



SUNDAY SERMON

The Feast of Pentecost

"St. Columba at Iona"

~ *Attributed to St. Columba (early twelfth century). Trans. Kenneth Jackson (1909–1991)*

Delightful I think it to be in the bosom of an isle on the crest of a rock,
that I may see often the calm of the sea.

That I may see its heavy waves over the glittering ocean
as they chant a melody to their Father on their eternal course.

That I may see its ebb and its flood-tide in its tow;
that this should be my name, a secret I declare,
"He who turned his back on Ireland."

That I may bless the Lord who has power over all,
heaven with its crystal orders of angels, earth, ebb, flood-tide.

That I may pore on one of my books, good for my soul,
a while kneeling for beloved heaven, a while at psalms.

A while meditating upon the Prince of Heaven.

DATE

Feast of Columba Day
Sunday, June 3, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Lex orandi, lex credendi is an ancient Christian principle. A loose translation from the Latin would be "the law of prayer is the law of belief," meaning "praying shapes believing;" the way we pray shapes – informs – how and what we believe.

A simple illustration: when I was a child the common practice in the Episcopal Church was for the people in the congregation to kneel during the intercessory prayers, which were said by the priest. In recent years, the common practice is for the people to stand and respond to the petitions led by a fellow parishioner. The posture of kneeling turns me inward to introspection, the words of another - a priest, washing over me, speaking for me, on my behalf. Assuming this posture week in and week out year after year leads to a relationship with God that is private, personal, intimate, receptive. Standing prompts me to be aware of and puts me in relationship with others around me; the call and response requires active engagement.

Over time, such prayer may lead to a relationship with God that is communal, informed by interactive relationship with others.

The church puts words in our mouths, gives us words to say and to pray – prayers, creeds, confessions – words we speak directly to God. Some of those words and prayers are comfortable to us, familiar; they give voice to the intention of our heart and affirm what we believe or wish to believe. But some of those words and prayers startle us, maybe offend, do not conform to our intentions or beliefs. The church has us say the Nicene Creed, not because we already believe it, but that in saying it, we may believe it. Some of us take comfort in that tension; some of us remain silent; some of us resist the imposition.

Some days, I feel that the way I am true to God is by speaking my own words, creating my own path. Other days, I feel drawn to the way of submission, to place myself in the care of the church, the congregation, the saints who have

Continued

gone before us. I am nourished both by the prayers that are familiar, that well up naturally within from rote memory from years of use, a balm in which to rest – as also I am nourished by those prayers that are fresh, different, that open a perspective, an awareness I had not foreseen.

Today the church – with thanks to Jason Cox, Anne Timpane and others – gives us some new words, new images, new prayers, new hymns. New ways to pray may open new ways to believe.

Today the church invites us to pray for and with our patron Saint Columba, that we may come to believe and live our lives in some manner after his fashion. Trained as he was in the great Irish monastery of Clonard, Columba would have known the truth of *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

To pray with Columba, let's take as our text the poem attributed to him that we just read in place of the psalm. And let's start with location; Columba is not praying in a church. Rather, he is "in the bosom of an isle on the crest of a rock" looking at the "heavy waves over the glittering ocean as they chant a melody to their Father on their eternal course." Anyone here found themselves moved to prayer as you watch the swelling waves of the ocean, the changing blue, green, black, aqua of living water in perpetual motion?

In approximately 563, Columba and a small band of fellow monks left their homeland of Ireland and established a monastic community in Scotland on the little island of Iona, facing westward across the Atlantic. Columba spent the next thirty years in those parts. The prayers of Columba and of the community he founded reflect a Celtic form of Christianity which views creation not as fallen and in need of redemption, but views creation as a blessing, a gift of original blessing far surpassing any original sin; which sees the living presence of God animate and vital in every living creature. Thus, the waves of the ocean, the glittering sun, the stars and all living things show forth the presence of God. To pray with Columba is to open our eyes and hearts to creation with gratitude and praise.

Says the poem, "that I may pore on one of my books, good for my soul, a while kneeling for beloved heaven, a while at psalms." Columba was a renowned scholar and scribe; his illustrated manuscripts of the psalms were considered the height of artistry born of deep devotion to God. To pray with Columba is to immerse ourselves fully in the exercise of the unique gifts that God has given to each. Columba received the gifts of a scholar and scribe and employed them to his utmost; for us to pray is to devote ourselves to our particular work and calling – as response to this task that God has given us to do.

But note in the poem "that this should be my name, a secret I declare, "He who turned his back on Ireland." It is said that in his early years, while at Clonard, Columba copied a psalter without permission and when told to return it, he refused. This seemingly small event led to the outbreak of a war. Columba came from royal lineage; when he refused to concede many came to his side. Some three thousand people died in this war. Aghast at what his own behavior had prompted, Columba's voyage to Scotland was a self-imposed exile, a self-imposed commitment to proclaim the mercy and love of Christ among the local inhabitants – Druid Picts – and to do so without ceasing until three thousand had come to know the love of God.

Thus, to pray with Columba is to be fully cognizant of the harm we have done to others. To pray with Columba is to confess, to repent, put ourselves in God's hands, turn from those ways that damage or demean others or ourselves. To pray with Columba is to commit ourselves to sharing the love of God and the faith that is in us. It is to take our messes and ask God to make of them an occasion for grace.

Says Richard Rohr, "A saint is one who somehow voluntarily chooses to trust the daily paradox of life and death as the two sides of everything." "Those who agree to carry and love what God loves, both the good and the bad, and to pay the price for its reconciliation within themselves—these are the followers of Jesus. They are the leaven, the salt, the mustard seed that God can use to transform the world." "Our vocation is a willingness to hold—and transform—the dark side of things instead of reacting against them, denying them, or projecting our anxiety elsewhere."

Continued

Finally, in the poem, we pray "that I may bless the Lord who has power over all, heaven with its crystal orders of angels, earth, ebb, flood-tide." Columba must have radiated extraordinary vitality and grace. Columba's blessing was sought by all manner of people. Fisherman, druid fisherman came in search of his blessing, as did kings and queens. His abbey of Iona and the island itself are a blessing. In the book of Genesis, God said to Abraham "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing to others." God does not bless us for ourselves alone. God blesses us so that we may be a blessing to others. That's what happens every Sunday: we receive a blessing so that renewed and refreshed we may find ways to be a blessing in our lives. To pray with Columba is to open ourselves both to receive and to give, to allow ourselves to be a vessel of God's grace.

In sum, to pray with Columba is open our eyes to God's presence in every living creature, to give ourselves fully to the task and calling we have received, to embrace our failures and ask God to use them for good, and, finally, to receive the extraordinary gift of being vessels of God's grace and love in this world. Does Columba make a claim upon you? Or open a path for you? Through the prayers of our hearts may we come to live in the fullness of Christ. Amen.