

fursey pilgrims

Fursey Pilgrimage Sermon

Burgh Castle, 5th October 2013

Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him... in the ship. Mark 4, vv35, 36.

Fifty years ago this autumn the Church sent me to my first appointment. My ministry began not in England but in Scotland – and therefore from the very beginning I have had a particular awareness and appreciation of the Celtic strand in our Christian heritage.

I'm certainly not an expert, like yourselves. As a Methodist, my distinctive devotional inspiration has been the mission and hymnody of the Wesleys. But as a direct result of that first stationing in 1963, I acquired – and have retained – a depth of affinity and respect for Celtic Christianity which might otherwise have passed me by.

I was sent to Glasgow the dear green place where the [cathedral](#) – a building of no little potency despite its Presbyterianism – contains the tomb of its founder, [St Mungo](#), who died in 603 – thirty years before St Fursey arrived here.

But my church was at Govan, which only merged with Glasgow in 1912; and [Govan Old parish](#) church sits on a fascinating religious site. Its antiquity is overwhelming. The very churchyard has a pre-Christian feel and retains a noticeably circular shape. From it have been retrieved large, mysterious, carved stones – [the hog backs](#) – and many other ancient stones including the sarcophagus once thought to have contained the body of [St Constantine](#), who founded the church in 565.

A short distance down the Clyde from Govan, across the river and just beyond the village of Old Kilpatrick lies Dumbarton, with its famous rock. Here, it is claimed, was the birthplace of [St Patrick](#). What a life! Taken captive by Irish pirates in 405 at the age of 16, six years as a shepherd, escape, years in the monastery at [Auxerre](#) in France, the vision in a dream “We beseech you, holy youth, come and walk among us once more”, and in 432 his deliberate return to Ireland – the land of his captivity – with the Gospel that sets men free.... The thought that the Apostle of Ireland might have lived so very near was a constant thrill.

[St Columba](#), the Apostle of Scotland, crossed the Irish Sea in the opposite direction. It was to be many years before I reached [Iona](#). I was poorly paid and busy in the slums of Glasgow. But it was impossible to minister in Scotland without an awareness of the perpetual influence of this spiritual giant.

Those are my Celtic credentials: indebted to Mungo of Glasgow, Constantine of Govan, Patrick of Dumbarton, Columba of Iona – to which noble list I add gladly: Fursey of Burgh Castle.

Our Gospel reading this afternoon depicts Jesus in a situation which – in a simple and uncomplicated manner – reminds me of St Fursey.

Crowds were seeking Jesus. He was the sensation of the hour – and for good reason. On the beach, he found it most convenient to address the multitude from the comparative safety of a little ship. But the sheer drain of constant and demanding ministry can be overwhelming – even for the Son of God. Jesus knew he had to get away from this multitude. They were told that the rally was over, and sent away. Jesus had decided to cross the sea. The evidence suggests strongly that physically, mentally, spiritually, he needed to be recharged. During the storm, he was out for the count. He needed a rest – and perhaps what we call (often euphemistically) ‘a new challenge.’

Incidentally, I can't help smiling at how the story continues after that momentous night. Jesus steps out of the ship – and the next word is ‘Immediately.’ That's how it is in the service of God; and that's how it must ever be. We're on a journey with a purpose. We could sing easily with Bilbo and Frodo Baggins: ‘The Road goes ever on and on...’ And there is still everything to play for; many issues remain undecided as we journey

along that road. Like the Baggins', we wrestle against principalities and powers. One battle won, and immediately - .

Furseay was a holy man who – after preaching the Word of God among the Irish for many years – could no longer endure the crowds that followed him. Like Jesus in the Gospel, he had to get away from that particular multitude. In our parlance, he may have felt that he'd gone as far as he could in that situation. Whatever the prompting, he knew it was time to move. He abandoned everything he possessed and leaving his native land, crossed the sea to England with a few companions, arriving here in the province of the East Angles in 633.

And immediately!.... Received warmly by King Sigbert, Fursey's work began again. Many were converted to Christ 'by the example of his goodness and the effectiveness of his teaching' (I love the telling phrase Bede uses). Stimulated by a vision granted to him when he was ill, Fursey built a monastery here at Burgh Castle on a site given to him by the King, where our pilgrimage today will reach its climax. Later, as you know, after helping to bring to us the Gospel of Christ, this holy man moved to France, where he died.

From the example of Fursey and my other special Celtic saints from those misty, distant days I derive immense inspiration for my own earthly pilgrimage.

