebbs and flows, this place is surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea like an island, and twice, when the sands are dry, it becomes again attached to the mainland.

Lindisfarne's rich Christian heritage dates back to AD 635 with the foundation of the first monastery. It was from this monastery that early missionaries, led by St Aidan and St Cuthbert, spread the Christian faith throughout the whole of northern Britain, and in time it became famous also as a centre for learning and for the training of missionary priests, until Viking attacks forced the monks to leave in the ninth century. Monks from Durham Cathedral returned in the twelfth century and founded a Benedictine priory that flourished there until 1537, when Henry VIII closed it. However, several communities representing a new form of monasticism continue in this rich tradition today, including The Community of Aidan and Hilda and The Northumbria Community. They walk in the footsteps of Aidan, continuing on a path that has been walked for 1,300 years, and this prayer, written in the spirit of Aidan, continues to be prayed daily on the island:



ST AIDAN'S PRAYER FOR LINDISFARNE

Lord, this bare island, make it a place of peace.
Here be the peace of men who do your will
Here be the peace of brother serving other
Here be the peace of holy monks obeying
Here be the peace of praise by dark and day.
Be this island your Holy Island.
I, Lord, your servant Aidan, make this prayer;
Be it your care.