

# FAITH IN EXILE

Address by the Very Revd Stephen Platten  
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at the  
**FURSEY PILGRIMAGE**  
Burgh Castle - Saturday 5th October 2002

*'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'*  
*Hebrews 11.1*

It was the year of the Lambeth Conference, 1968, and we were gathered in the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island in Northumberland, waiting for Trevor Huddleston to preach. Snuggling into the ruined walls it was not dissimilar to Fursey's monks sheltering in the lee of the Roman fort just across the fields from here. It was summer but storm clouds threatened; there were even rumblings of thunder. Father Joe, a Franciscan friar, muttered to me in a stage whisper: 'God doesn't like Series III!' It was just at the beginning of liturgical reform.

Now Lindisfarne is only an island at high tide but there are strong resonances with our celebrations today. It is not only the ruined walls but the place from which Fursey set out that set the scene. Skellig Michael, Fursey's point of embarkation on the west coast of Ireland, is far more exposed, rocky and isolated than Lindisfarne. The monastery there at Skellig Michael was probably set up by St Fionan in the early sixth century. A craggy spiky rock, out in the Atlantic, it was the point of departure for many pilgrims seeking an 'exile in faith'. Fursey, Columbanus and the semi-legendary Brendan all left these craggy islands to take the faith to other lands.

Geoffrey Moorehouse, in his marvellous reflection on these dramatic skelligs, these craggy centres of holiness, which he calls *The Sun Dancing*, writes:

'The men at the oars moved as though they had all the time in the world at their disposal. Fionan's bony face was tilted towards the sky. Their course had already been providentially determined. "When you reach the sea," Brendan had told Fionan, "the moment the waves begin, there you must surrender to what will be and wait for the sign. Wherever the boat begins to lead, that way you must go from then on. It will be meant."

In Fursey's case we assume that this meant Cnobheresburgh or what we now call Burgh Castle. To the twentieth century mind this pilgrimage process all feels more than haphazard and perhaps also endued with rather too much superstition. But that splendid text with which I began, from our lesson from the Letter to Hebrews, corrects our scepticism, for the writer reminds us:

'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'

This well-known sentence is rooted in the heart of the Christian gospel. Faith is not believing six impossible things before breakfast; it is not *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Nor is faith some sort of blind leap into an unimaginable future. Faith begins with the Christian *hope* and

that is spelt out in the human life of Jesus, and in his passion and resurrection. God is faithful and that is the ground of our faith.

This theme also underpins the gospel story we've just heard. All the emphasis there is normally put on the extraordinary 'the walking on the water'. Lloyd Webber fans will remember Herod in Superstar: 'If you are the Christ, yes, the great Jesus Christ - Prove to me that you're no fool - walk across my swimming pool!' But the essence of the gospel tale is the nature of faith. In Jesus God makes himself and his faithfulness made known. The story is a picture parable all about the significance of such faith. It is this rooted view of faith that motivated Fursey and his companions.

Mention of Fursey (perhaps it's just his name) often brings a wry smile to people's faces. The story of his journey here seems almost literally 'out of this world'. It speaks of another age. And yet all the evidence makes it clear that this journey, and dozens like it, were solid history.

Such was the faith of Columba, Fionan, Colombanus and Fursey. Courageously they followed the teaching of their saviour. They did so in a wild and woolly world. With no protection from the stormy seas they left desolate craggy hermitages for equally uninviting moorland, mountains or swampy homes. But such was their commitment and trust that they knew that it was all in the providence of God:

'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'

Our presence here today, fourteen hundred years on, is evidence of the trustworthiness of the gospel in which they made their exile and pilgrimage. How else would the faith have survived? Those Irish pilgrims embraced the world that their God had created. They used the world to speak of the marvellous gospel of redemption. Listen to Amargin, the poet from those western Atlantic outposts of Ireland:

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,  
I am the wave of the ocean .....  
I am the God who creates in the head, the fire.  
Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the mountain?  
Who announces the age of the moon (if not I)?  
Who reaches the place where the sun couches (if not I)?

This remarkable poem, a blend of a counter-cultural gospel, driving out evil, with a good creation is at the centre of what we celebrate today. We give thanks for Fursey but first and foremost we celebrate and worship God in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is that same God who gives us the faith to proclaim his love anew in our generation, and in our own form of exile. How shall we proclaim the Lord's song in a strange land? This ancient church is no bad place to begin. As travellers, tourists and others arrive, let Fursey's faith challenge them once again.

**Amen**