Firstly, they demonstrate the primacy of mission in the life of the Church and the believer. Strathclyde, Strathclyde, Ireland, Scotland, East Anglia – their missionary zeal thrills me. Following my conversion as a teenager, mission became almost my prime concern. At school and then at work, I tried vigorously to show the flag. If you've found something good you want to share it.

And in many respects our task is as hard as Fursey's – for the terms of reference have changed. He preached to people who at least acknowledged the existence of the spiritual world – indeed, it was close, and its affairs were interlinked with the life of this world.

We can no longer take such assumptions for granted. We are deemed by millions to have lost out to science, and in many instances the vocabularies and categories with which we are so at home have been deleted from the collective memory-bank: our words mean nothing. But the obligation to mission still stands – and the commitment and zeal of Fursey and those other amazing Celtic saints is ever before us. I can't think of Fursey and not think MISSION.

Secondly, the Celtic saints illustrate the attractiveness of holiness, and demonstrate how the centrality of devotion is the springboard of mission. Their monastic discipline issued in that purity of heart to which we all aspire and to which we are all journeying – and to which (as Bede suggests) even unbelievers may respond: "Converted to Christ by the example of his goodness."

Growth in holiness and missionary effectiveness are linked – and both stem from that lively awareness described by the psalmist of the all-pervading depth of the Divine presence: "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there...." But remember! Sometimes even holy men and saints have to abandon a particular work in order that the wells might be filled afresh, and a new work begun. 'Let us pass over unto the other side.' The saints were pilgrims, too.

Thirdly, I detect in the Celtic tradition an awareness of – and sensitivity to – the whole created order, to which I respond from the depths of my being, and which might yet prove to be an important bridge between Christian doctrine and modern thought and experience. My Faith is Christocentric and Trinitarian – the Faith of St Patrick's Breastplate – but even that great hymn has a central verse devoted to the glory of the Creation:

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star-lit heaven
The glorious sun's life-giving ray
The whiteness of the moon at even
The flashing of the lightning free
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

The old white horse who sensed Columba's impending death; the significance of the scent of fragrant flowers that made a burden lighter "(It is our old master, Columba. He is anxious because we're so late. Unable to come and meet us with his body, he sends his spirit to refresh, rejoice, console us.)" – those kinds of things; that form of imaginative openness; that way of thinking. This is not to abandon rational thought and systematic theology; it is to let all the senses contribute their revelations.

The closeness and power of the elements were all too real in those days. I always feel our Gospel reading is a very Celtic story. Their sympathy with the disciples would have been wholehearted. "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" is not far from Fursey's cry of alarm, "Master, the fire is coming near me!" uttered in his vision when the four fires of falsehood, covetousness, discord, and injustice merged menacingly into one. Fursey was told: 'It will not burn you.' The disciples were told: 'Peace, be still.'

To Fursey, here at Burgh Castle, as to Columba on Iona, the sea was an all-encompassing reality. No Great Yarmouth sandbank in those days (as we know it) – just a wide estuary stretching from here to Caister.

But it is still possible to stand by the Roman walls here at Burgh Castle and stare out across Breydon Water, where the sun sets, as it is possible to stand on Iona and gaze towards Fingal's Cave and distant mountains, and feel the same God in the same wind.

Mission, holiness, a vivid poetical and powerful awareness of the creation – these are among the Celtic emphases that enrich my pilgrimage: the pilgrimage upon which I might never have set out without the labours in this kingdom of St Fursey. We are the people he found when, in the ship, he passed over unto the other side.

But Fursey not only brought the Good News to East Anglia. He continues to represent a tradition that retains a distinctive sweetness, capable of deepening and refreshing faith, today. Some may suggest that it contains nothing that cannot be found elsewhere in the Catholic tradition. I think they miss the point. It is the blend of emphases that produces the distinctive flavour.

Fifty years on, let me return to Govan (as I did the other day). Among the stones retrieved from the churchyard and displayed in the church is the [Sun Stone](#). It may not be unique, but it moves me deeply. On one side is carved a sun; on the other is carved a cross. Various interpretations are possible: but to me it is a visible expression of Christ's triumph over the objects of pre-Christian worship – an artefact not discarded but pressed into new, Christian usage by men and women who had come to "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The same experience was shared by the people of this province through the labours of him we honour today.

May this pilgrimage – through the prayers and intercessions of St Fursey, with Mungo, Constantine, Patrick, Columba, and all the saints, increase the brightness of our faith and cast light upon that greater pilgrimage upon which we are joined.

For Fursey, who sent away the multitude and passed over unto the other side, and came to us in this place with Christ's Gospel, thanks be to God.

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