

## Warden's Sermon, Sneaton Castle, June 2016

*This sermon was greatly influenced by very recent events. The UK referendum on membership of the European Union had only a few days before the Gathering resulted in a small 'Leave' majority. This was a shock to many and very quickly became a major topic of discussion amongst UK-based members. Whether one supported the remain or the leave side, most of us were very disturbed at the tone of the debate that had taken place over the past weeks. Uniquely, it was necessary for the Gathering at Sneaton Castle to provide space for us to begin to come to terms with the new very uncertain situation we found ourselves in.*

Almost as soon as I had arrived at Sneaton Castle I realised that I was going to have to re-cast my thoughts for my address at this closing Eucharist. Many of us are still in the process of re-orienting ourselves to the reality of a vote to leave the European Union and this has been accompanied by very intense feelings.

Over the past few days we've been hearing about the lives of the Northern Saints – people from around here who lived in very uncertain times and showed a leadership that offers encouragement today. So I'm going to try to follow a train of thought that will take us from where we find ourselves now back to the saints of the sixth and seventh centuries and perhaps give us a different vantage point from which to view the recent events.

So to start in the present. Even before the referendum vote a few days ago I, like many others, had been almost in despair about the conduct of the campaign. Politicians on both sides of the debate had been making definitive statements about things that could never be said with any degree of certainty. It's not unique to the UK. There is a similar sense across the Atlantic as the Presidential Election approaches in the USA. Politicians everywhere seem to feel an imperative to show certainty even when it is clearly impossible. They can't, daren't, admit that they do not really know. As scientists, who understand data and how it is interpreted, we are immediately uneasy. For example, we know that economic models are just that, models and not the reality, and that their output depends upon their structure and parameterisation. As ordained scientists (unlike some other kinds) I would suggest that we are more sensitive to the distinctions between what we know, how much we know, and further we are able to sense how much we can know. It may not be easy to accept this all the time, but we need to resist the demand for certainty, required by a public driven by the appetite of the media for a new story every day (at the least).

Theologically we may note a similar pattern. Many of us are as uncomfortable with the over-definitive statements of some branches of Christianity as we are with those of over-ambitious scientists. As I've said before at these meetings, we need a degree of humility about what we can say scientifically and theologically. As we do this, we can make our journey into the past and find ourselves comfortably linked with the sixth century, this time with the Irish missionary, St Columbanus (543-21 November 615). He was a key figure in the Irish missionary activity in the early medieval period, founding a number of abbeys (e.g. Luxeuil in France and Bobbio in Italy). I'm always struck by how much some historical figures seem to have achieved. Apart from his travelling ministry, Columbanus left many writings and a few paragraphs seem to be exceptionally relevant 1500 years later. Here's how he offers an understanding of God, and importantly for us, he relates it to our understanding of the natural world.

From the Instructions of St Columbanus, abbot

God is everywhere. He is immeasurably vast and yet everywhere he is close at hand, as he himself bears witness: I am a God close at hand, and not a God who is distant. It is not a God who is far away that we are seeking, since (if we deserve it) he is within us. For he lives in us as the soul lives in the body – if only we are healthy limbs of his, if we are dead to sin. Then indeed he lives within us, he who has said: And I will live in them and walk among them. If we are worthy for him to be in us then in truth he gives us life, makes us his living limbs. As St Paul says, In him we live and move and have our being.

Given his indescribable and incomprehensible essence, who will explore the Most High? Who can examine the depths of God? Who will take pride in knowing the infinite God who fills all things and surrounds all things, who pervades all things and transcends all things, who takes possession of all things but is not himself possessed by any thing? The infinite God whom no-one has seen as he is? Therefore let no-one try to penetrate the secrets of God, what he was, how he was, who he was. These things cannot be described,

examined, explored. Simply – simply but strongly – believe that God is as God was, that God will be as God has always been, for God cannot be changed.

So who is God? God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. Do not demand to know more of God. Those who want to see into the depths must first consider the natural world, for knowledge of the Trinity is rightly compared to knowledge of the depths of the sea: as Ecclesiastes says, And the great depths, who shall fathom them? Just as the depths of the sea are invisible to human sight, so the godhead of the Trinity is beyond human sense and understanding. Thus, I say, if anyone wants to know what he should believe, let him not think that he will understand better through speech than through belief: if he does that, the wisdom of God will be further from him than before.

Therefore, seek the highest knowledge not by words and arguments but by perfect and right action. Not with the tongue, gathering arguments from God-free theories, but by faith, which proceeds from purity and simplicity of heart. If you seek the ineffable by means of argument, it will be further from you than it was before; if you seek it by faith, wisdom will be in her proper place at the gateway to knowledge, and you will see her there, at least in part. Wisdom is in a certain sense attained when you believe in the invisible without first demanding to understand it. God must be believed in as he is, that is, as being invisible; even though he can be partly seen by a pure heart.

Columbanus was a link between Britain and Ireland and continental Europe 1500 years ago. Since then the links have sometimes been closer, sometimes more at a distance. No doubt that process will continue its ebb and flow. We have heard in Rosalind's talks of the many uncertainties of those earlier times. Now, similarly, we have the instabilities and uncertainties of our own time, ones of which we are particularly conscious at the moment. But look at what we have in common with those earlier times. The thought world is different in many ways, but it is also the same. Columbanus cautions us against trying to pin God down with too much certainty. That is an essential theological insight, supported by scripture and the early church. As scientists we may not always be at ease with uncertainty but at least it is part of our regular way of dealing with the world. As ministers of the church we gladly accept the ambiguities and are not trapped by the demand of the political and media communities for certainty. That is, as Columbanus says, because we do not 'gather arguments from God-free theories, but by faith'. So as scientists and ministers we are in a unique position to understand the nature of the complex and contradictory situation we find ourselves in. 'Complex', 'contradictory', 'ambiguity' – all these words carry with them potential overtones of anxiety. I believe that reading the words of Columbanus, and others of his time, all these negatives are erased by the sense of the beauty of the creation which reflects the character of its Creator. It's in that context, which has its own constancy and consistency, its own certainty, that we will be able to hold out a hand to accompany those we minister to through the many steps ahead which still have to be identified and negotiated.

Peace be with us all.