

Columba's Tears

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives us two stories of people who have lost something—a sheep, a coin. How diligently each searches for what they've lost, and how delighted they are when they find it! Jesus compares their delight to the joy in heaven when someone who has lost right relationship with God is found and restored.

I'm going to tell you a story of just such a person—the story of Saint Columba. He was born in Ireland, in 521 C.E., the son of a chief of the royal tribe. His parents named him Columcille, which means “dove,” and trained him for the church. However, Columcille had a quick temper which often got him into fights, and the other boys in his tribe gave him a very different name—Crimthann, “the wolf.”

Columcille studied in monastery schools and in the great colleges of ancient Ireland, eventually becoming an ordained priest, even though he hadn't quite managed to tame his fiery temper. When he was forty-two years old, Finian, one of his former teachers, returned from a visit to Rome with a precious manuscript—a new version of the Gospels, translated by St. Jerome. Although he usually kept a tight hold on his books, Finian allowed Columcille to see this new one, and Columcille made a copy in secret. Finian found out about this and, in anger, took Columcille to court.

Diarmid, the High King of Ireland, delivered a judgement which, interestingly enough, became the basis of our modern copyright law. “To every cow her calf, to every book its transcript. Therefore the copy made by you, Columcille, belongs to Finian.” Columcille was so enraged, he forgot his quarrel with Finian and turned his anger toward the king, vowing to avenge himself in battle. He and his followers routed Diarmid's troops, but afterwards the clerics of Ireland met and accused Columcille of the deaths of three thousand of Diarmid's men. It must have seemed to his colleagues that he was very much a lost sheep, because they decided to excommunicate him.

Now deeply sorry for his actions, Columcille decided to go into exile, vowing to win as many souls for Christ as fell in the battle he fought with Diarmid. With twelve followers, he put to sea in a fragile craft of wood and hide, determined to sail until he could no longer see any part of Ireland on the horizon. They finally came ashore on the Scottish island of Iona, at what is now known as Columba's Bay, because Columba is the name by which he became known in Britain. During his voyage from Ireland, Columba composed a homesick poem that expressed the pain of his self-imposed exile.

*How swift is the speed of my coracle,
Its stern turned to Derry.
My grey eye looks back to Erin,
A grey eye full of tears.*

Columba had recognized that he was lost and, in penitence, had imposed upon himself the loss of his beloved homeland. But I suspect that the greater loss for him was of his closeness and right relationship to God. His exile was his attempt to restore that relationship— to regain what he had lost. On Iona, Columba and his followers established a monastic center that became a base for missions to the Picts in Scotland, the Anglo-Saxons in what is now England, and throughout Europe, reaching as far as western Russia.

Columba and his followers were steeped in the rich traditions of Celtic Christianity, which flourished in the British Isles through the 12th century. One of the primary characteristics of Celtic Christianity is a profound sense of the sacredness of all creation. As Edward Sellner notes, in *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, “*Their daily life was lived in close proximity to nature and the spirituality reflected . . . a sense of wonder and awe at the divine residing in everything.*” This belief in the divine indwelling in each created thing informed their practice of worshipping outdoors, a practice scorned as pagan by the Roman church, and their deep love and respect for the environment, expressed in quiet care for all living things.

This sense of the sacred in all things also extended to all persons. Rather than seeing humankind as mired in original sin, they saw the basic goodness of each person, created as we are in the image of God. The Celtic tradition also provided inspiration and encouragement for a daily practice of the presence of God. Anthony Duncan, in *The Elements of Celtic Christianity*, notes that “*Celtic Christianity is essentially an embracing of life in its totality. There is no false division between the sacred and the secular— all is blessed. The whole of life, the whole of Creation, is brim-full of the divine Presence and there is nowhere where God is not.*”

In the Celtic way, there are prayers for rising in the morning and for going to bed at night, and for just about every activity in between. God’s blessing was sought not only before meals, but for bathing and for kindling a fire, for placing a warp on a loom, for consecrating seed and for reaping the harvest, and even for milking the cows. There is a wonderful down-to-earthness in these prayers, but even as I use the term “down-to-earth,” I want to emphasize that earth is not “down” while God is somewhere rarified, distant, and “up.” As we heard in the words of Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart, there was nothing which was considered to be beneath God’s interest, no creature or activity so humble that God would not be concerned with it.

I remembered Saint Columba’s story, as I stood looking out at Columba’s Bay, on my recent visit to Iona, imagining his coracle scraping ashore on the pebbled beach. The stones under my feet ranged from black through gray, through various shades of red and green, to the white serpentine marble that was once quarried on the island. I looked for one of the rare translucent green stones, called “St. Columba’s tears” in honor of the tears he shed as he left behind all he had known and loved. And I thought about how the emphases of Celtic Christianity, particularly the three I’ve just named, might have helped him in his exile.

With its white sand beaches, green pastures and craggy hills, its views of the ocean and of the mountains of Mull, Iona is an achingly beautiful place. It’s easy to be moved to awe and to see

God in creation when surrounded by such beauty. Deeply loved by his followers, Columba also, apparently had the ability to see the spark of God indwelling in each person he encountered. And he would have practiced the presence of God with the small daily prayers in which he asked God's blessing on the activities of his busy life. And I can't help but wonder how we might be changed, both as individuals, and as a society, if *we* saw and honored the sacred in every iota of creation? If *we* saw and honored the sacred in each other and ourselves? If *we* practiced the presence of God, or the holy, by whatever name we relate to it, in our day-to-day living?

Celtic Christianity was eventually largely suppressed by the church of Rome. To me, this feels like a great loss, like the loss of the sheep or the coin in our gospel story, because, as we look at the state of our world today, it seems very clear that we have lost the sense of the sacredness of all creation, we've lost our ability to see and honor the sacredness of every human person, and we've lost the practice of the presence of God in our day-to-day lives. How much rejoicing would there be in heaven if we were to find and claim these things once again? Perhaps it's time to start searching.

Amen.