

Listening in to the future

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I examined the prophecies of the Petty Seer, an eighteenth-century evangelical minister. By way of comparison, this time I would like to put under the microscope the very different prophecies of a very different kind of person. Norman MacDonald was an elder of the Free Church who lived from 1853 to 1945. His nickname was Tormad Sona, which we might translate as ‘Unworldly Norman’. He was the last of the ‘Men’ as commonly defined, that is, lay guardians of the faith, powerful in prayer, venerated for their piety and often possessed of the gift of prophecy, whose purpose was to wander the country speaking to the question at fellowship meetings, supporting godly ministers and opposing laxity in all its forms.

In Tormad’s case the ‘country’ was Lewis, and the gift of prophecy was devoted entirely to spiritual or worldly rather than moral purposes. A splendid account of him is given in “Am Measg nan Lili” by John MacLeod, Free Church minister of Barvas, published in Inverness in 1948. It is an extraordinary book about an extraordinary man. In its anecdotal structure and in its subject matter it reflects medieval saints’ lives and the Gospels themselves, yet it is set explicitly in a world of motor cars, radios, sofas and police stations.

I will give a couple of small examples. In a version of the Life of Calum Cille we are told that the saint visited heaven every Thursday as long as he lived. In “Am Measg nan Lili” Tormad is quoted as saying, *An uair a tha càch a’ dol a chadal sann an uair sin a tha mise ri falbh a chéilidh far a bheil mi fhìn ag iarraidh a dhol*. “When others go to sleep that is when I go to visit where I want to go.” In the Gospels Christ says, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” In “Am Measg nan Lili”, Tormad is rummaging in his pocket for something to light his pipe when a child runs to him with a piece of straw. The adults present smile as if to say, “That won’t help much.” Says Tormad: *Thug an leanabh sràbh dhomh, agus cha do rinn sibhse sin fhéin*. “The child gave me a straw, and you did not do even do that.”

“Am Measg nan Lili” is quite a substantial book, and there are many insightful anecdotes like this which help us to understand Tormad’s gift of prophecy a little better. Preliminary analysis suggests that the book contains eighteen instances of prophecy, six of the gifts of God, and eight of God working through Tormad. The story of the child and the straw is an instance of the gifts of God. In other words, ordinary things which we might call accident, chance, coincidence, luck, or the ways of children are all here reckoned as part of God’s covenant.

Here are other examples. Tormad visits his daughter on the Mainland and suffers from the *greim* or stomach cramps. She gives him a hot water bottle which relieves the pain. It reminds him of the *pigidh* or whisky jar that people had in the old days. He says: *Tha fios agam gu bheil móran de rudan matha anns a’ chumhnant, ach cha robh fios agam idir gun robh pigidh anns a’ chumhnant*. “I know that there are many things in the covenant, but I had no idea that there was a whisky-jar in the covenant.” Again, he gets a present of a shirt and collar and when asked if they fit he says, *Na biodh eagal sam bith ort nach freagair iad mi, freagaraidh a h-uile nì a th’ anns a’ chomh-cheangal mi*. “Don’t worry that they won’t fit me, everything in the covenant fits me.”

And again: on his way to church on Sunday Tormad sees a cow in the corn and goes to its owner’s house to let them know. The daughter of the house has just poured an extra cup of tea by what we would nowadays call “a mistake”. *Mhàthair, lìon mi copan agus chan eil fhios agam co dha*. “Mother, I’ve filled a cup and I don’t know who for.”

Tormad appears. *Trobhad a ghràidh, tha ullachadh aig a’ Chruithfhear dhuit ann a-seo*. “Come in my dear, the Creator has made ready for you here.” And Tormad, who left home without his breakfast, gets not only a cup of tea but a big slice of bread with an inch thick of butter on it.

There is humour too. A big car from Ness is on its way to Stornoway. At Ballantrushal it stalls. Experienced though he is, the driver is unable to restart it. Domhnall Thearlaich comes out of his house to investigate and he, too, can find nothing wrong. From under the bonnet he spies Tormad Sona. “Do you see that old fellow coming down the road from Upper Shader? As soon as he gets here I bet you get the motor to work.”

Tormad, who is on his way to the Barvas spring communions, reaches the car and climbs into it. *Tapadh leat, a charaid*, he says, *air son gun d’fhuirich thu rium. Faodaidh sinn a-nise falbh*. “Thank you, my friend, for waiting for me. Now we can go.” With a wry smile the driver takes a half turn of the handle. This time the engine roars into life, and off they speed.

As the Psalmist says, “The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels.” To the wandering saint the motor-car is truly a gift of God, and this next anecdote nudges us gently into the realm of prophecy. At the Barvas communions Tormad arranges with a car owner to pick him up on the road at such and such a time and bring him to a particular house. When the time comes Tormad is with a minister in the wrong place, but is completely unconcerned. Eventually he goes out on to the road and at that very moment the car arrives. *Stad an càr orm*, explains the driver, *agus sann an-dràsta a fhuair mi air a carachadh*. “The car stalled, and I’ve only just got it moving.”

Many of Tormad’s prophecies are gentle, undramatic. He knows that someone is sick in the township, and finds her. He correctly foretells the arrival of a friend and makes sure that food is prepared for him. He is the only stranger staying in a particular house during the Ness communions, but foretells that two more will arrive, and they do; he knows, without being told, that one of them (he does not know which) had wanted to go to a different house. Someone is coming from Arnol to see him but his transport breaks down, and it later

transpires that Tormad knew he had set out: *Na rinn thus' ullachadh air son a dhol a chéilidh ormsa gu Gabhsann?* "Did you get ready to go and visit me in Galson?"

