

St Columba (part 2)

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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(Jeremiah 2:4-13); Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1 (2-6) 7-14

Today is the first Sunday in Spring, the season of renewal, new life, new beauty, a little waywardness, a little foolishness, a little laying aside of the cares we have carried through winter, to enjoy the beauty and wonder of our world.

Today is also in our culture "fathers' day", but we here at St Philip's in the best Celtic tradition of honouring native customs, but adapting them so that they take on a greater Christian perspective have called it Men and Boys' Day so we are more inclusive of all the males present. We hope you men and boys enjoy the extra attention you will getting today.

As it is spring we begin with a little foolishness, with a story sent to me last week by my sister in law on the internet. Does everyone here have someone who forwards on unsolicited emails?

This one seemed meant to be shared.

"A young boy had just gotten his driver's permit and inquired of his father, if they could discuss his use of the car. His father said he'd make a deal with his son." You bring your grades up from a C to a B average, study your Bible a little, and get your hair cut; and we'll talk about the car. The boy thought about that for a moment, decided he'd settle for the offer and they agreed on it.

After about six weeks his father said, "Son, I've been real proud. You brought your grades up and I've observed that you have been studying your Bible, but I'm real disappointed you haven't gotten your hair cut."

The young man paused a moment then said, "You know, dad, I've been thinking about that, and I've noticed in my studies of the Bible that Samson had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, Moses had long hair and there's even a strong argument that Jesus had long hair". To this his father replied, "Did you also notice they all walked everywhere they went?"

Enough of foolishness! But I wonder if it is also foolish to expect to gain wisdom and courage and new understanding about oneself and the world from a man who lived one and a half thousand years ago, and walked pretty well everywhere he went with no shoes on at least in summer.

About three months ago on June 10th, the day after Columba's feast day, we learnt about his early life up to the time he landed on Iona.

To briefly recap for those not present:

Columba, Columcille in Gaelic, was born into a royal family of Kings and High Kings in Donegal Ireland. He loved going to church as a child, so the direction his life took was to be trained to become a priest. He studied at the most elite schools in Ireland - the equivalent of Eton and Cambridge and Oxford and was musical, eloquent, and skilled in painting illuminated manuscripts. He was priested, set up centres of learning in Ireland and got involved in politics.

With his royal connections, he ended up supporting the wrong side in a battle which resulted in great loss of life. For this, and possibly for stealing a manuscript which he wanted to copy and was reluctant to give back, he got reprimanded by the local synod.

The exact reasons for him leaving Ireland soon after this synod remain unclear, but leave he did with 12 followers, mainly relatives, sailing in a coracle to a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland.

He landed on Iona on Pentecost in 563 when he was 42 and stayed until he died there at the age of 76.

What did he do there?

Why did he become a saint?

To help us focus on this lovely warm spring morning, when we should really be outside, I will suggest three things he did really well.

1. He was very good at setting up new communities of monks and brothers in Ireland and Iona. The Iona community became famous for its holiness, wisdom, hospitality, and culture... The brothers would have had individual "beehive" mud and wattle cells (not unlike an African bush village), the church itself was made of oak. Other buildings would have included the hospitium (guest house) refectory, scriptorium, barns, stables, mill, smithy, carpenter's shop and kiln. The fire in the kitchen would have been blessed and never allowed to go out. It was a self-sustaining economic and culturally rich community... the Book of Kells was started here.

So he had great organisational, administrative and leadership skills.

2. But he was also a missionary.

He was not content with setting up heaven on earth on a little island. The great saint Ninian had been in Scotland before him and had inspired important evangelistic movements. But the impetus had waned under the pressure of tribal wars, and some of the fragile Christian communities had disappeared.

Columba had first hand experience of battles, kingship rivalries and politics, and he had learnt to be more diplomatic after leaving Ireland.

He put this learning and experience to good use and got involved with the political life of the day and arbitrated between warring clans.

So successful was he that one of the things he did was to consecrate Aiden king of the Scots at a ceremony on Iona — the first king in Britain ever to be so consecrated.

For centuries after Columba the sanctuary of the monastery grounds on Iona, remained a favourite burial ground of Scottish kings and powerful noblemen.

Thirdly, or rather firstly, and most importantly, his spiritual faith informed his actions and his life.

He knew his bible, he sang the psalms every day, and acted in accord with the spiritual principles he found there.

He led by the example of his own life.

His life was austere, regulated by the daily hours of worship, productive work and prayer.

Yet he was not rigidly tied to a rule, for example, he cancelled a fast day to give hospitality to a "certain troublesome guest".

He was a holy man with a strong sense of the reality of the spiritual life and its central importance in the life of the world. He acted as though the world of the spirit was relevant and integrated into the physical and social world around him.

Each of us, according to our own temperaments and experience of life, will respond in different ways to the different facets of his life.

From his building up and sustaining a new community,
his reaching out to spread the Christian gospel,
his involvement in political matters and social justice issues,
his engagement in the cultural arts of his day.

I think our community here at St Philips attempts to go some way in each of these directions.
We provide hospitality and practical support to anyone in the area with Pandora's, the
Northbourne Community
and our food baskets money given to those in need,
we explore social issues of the day,
our musical offerings bring pleasure and significant cultural learning and grace to many,
and we take our liturgy seriously.

Of course we don't succeed completely, but as a community we try, and thus we provide a
base for each of us individually to develop and offer our own gifts and talents.

So, now I invite you,
and certainly I invite myself,
to explore in this spring season how we can get closer to nature and closer to the source of our
spiritual faith so that we will really mean the words of our Communion song...

Guide me O thou great Redeemer...

May we really be open to be guided,
to be pilgrims in this world for the rest of our lives... that's the hard part,
to be never quite at ease, never quite at peace for any length of time, but always alive to the
present moment,
and at the same time ever mindful of the reality that we do not know the moment when we
will enter into the eternal presence of our God.

It is a blessing that we don't know when that time will be, but on the other hand, we had
better take care to act like the spiritual world is very close to us, because as our Hebrews
reading today reminds us, we never know when we might be entertaining angels.

Amen.