

Sermon for the 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columbanus,

San Clemente Church, Rome 10th October 2014

It is a great privilege to be asked by the Society of Saint Columban, and Father Robert McCullough in particular, to share some thoughts from an Anglican perspective on this auspicious and meaningful 1400th anniversary of their saint and founder.

It might seem at first glance that this anniversary is too far removed from our present realities to have much to say to us now. 1400 years is a long time and so much has changed. But this is far from the truth when you look closely into Columbanus's life and work; he is full of import for us now. Also, as we begin to receive the graces that God caused to come to us all through Columbanus, let us remember that he can speak to us all here tonight - Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant - because he comes from a time when the Church was utterly and completely one, undivided and whole. He belongs to us all in this sense and we need to listen to him as one in spirit and truth. God is above time while being immanent in all times and so He can bring his servant Columbanus to us all afresh today. We will be encouraged and enriched for this reason alone.

To Anglicans and Roman Catholics in particular Columbanus is also interesting because he must have passed St Augustine on his way to England from Rome, as he himself was heading towards Italy. Two missionaries passing in the night as it were, both bearing the gospel of peace and the truth of the kingdom of God. The go-between Holy Spirit of God criss-crossing the European world of the 6th century with the treasures of two deep wellsprings of the gospel. The free cross-pollination of the seeds of the Kingdom in and from different soils.

Columbanus was born in the Kingdom of Meath, now part of Leinster in Ireland in 543, the same year that St Benedict died at Monte Cassino, and became literate in grammar, rhetoric, geometry and the study of the Bible. He spent time in Lough Erne where he composed a commentary on the psalms, then moved onto Bangor Abbey with Saint Comgall was abbot, and then when he turned 40 gained permission to travel to the continent with St Attala, Columbanus the Younger, Cummain, Domgal, Eogain, Eunan, St Gall, Gurgano, libran, Lua Sigisbert, and Waldoleno. This group soon established three monasteries and the religious life prospered under Columbanus and his Irish rule. He knew how to plant and to grow the kingdom of God.

The rule involved ten chapters: of obedience, of silence, of food, of poverty, of humility, of chastity, of choir offices, of discretion, of mortification and of perfection, being much shorter than the rule of St Benedict. Columbanus said that the rule of silence must be carefully observed, since it is written "but the nurture of righteousness is silence and peace", and also later "let the monks food be poor and taken in the evening, such as to avoid repletion, and their drink such as to avoid intoxication, so that it may both maintain and not harm". In the fourth chapter Columbanus presents the virtue of poverty and of overcoming greed, and says that monks should be satisfied with "small possessions of utter need, knowing that greed is a leprosy for monks".

Columbanus was not perfect: he could be impetuous, according to Jonas his biographer, and even headstrong, because he was eager, passionate and dauntless. However he also had a great love for God's creatures, and it is said that as he walked in the forests birds would land on his shoulders and he caressed them, and squirrels ran down trees and nestled in the folds of his cowl.

He is associated with 9 miracles.

1. Procuring food for a sick monk and curing the wife of his benefactor

2. Escaping injury while surrounded by wolves
3. Causing a bear to evacuate a cave at his biddings
4. Producing a spring of water near his cave
5. Replenishing the Luxeuil granary
6. Multiplying bread and beer for his community
7. Cutting sick monks, who rose from their beds at his request to reap their harvest
8. Giving sight to a blind man at Orleans
9. Taming a bear and yoking it to a plough

Jonas tells of a particular miracle in detail during Columbanus time in Bregenz, during a famine.

“Although they were without food, they were bold and unterrified in their faith, so that they obtained food from the Lord. After their bodies had been exhausted by three days of fasting, they found so great an abundance of birds, just as the quails covered the camp of the children of Israel, that the whole country there was filled with birds... the manna of the birds stayed for three days. Eustasius who was present said none of them remembered ever having seen birds of such a kind before: and the food was of so pleasant a flavour that it surpassed royal viands. Oh, wonderful gift of divine mercy!”

Columbanus was also fearless in the face of political and regal indiscretion or injustice and challenged monarchs over ethical and fairness issues without discrimination, including the then King of France, King Theuderic. Although he suffered for his stand, he remained undaunted.

What can we receive from Columbanus now, given this story of his life and mission under God?

It is clear that an educated and disciplined life still bears much fruit, especially if it is centred in prayerfulness and contemplation. Without this the world become anchorless.

It is clear that the combination of hard labour and worship, while living a life of humility and hospitality in community, has much to commend itself today in the face of restlessness, individualist materialism and meaninglessness. The forms of new monasticism we are seeing come to life in different denominations today bear testimony to the need for Columbanus’s communal vision and zeal, in our own way, today. Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby has said that the revival of the religious life in one form or another has always been a precursor to the renewal of Christian community mission as a whole.

It is clear that a renewed theology of creation is desperately needed today as we fall ever deeper into the ecological crisis of our time. Columbanus’s oneness with creation as a sacred gift (though not divine) is a key to our own challenge to reconcile ourselves to the ways of nature with respect and to give ourselves to the humble stewardship of the earth as envisioned in the book of Genesis.

It is clear we need Columbanus’s fearlessness in the face of corruption and immorality in high places.

Columbanus is now the patron saint of motorcyclists; in art he is represented bearded bearing the monastic cowl, holding in his hand a book with an Irish satchel and standing in the midst of wolves. Sometimes he is shown taming a bear, or with sunbeams over his head. Motorcyclists, education, oneness and peace with the animal and natural world, are surely keys to a wholesome and sane existence today. Let us remember St Columbanus with full hearts and minds and drink from his deep well in our time. He being dead yet speaks, to us all.