

## “A MORNING SONG TO GOD”

Psalm 104:1-13, 24-35 Matthew 6:25-33 July 7, 2019

Although I didn't really plan it this way, it does turn out that I have done a series on my Iona Pilgrimage and Celtic Spirituality. I will conclude with this morning's message and next Sunday I will begin a new series on Discipleship.

However, you may expect some of that to creep in from time to time in my ministry and our times of worship together. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me and as I shared with you—I was blessed with “fresh vision and new courage for every place where love or duty or pain may call [me].”

During our time on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, we were privileged to hear Ray Simpson speak. He is the founder of Open Gate, a sanctuary that welcomes all who have need of a place to sleep, food, and companionship on their journey. He is a renown expert on Celtic Spirituality and in his book Exploring Celtic Spirituality “offers a rich overview of a spirituality now re-emerging from the mists of time.”

In his chapter “A Cherished Creation” Ray writes: *The Celtic Christians looked upon creation as loveable and enjoyable, as did God when he created it (Genesis 1:31)*. The following lines, attributed to Columba, portray a love of creation in relation to God: ‘Delightful would it be to me...to be on the pinnacle of a rock, that I might often see the face of the ocean; that I might see its heaving waves over the wide ocean, when they chant music to their Father...’

This enjoyment of God, together with his creatures, has never been quite extinguished in the Celtic lands. Catherine Maclennan told Alexander Carmichael how her mother would get her children to sing a morning song to God as Mary's lark was singing it up in the clouds and as Christ's song thrush was singing it yonder in the tree, giving glory to the God of the creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day and for the joy of life.

She would tell us that every creature on the earth here below and in the ocean beneath and in the air above was giving glory to the great God of the creatures and the world, of the virtues and the blessings, and would *we* be dumb.

In his poem, in Welsh, “The Christ of Nature’, the modern Welsh poet Donald Evans captures the way he, doubtless like many Celtic Christians, understood Christ's view of the natural world:

He loved the character of birds, the flock that trusted in His Father;  
He loved lambs, the most skillfully made: lambs with the most innocent nature.

He loved the beasts of the margin-lands; those that dwelt in the wild; He loved their staunch dependence on that which the desert could give. He loved the wheat swaying, weighed down with yellow nourishment; He loved the mountain fastnesses, the uninhabited places where peace grew. He loved the earth; loved her like a relative because she is God's earth; He loved her because she was created by His Father out of nothing as a temple of life.

One of the experiences I shared with you earlier was of walking out to St. Columba's point on the island of Iona. It was memorable to me for many reasons but we did begin our pilgrimage with St. Columba and traveled from there.

Saint Columba, who is lovingly named the Dove of the Church, inspires us with a Christian vision that infuses the creativity of our human gifts with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He calls us to devote ourselves entirely to a vision of Christ that has the power to transform the world.

You are familiar with the ancient Irish hymn “Be Thou My Vision”. It begins like this:

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,

Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.  
Thou my best thought by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

In the book Holy Companions, Spiritual Practices from the Celtic Saints, by Mary C. Earle and Sylvia Maddow, they write that: Columba's life began with a vision. His mother, who was born of royal lineage in the northern part of Ireland, was expecting a princely son who would be a king. Before his birth, however, she received a dream in which the angels told her that her son would be a great prophet destined to be the leader of innumerable souls. Heeding the angel's message, she sent the young Columba to the great teachers of the Christian faith. His exceptional gifts in poetry and expression were nurtured in the tradition of the great bards of Ireland. From the very beginning he showed a love of the psalms.

Columba's prayers revealed to the people that he possessed what the Celts call the gift of "second sight," a quickened inner vision that allows one to transcend time and space, to see eternity in the midst of the everyday details of life.

This inner vision led Columba to found monastic communities all over Ireland. It is said that he founded forty-one monasteries in forty-one years, many of these monasteries becoming centers of prayer, hospitality, and learning.

However, Columba's love of learning caused a conflict in the monastery at Moville. He was accused of copying a book of psalms that belonged to another monk. The case went to the High King of Ireland, who ruled that Columba had to return the copy to the owner of the original text. What began as a dispute over property, a copied book of psalms, erupted into armed battle.

Columba's supporters fought and won, supposedly demonstrating his power. Columba, and Ireland, saw the destruction that possessiveness and greed had caused; more than three thousand soldiers died in the battle. In an effort to make amends for this misuse of power, Columba's beloved Ireland forced him into exile. He then embarked on a pilgrimage, entrusting himself to God's mercy.

He set sail in 563 with twelve companions. They landed on the ancient isle of Iona of the northwest coast of present-day Scotland. Landing on the day of the least of Pentecost, Columba found his vision of Christ's mercy and forgiveness renewed. He began creating one of the greatest centers of faith and evangelism in Christian history. At a time when all was in disarray on the continent of Europe, Iona was a community devoted to learning to intentional Christian living.

Columba's group of monastics sent forth missionaries to evangelize the Picts and Scots in what is now northern Scotland. Later missionaries from Iona went to Europe and established new monastic foundations, taking the light of the gospel to the farthest reaches of Europe, even as far as Russia.

At the heart of this great flowering of the gospel, Columba maintained a simple, devoted life sustained by his rule of prayer, silence, work and study. It was said that his face began to reflect the joy of the Spirit, and that even when he was not present, his spirit offered healing and comfort to his fellow monks. His vision of the Christian life continues to thrive today on the island of Iona, where countless pilgrims are inspired by this gifted saint's vision.

Columba's vision was formed by his passionate love of the truth of the Scriptures and the beauty of creation. As a young monk, he enthusiastically offered his abundant gifts of scholarship, leadership, and poetry in following that vision. At the time of his exile, his vision was shaped by his own experience of sin and failure, exile, redemption, and renewal. From the ashes of Columba's life in Ireland, the living Christ kindled a new life in the saint and gave him the strength to create a new community.

Columba reveals to us a Christian vision that transcends time and space, yet is grounded in our own time. This vision reaches far beyond our grasp, yet it is within our reach. It honors our unique human gifts and multiplies them in service to the world. To pray with Columba is to catch a glimpse of that vision and to join

him in devotion, serving the King of kings.

In the week ahead I invite you to pause and reflect on your own vision of Christ and how that vision takes form in your life. Although Columba had an inspired vision of God's will, his own personal vision sometimes conflicted with that inspired vision. Have you ever held on to your own vision until it began to conflict with God's holy vision? Express your sorrows over any hurt or loss you might have inflicted on others. Spend some time praying that even this loss, like Columba's, will be transformed and made new by God's grace.

Let me close today with Columba's words...

Let me bless almighty God, whose power extends over  
sea and land, whose angels watch over all.

Let me study sacred books to calm my soul; I pray for  
peace, kneeling at heaven's gates.

Let me do my daily work, gathering seaweed, catching  
fish, giving food to the poor.

Let me say my daily prayers, sometimes chanting  
sometimes quiet, always thanking God.

Delightful it is to live on a peaceful island, in a quiet cell,  
serving the King of kings. Amen and amen.