



Sharing together, and Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 5th September 2021

A service to mark the 1500th Anniversary of St Columba's birth

Readings: Isaiah 35.4-7a; Psalm 125; Mark 7.24-37

Introduction

In the year of our Lord 521, St Columba was born. His life and work have been a considerable influence upon the Church over many of the fifteen centuries since. Of the several strands of influence that are woven together in Downing Place Church, Columba is not the least, for it is the name selected in the late nineteenth century for the new Presbyterian work in this city.

So, we use this moment gratefully to mark his 1500th anniversary, most of all to ensure that today this church can reflect things in Columba that add value and virtue to what we are becoming.

Ideas and prayers are developed from those of Columba, those he inspired, and by the tradition that continues to find lively expression on Iona.

Opening Words

A poem attributed to St Columba offers this striking image:

*'The flame of God's love dwells in my heart
as a jewel of gold is placed in a silver dish.'*

Grateful for the **silver dish** that is our lives and the world in which we live them, and for the **golden jewel** that is the love of God, come amongst us in Jesus Christ, let us worship God, beginning with the prayer Jesus taught pilgrims like Columba, and like you and me.

Sharing Together The story of St Columba

Garton – just one letter different from Girton – is a little place on the northwest of Ireland. In 521 a boy was born there and given the name Crimthann, which means 'fox'.

By the time he was a teenager he was saying lots of prayers, and thinking a great deal about God. So he got a new name, Colum Cille, and that one means 'Dove of the Church'.

Later in life he was known as Columba – meaning 'dove'.

There are some famous stories which say that a bit later in his life things went badly wrong. Legend says he fell out with the king, and when the rows led to battles, some people were killed. Colum Cille hated himself for that, and although the church leaders decided not to punish him too severely, he took a long time to accept forgiveness from God or from the church, and decided to leave Ireland. He got in a small boat – maybe a wood and leather vessel called a coracle – and sailed to Iona, a very small island off the West Coast of Scotland. By this time he was over forty – which was a lot older then than it is now.

He set up a community of people who believed in Jesus like he did, and they lived very simply, with not too much 'stuff'. Even his pillow was a stone! They prayed and sang hymns to God, sometimes hymns that Colum Cille himself had written – like the one we sang a few moments ago. And they studied than many people, when, that is, they were not working hard on the land.

Colum Cille wanted to help other people trust God, so he told them about Jesus – he even the King, whose name was Brude. Maybe he even read to them what Kelly has just read to us, those words from Isaiah, that they could be strong and unafraid because God was on their side.

There are many other stories about him. One is about him stopping the Loch Ness monster from hurting a man who was swimming across the loch. Lots of these adventurous tales are more like legends, that people like to think are true, but are probably more important for the lessons they help us learn.

One night in June 597, when he was 78 years old, he realised that he was dying, and it has been said that his last words were: 'Love one another wholeheartedly.' I think that's how we do our bit to put the golden jewel of *God's* love onto the silver plate of *God's* world. And then he said, 'Peace.' In Latin his name became Columba. That means 'dove', which is a sign of peace.

Our next song comes from the Iona Community. It is also about a dove, which is also a sign of the Holy Spirit, which is describes as an enemy of apathy and heavenly dove. Maybe that's a good description of St Columba today, 1500 years after he was born.

Sermon

Looking at the life, legends, and legacy of St Columba, what might we gain for 21st century Downing Place Church?

First, Columba erred in Ireland and moved to Iona, learning from the past, and starting again. We, too, live lives that are a heady mix of the fruitful and the flawed. Like Columba, we get it wrong.

- It may be that our failures are modest peccadilloes. So small that whilst we are ashamed, few others have noticed.
- By the same token, it could be that we've made serious mistakes, for which we struggle to believe we are forgiven, less still to forgive ourselves.

As George MacLeod has it, we are left 'standing, frightened, and hesitating'. When that is where we are, there's no point in only looking within ourselves for rescue and relief. Rather, it is God in Christ who offers us hope. So, hear the good news: Jesus longs to convince us that God is the God whose nature is always to have mercy. 'The hill is conquered, the truth has triumphed, life is abundant.' That's more of MacLeod.

