Sermon for Fursey Pilgrimage

St Peter and St Paul, Burgh Castle
7 October 2017 Canon Peter Doll,
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We gather to give thanks to God for the life, teaching, ministry and prayers of St Fursey in the momentous year when we also remember the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Although removed from Fursey's time by almost 1000 years, some of the issues which became touchstones of disagreement between Protestant and Catholic also preoccupied Christians in Fursey's day. In particular, I am thinking of the relationship between the local church and the universal Church and what are those things about which Christians can disagree and yet still maintain or restore unity with one another? As we are an ecumenical gathering, I need hardly remind you that these are issues which can impair communion not just between our churches but also within them. The meeting of the Anglican national primates in Canterbury has reminded Scottish Episcopalians that their decision to approve same-sex marriage must have consequences for their relationship with the rest of the Anglican Communion. Likewise, Pope Francis' teaching in *Amoris laetitta* that in certain circumstances it may be possible for local churches to allow divorced Catholics to receive communion has prompted more than two hundred priests and teachers to send him a 'filial correction', in short, to tell the Pope that his teaching is not catholic! Sadly, there are no easy answers out there. But perhaps Fursey in his life and ministry, even if he can't tell us what to do or think, can give us some indications of the responsibilities and obligations we have to one another in Christ.

Because the presence of Celtic Christians in the British Isles was known to ante-date Gregory the Great's mission to the Anglo-Saxons in 597, Protestant historians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries chose to impose upon the Celts a proto-Protestant identity, an early anticipation of their own position - nationalist and anti-Roman and free-wheeling, the antithesis of what Ultramontane Catholicism became by the nineteenth

century. That kind of romantic reading of Celtic Christianity of course continues into our own day, with some choosing to see it as undogmatic and free-spirited. It is certainly true that Celtic Christians were adept at inculturating themselves into the societies in which they were placed. They expressed a close identification with their natural environment. Women had more freedoms and power than they tended to have in continental European societies. Structurally, rather than being organised in dioceses and parishes as in the more centralised societies on the continent, Christians in Ireland adapted themselves to the essentially familial and itinerant structure of society, with monasteries becoming part of the great estates of the landed families. Roving ecclesiastical families, in which priesthood and the care of churches passed from one generation to another became the great organising principle of Irish Christianity.

And yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the Celtic Church therefore regarded itself as in any sense separate from or independent of the rest of the Western Church. If it had, it is extremely unlikely that Celtic Christians would have preserved the Latin language in prayer and Bible and scholarship. In ways that we can scarcely imagine, Celtic Christians were linked by trade and theology to their fellow Christians in Rome and even in Egypt and Syria. Books which started their life on the furthest margins of the Byzantine empire made their way to Ireland. A Syriac manuscript of the Gospels harmonised into a single narrative known as the *Diatesseron* came to Ireland and exercised a profound influence on such Celtic manuscripts as *The Book of Durrow* of the late sixth century. Some of the minerals that went into making inks for manuscript books had to have come from Italy and Egypt. The intricate lacy filigree work that we associate with Celtic manuscripts like the *Book of Kells* or with the carving of Celtic crosses had their ultimate origin in Syriac and Coptic Christianity. It is less surprising, then, that the Celtic form of monasticism, typically with monks living in individual cell buildings and sharing a church for worship, should have been based on the practice of the early Egyptian desert fathers, and that their theology should have carry the marks of the influence of Origen, Evagrius and John Cassian. Celtic Christianity was distinctive, but it was by no means out on a limb, whatever geography might encourage us to assume.

That sense of connection and obligation to the wider Church, intensified by a powerful spiritual energy, impelled the Celtic Christians to reach out as missionaries, both within the British Isles and further afield. In the 580s, Columbanus made journeys into Christian Gaul and further east into present-day Switzerland, where he founded the renowned monastery of St Gall, and finally to Italy, where he died in 615 at the monastery he founded in Bobbio. These were not missionary journeys to pagan lands, but more missions of renewal to that older Christian world which had fostered Celtic Christianity in the first place. They could happen only because Celtic Christians had decided to keep Latin as the language of its public worship and the Bible.

Columbanus set the pattern of mission from Ireland and Scotland that was followed by other Celtic monks, including Fursey himself. Around 633, as an abbot from the West coast of Ireland, he arrived with his followers on the shore of East Anglia, where he was welcomed by King Sigebert, and given a site, probably here at Burgh Castle, to establish religious communities. Felix, the Burgundian bishop, was already in the region, and the two worked in parallel as representatives of both the Roman and Celtic traditions for the conversion of the East Angles. The liturgical and jurisdictional disagreements which would have to be settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664 were not a cause of division here. Fursey and his companions ministered in Norfolk for about 10 years; as Bede records, the people 'were inspired by the example of his goodness and the effectiveness of his teaching, many unbelievers were drawn to Christ, and those who already believed were drawn to greater love and faith in him' (HE III.19). Around 644, Fursey withdrew to the Continent, where he ministered with great effectiveness in the north of Gaul and where he died around 649-50 at Mezerolles and was buried at Peronne. It had been Fursey's hope that he would eventually reach Rome, where he wished to pray at the tombs of St Peter and St Paul, but this was not to be.

From an early age, Fursey had vowed himself to *peregrinatio,* to a typically Celtic understanding of life as perpetual pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God, and it is in this vow, I believe, wherein lies the key to Fursey's great ministry of reconciliation. Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews expresses one aspect of this tradition: 'They acknowledged they

were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had an opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city' (Heb 11.14-16). But the Celtic tradition expressed this sense of exile with an added intensity, for to remove oneself from the legal structures of kingship and kindred was to make oneself an outlaw, without any kind of legal rights. Thus one freed oneself from all earthly attachments for the sake of a more fundamental attachment to God and to his Kingdom. It seems that for Fursey this may have meant detachment from any of the particularly Celtic Christian traditions which would have stood in the way of his ministering to or alongside Roman Christians. He had freed himself from all that would hinder the work of the Kingdom and the unity of the Gospel.

And perhaps that is the challenge that Fursey offers to us and to God's Church in this day and time of our pilgrimage. The church and our wider society are being torn apart by various commitments for and against particular causes: abortion, same-sex relationships, divorce and re-marriage, assisted dying, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering - the list goes on and on, all causes which people hold dear and on which many feel they know the right answers. Fursey chose to die to all such allegiances for the sake of the Kingdom and the unity of the Church. We need to be asking ourselves: which of our allegiances and convictions are standing in the way of the unity of the Church? I know your immediate response may be, It's not *my* convictions that are the problem - it's all the others! But I do encourage you to pause and reflect on what, inspired by Fursey's self-denial, Christians might be prepared to give up that God's Kingdom might be better known in our world.