Other prophecies are more Biblical in tone. During wartime rationing, he foretells that an old woman with whom he is staying in Barvas will have more food in the house on communion Monday than on the previous Thursday. Sure enough, gifts of food roll in from Ness and from Borve, from Laxdale and from Stornoway, including a large *langa* (ling). On another occasion he says to a friend with a car, "In a few days you will be going to Stornoway, and a mile or two out of Barvas you will come by a man and pick him up." He even pays the man's fare in advance. So it happens, and of course the man turns out to be on his way to the Stornoway communions.

In one anecdote, he is at the Bennadrove market when a woman he knows with a sick person in her family comes to buy a milch cow. She has only £2, and Tormad has no money at all, but after retiring to pray he tells her: *Gheibh thu bó an-diugh*. "You'll get a cow today."

They find a suitable cow, but the owner wants £5. "Do you know this man?" says Tormad.

"No," says the woman.

"Do you know this woman?" says Tormad.

"No," says the man.

"Are you selling this cow for £5?"

"Yes," says the man.

"Will you give £5 for the cow?" says Tormad.

"Yes, but I don't have all the money here, I'll send it to him by post."

"Never mind, I will come for it," says the man.

On another occasion Tormad's attitude is quite the opposite — he makes no attempt whatsoever to give destiny a helping hand. It is as if he is moving effortlessly through some spiritual otherworld. He arrives at the Police Station in Barvas and is asked, "Where are you going today?"

"That is up to you," he says.

It turns out he has a postal order to be cashed at Borve, and sure enough the policeman has to go to Borve that day, so he gives Tormad the money and takes the postal order. Tormad is on his way to communions somewhere and gets a lift from a man with no Gaelic. "Where are you going?" says the man.

"I go where you go."

Further on the driver says, "Where do you want out?"

"Anywhere."

The driver wants to take him to the right place so he says, "What number?"

"No number."

So the driver just takes him to where he is going himself, and it turns out that that is the very house Tormad is going to.

Sometimes, by contrast, the circumstances of the prophecy are highly dramatic. Of a woman who is dying, Tormad foretells that she will not die then describes the rest of her life, and it comes true. One day during the First World War he tells his wife that there will be news for them when they get back from Stornoway and he adds, *Tha cruinneachadh gu bhith 'nar dachaigh a-nochd*. "There will be a gathering in our house tonight." They arrive home to be told that their son Donald has been drowned.

Once at the Back communions, such a ferocious storm arose on the Monday that the church was almost empty. Tormad was there, though, being the only one of five brave men in the house where he was lodging who took to the road. The reason, we are told, is that he had a guarantee of safety in the form of the promise in Luke vii. 27, "I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee."

This raises the question of what lies behind Tormad's prophecies, many of which would seem to the modern observer to resemble what we might now call intuition. In one place we are told that "he did not know how the revelation happened, simply that it happened". Elsewhere we learn that "he was afraid of being independent of the Lord"; for example, on his way to visit someone he wanted to see, he put his foot in a hole full of water, and obediently accepted this as a sign that he should not go after all. So he carefully observed signs, and visions, and revelations through prayer. With regard to visions, there was the time at a question meeting in Carloway when he read out a verse then suddenly resumed his seat in obvious distress. Tormad Dhomhnaill MhicAoidh from Arnol, who was sitting beside him, reported, *A mhinisteir, sann a chaidh rud fo shùil Thormaid*. "Something passed under Tormad's eye."

Dé chaidh fo do shùil, a Thormaid? said the minister. "What passed under your eye?"

Chaidh rud fo mo shùil-sa, said Tormad, *nach do chuir a' University an Glaschu fon t-sùil agaibhse riagh.* "Something passed under my eye that Glasgow University never put under yours."

Above all, however, Tormad obtained revelation by what he helpfully called "listening in", using an English idiom from the brave new world of wireless. It was a combination of prayer (very much a two-way medium) and scripture (the message, which often had to be decoded). So for example, when invited to dine at the manse, he went off to pray before accepting the invitation, then returned saying that at the "listening in" the Lord had told him to accept. There were four courses, and for each he asked a blessing and gave thanks. So he said grace eight times, and the minister's wife remarked, "You have quite a line in graces, Tormad."

"If they are there at all they come from above," he replied, "and it's from above they are said."

Here is another example. In his old age he needed a place to stay in Barvas that was near the church, so he wandered along Loch Street, praying for guidance. *Nach cuir thu cuideigin 'nam choinnimh?* he asked. "Won't you send someone to meet me?" God replied in the words of Mark xiv. 13, "There shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water; follow him," except that in Gaelic the verse uses *duine*, which is not gender-specific. Further along Loch Street he saw a woman with two pails of water and followed her into her house. After exchanging pleasantries he asked, "Do you give hospitality to strangers in this house?"

“Yes,” she replied, “*you* will get hospitality, anyway.”

I have already quoted two of my eight instances of ‘God working through Tormad’. Here, to finish, are two or three more. A young woman wants to speak to Tormad; she dreams that she will find him in a particular house, and so she does. Tormad gives a lift in his cart to a woman who is in soul distress; she does not tell him, but he knows anyway, and gives her comfort as they part by saying as if to his horse, *Falbh a-nis, agus s tu a dh’fhaodas, agus tròcair air do mhuin*. “Go now, and so you may, as mercy is bestowed on you.”

Tormod was constantly aware of being God’s vessel. After citing a particular passage at a question meeting in Barvas he was asked where he had found it. *Cha bu mhis’ a fhuair i*, he said, *sann a fhuair i fhéin mise*. “I did not find it, it found me.”

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