With Columba, let's not be held back by our yesterdays. Each of us is offered a fresh chance, seventy time seven. And so is the church. Whatever we wish was different in our churches' stories, it's past, it's gone. Something new has begun. And God fills us with the Holy Spirit, 'weaning and inspiring all whose hearts are open'. That's why with the Psalmist we can sing, 'Those who rely on the Lord are unshakeable'.

May the new beginning that Columba seized so effectively a millennium and half ago be a model for all that we become.

Secondly, the Columba who arrived from Ireland gave himself to evangelising Scotland and beyond. Columba scholars offer a nuanced understanding of his evangelising work. For example, Gillean Craig suggests that a better description of his *modus operandi* is 'presence' rather than 'mission'. She says he is more a 'witness' than a 'missionary'. Here's what she wrote in 1996: *Witnesses are people whose experience gives them a story to tell that confronts others with, and helps them to come to a decision about, the truth. Our witnessing can take a wide range of authentic forms, depending upon our circumstances, talents and abilities. It ranges from the constant and steady witness of the faithful presence – the people ready to suffer and rejoice with their neighbours, the church still open for prayer and praise – to the dynamism of social action, of open-air evangelism and challenging drama. We can be mute witnesses in the holiness of our lives, and vocal witnesses telling others the story of Christ.*¹ End quote

¹ Craig, Gillean Church Times, 2 February 1996 page 8, as quoted in Ian Bradley 1996 *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications page 116

Through presence and witness, that which he found to be good news in his own experience, he devoted himself to sharing with others. There's a witness for *us* to offer as well; to a world marred by climate, coronavirus, and Kabul. A witness for us to offer to a world where the Syrophenician woman worried about her daughter, and the man whose hearing and speech were impaired, are not freaks to be treated as exceptions, but one with us all in the diverse community of humanity. They are part of the silver dish into which we are called to place the message of the golden jewel. It's a message of faith, which discovers how to trust God and those in whom God lives. It's a message of hope, which never leaves imperfect things as they are, but forever strives to migrate them into what God would have them be. And it's a message of love – that we are loved by an unending love, (Rami M. Shapiro), and made to love others that way, too. If our lives are given their meaning by this trio of faith, hope and love, is it not inconceivable to keep it to ourselves. Where would be the faith, hope and love in not doing so?

May Columba's ministry of presence and witnessing be a model for all that we become.

And **thirdly**, the community at Iona Abbey was established by Columba all those years ago, and after many years of frailty, was rekindled by George MacLeod and his associates, just as the storm clouds of World War II were gathering. As Iona's website says, *'From a dockland parish in Govan, Glasgow, he took unemployed skilled craftsmen and young trainee clergy to Iona to rebuild both the monastic quarters of the mediaeval abbey and the common life by working and living together, sharing skills and effort as well as joys and achievement.'*²

It continues to this day, the Abbey renovated again over the past few years and rededicated just a few weeks ago. With a resident group on the island, there are also thousands of associates around the world. Its lifestyle is simple, and committed to nourishing community characterised by justice. A vital element is dignified, thoughtful and innovative worship. How might those things find authentic expression in Downing Place Church? We are in the twenty-first century of the Christian era, not the sixth. Nor are we on a small island in the Inner Hebrides. Our context is different, but there are aspects of Columba's legacy that are as good for Cambridge as for Iona. My vision is that Downing Place Church has

- a simple lifestyle, uncluttered by frippery and superficiality;
- a determined commitment to the natural world's thriving and to the human world's common good;
- a passion for enabling others to know the joy of Jesus's life-affirming message that we are found and freed by God's love;
- and ways of worshipping that at once both take us into the presence of God and thrust us into the life of the world.

May the new community that a millennium and half ago Columba crafted so effectively be a model for all that we become.

For Columba, thanks be to God.

For the opportunity to share his coracle, thanks be to God.

Amen

N. P. Uden

5th September 2021

² *Our History*, from the website of the Iona Community, available at <https://iona.org.uk/about-us/history/>, accessed 30th August 2021