

St Columba

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Revd Jeannette McHugh
St Columba — Columcille, Sunday, 10 June 2007

1 Kings 17:8-16(17-24); Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

Yesterday, June 9th was St Columba's Day —the day the Christian Church remembers a man who lived and died nearly, I was going to say 15 hundred years ago, but one and a half thousand years ago sounds longer. Columba lived his final 34 years on a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland and was buried there in 597 at the age of 76.

Why is he remembered?

Why was he made a saint with a capital S with his own feast day?

Before I started this sermon I thought I could tell you in ten minutes, but I find St Columba is too special a man to be summed up so quickly, so we will get up to when he arrived on Iona from Ireland, and then in the spring, when we have another Iona service, we will find out more about what he got up to in Scotland and the north of England.

Let me share with you the little I know about this man, giving much credit to Ronald Ferguson, Church of Scotland minister, former leader of the Iona Community, journalist, writer of great biographies, now minister of St Magnus Cathedral, Orkney, and Dr Ian Bradley, Senior lecturer at St Mary's College School of Divinity, University of St Andrews.

Ferguson begins his chapter on Columba with the words:

'Columba's voyage from Ireland to Iona in AD 563 is one of the great foundational journeys of Western Christianity. The power of the man and the influence of his achievements can be gauged by the number of legends which surround him.'

As with Elijah in our Old Testament reading, great men of God, do great remembered things, especially miracles.

Columba was fortunate to have his life story told within a few years after his death by Irish poets, and by Adomnan, eighth abbot of Iona, less than 100 years later.

So let us see what we can know of him, always remembering that writers of those times, and biblical times, were not so much concerned to record objective history, as to provide inspiration for the faithful.

The clue to understanding, appreciating, and benefiting, from the lives of saints is the phrase

'by tradition'
or 'tradition has it...'

When you hear or read those words, you don't so much take the next bit with a grain of salt, but rather with a spoonful of wonder.

For example, what are we to make of Elijah's promise that if the woman makes him a little cake, then her jar of meal and the jug of oil will never become empty, and then Elijah lying on her son three times to bring him back to life..or Jesus walking on the water. or all the terrible things that happened to the Egyptians because the pharaoh would not let God's people go? Do we take all these stories literally, or do we pause to wonder why they were said and what truth are we to find in them.

So when you hear the words 'by tradition' you are invited to respond to them in a way which opens your heart and mind to the deeper truths these stories seek to convey.

Columba was born in Donegal in 521. His father Phelim MacFergus was a king or chieftain of the Ui Neill, (apologies to any Irish buffs for my pronunciation) descendants of the famed pagan High King Niall of the Nine Hostages, who reigned in Ireland at the time of St Patrick. Columba's royal pedigree meant that he would have been a candidate for the High Kingship of Ireland, had his life not taken a different course.

Columba is Latin for the Gaelic word Colum which means dove. Columcille means Dove of the Church because 'tradition has it' that as a child he spent so much time in church, he got this nickname and it stuck.

Columba was fostered, as was the custom of the time, by a local priest. The spread of Christianity in Ireland, ever since the inspired leadership of St Patrick in the 4th century, had been accompanied by the emergence of monastic schools as important places of learning and piety. As soon as he was old enough, Columba was sent to the monastic school of Moville, headed by St Finbar, a noted scholar and traveller. At the end of his study Columba was ordained a deacon. He then moved south to Leinster, where he studied the literature and myths of old Ireland under the tutorship of Gemmen, a Christian bard, finding scope for the love of poetry and rhetoric which marked his style of expression.

He finished his studies at Clonard, the most famous seat of learning in all Ireland. Under the leadership of St Finnian, the students memorised large parts of the scriptures as well as copying sacred manuscripts. Thus were the elite of the Irish church trained.

By this time an ordained priest, Columba, who was already recognised as a leader by his peers, embarked on his missionary task. Heading north into Ulster he established a number of centres of mission and learning. There are stories of contests with Druid leaders, symbolizing the struggle between Christianity and pagan religion for the soul of Ireland. Columba himself had great respect, and indeed love, for the ancient Druidic traditions and wisdom: what he wanted to do was baptise them and bring them under the lordship of Christ.

The setting up of important Christian centres at places such as Derry and Durrow, where Rob has been, reveals his organisational and administrative abilities, as well as his love of learning.

Now it was this love of learning which got him into trouble, and probably one of the reasons for him going to Iona.

Bishop Finbar of Moville had returned from pilgrimage to Rome with a copy of the Psalms. Columba is said to have stolen it and secretly copied the manuscript, and some say he even refused to give the original back. The bishop took the matter up before the king. This resulted in the famous judgement, 'To every cow belongs her calf' which meant that Columba had to give up the copied document. The tradition is that Columba persuaded his kinsmen to fight against the king, who lost 3000 men. The battle was later interpreted as a victory of Christianity over Druidism, and Columba's prayers were felt to be the decisive factor.

Not everyone saw it as a victory for Christianity. At first Columba was no diplomat, and his achievements had won him enemies as well as friends. At a hastily convened Synod, he was tried in his absence and excommunicated. The sentence was revoked, however, and Columba was enjoined to win as many souls for Christ as had been killed in the battle.

Tradition has it that the impetuous Columba then went into self-imposed exile, going off with 12 followers to Scotland to where they could no longer see Ireland.

The legend of the saint turning his back on his homeland, attractive though it may be, is unlikely to be true. Columba returned to Ireland many times. It is much more likely that the

saint was responding to a call from his kinsfolk who had settled in Dal Riata, the Argyles near Iona. Yet it was an exile of a kind.

The Irish tradition of exile was making a sacrificial journey for Christ's sake, corresponding to the interior journey of the soul. Perhaps he did feel remorse for the part he played, whatever it was, in encouraging a battle which resulted in great loss of life. The seas were the motorways of the day, and coracles —sturdy hidebound boats —regularly plied their trade off the coast of Ireland.

So it was that Columba and his twelve followers, mainly relatives, landed in Iona on the eve of Pentecost, 563. As Adomnan put it:

'In the 42nd year of his age Columba, resolving to seek a foreign country for the love of Christ, sailed from Scotia to Britain.' (Refer to Rob being there for the re-enactment 1400 years later)

Now my time is up, but before I close let me tell you about the time he met the Loch Ness monster. Mention of it was in last Saturday's Canberra Times!

Adomnan reports that on one of his missionary trips in Scotland Columba sailed up Loch Ness. He saw men burying someone who had been attacked by a monster which then turned on one of the monks. Columba moved into action. The blessed man raised his holy hand and invoking the name of God he formed the saving sign of the cross in the air and commanded the ferocious monster, saying,

'Thou shalt go no further nor touch the man! Go back at all speed!' At the voice of the saint the monster was terrified and rushed down the river.

Loch Ness Monster 0. Columba 1.

The pagans were impressed.

With powers like this Columba was to become a cult figure, venerated throughout Scotland and Ireland for his miraculous works, his sanctity and his protective powers. He became counsellor and confidant to kings and chieftains, as Iona became one of the great spiritual powerhouses of early medieval Christendom.

Perhaps we too will be impressed by all that he did, and give thanks for his life and love of God. Amen.