

## **Sermon for the Choral Eucharist for the Feast of St Non**

***Sunday 4 March 2012***

Revelation 19.8: ‘...the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.’

When Dean Jonathan asked me to become a Guardian of the Shrine of St David, my initial reaction was one of panic.

I couldn't say no, of course – but I feared that it meant that I was doomed to spend the rest of my ministry lurking somewhere in the vicinity of the shrine – keeping an eagle eye out for small children intent on scribbling on it – or foreign tourists hoping to chip off a chunk to take home as a souvenir – or even (and here my imagination went into Brother Cadfael mode) covetous canons from lesser cathedrals plotting to pinch a relic or two in the hope of establishing a shrine of their own.

But that initial panic quickly subsided – and was replaced by an increasing sense of awe and wonder at the privilege of being asked to care for a shrine that is both an extraordinary work of art – its icons being windows into heaven as icons are meant to be – and also a focus of prayer: a lasting reminder to pilgrims and visitors that this is a sacred space – one of the holiest places in the British Isles and indeed the whole of Christendom.

T.S. Eliot called Little Gidding ‘a place where prayer has been valid’, and the same is true of this Cathedral, sanctified by centuries of prayer. The restored shrine of St David will ensure that it continues to be a place of prayer for many centuries to come.

Gwenallt, one of our great Welsh religious poets, wrote about ‘y ddwy-un eglwys’ – ‘the two-one church’ made up of the victorious church in heaven and the church militant here on earth: the church in the timelessness of eternity and the church in the linear time of our human experience, bound together in a single communion of saints.

Gwenallt was aware of how each of the two elements of the communion of saints could inter-relate. He depicts St David stepping into the society of mid-twentieth century Wales, bringing the transforming message of the Gospel to our people, just as he had done fourteen centuries before – and there is a sense in which our restored shrine continues this process into the twenty-first century.

This morning we remember not only St David, but also St Non, his mother, whose feast day we keep today. St David’s medieval biographer tells us that Non was a nun who was raped by a sixth century king of Ceredigion, which, given the rather brutal nature of much of Welsh life at that time, seems probable enough.

If we look behind the various legends that attached themselves to St Non in Welsh and Breton folklore, we glimpse a young woman from a deeply religious background, traumatized by an appalling experience, and then left to bring up her little son on her own.

And it's that relationship between the mother and her son which is profoundly significant. A recent survey showed that Christians in Britain are much worse than members of other religions at passing on their faith between the generations. I suspect that this may be something that has developed most markedly during the past half century.

Certainly I belong to a generation where it was not uncommon for mothers to teach their children the Lord's Prayer and other prayers as well. That was my own experience in a not particularly devout home. Mothers and grandmothers have played – and often still play – a crucial part in planting the seeds of Christian belief and practice in their children's or grandchildren's lives.

A wise and lovely old Polish lady in my former parish up in the hills once said to me: "Passing the faith to your children is like packing a suitcase for them. They leave home and wander off and may go in all sorts of directions. Perhaps they never open the suitcase at all. Perhaps one day they do open it and find what they really need within it. But what matters is that the suitcase is there. You have given it to them."

And what St Non passed on to her son David were those familiar words which David passed on to us, recorded in the early Welsh version of his life by the Anchorite of Llanddewibrefi: 'Byddwch lawen, cedwch eich ffydd a'ch cred, a gwnewch y pethau bychain a glywsoch ac a welsoch gennyf i.' 'Be joyful, keep your faith and your belief, and do the little things you've heard and seen from me.'

'Be joyful!' It was important to strike that note, if only because you don't have to be an expert in Welsh religious history to know that there have been periods when much of Welsh Christianity has seemed a dismal, dull, deadening and deadly affair.

Non's life must have been desperate enough at times – and yet she sang the psalms and canticles she'd learnt off by heart in the convent to her little son – and taught him the joy that comes through praise.

And that praise has echoed through the ages. There's the astonishing Welsh Benedicite in the Black Book of Carmarthen, verses which some scholars suggest may have been originally composed here in St Davids: 'Gogoneddog Arglwydd, henffych well!' 'Hail, glorious Lord! May church and chancel praise you, may chancel and church praise you...' And the praise expands to embrace the world, the cosmos, the tradition of faith and all human creativity.

That praise is continued by the great Welsh religious poets of the Middle Ages and by the hymn writers of eighteenth century Carmarthenshire, and it reaches a glorious climax in that wonderful hymn by Pembrokeshire's modern poet W. Rhys Nicholas which is so often sung to 'Pant-y-fedwen'. And of course that extraordinary tradition of praise is at the heart of the life and worship of this Cathedral: St David's own cathedral, so often filled with the most beautiful sacred music.

'Keep your faith and your belief' was St David's second command – which may seem uncomplicated enough in a country whose culture has been shaped by fifteen centuries of Christianity. But, as we're all very much aware, and as Dean Jonathan reminded us on St David's Day, life has changed. For many in Wales faith and belief are now things that they seem to find it only too easy to live without.

To my mind, the essence of faith is what remains when everything else is stripped away. It's that something that keeps us going when going on seems utterly impossible... That wounded hand that reaches out in love to grasp our hand in the deepest darkness and leads us gently forward into unexpected light.

Non must know that: raped, abandoned, left to care for her little son all on her own – and yet, even in the worst times, her faith sustained her - and she passed it on to David.

And faith is linked to belief. Gwenallt, in his poem about St David, speaks of 'the saints, our oldest ancestors, who built Wales on the foundation of the crib, the cross and the empty grave': Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection – the depth of God's love for us revealed in Jesus Christ, God come among us as one of us for our sake. That was the basis of the Gospel that Non taught David – and that David preached and that we preach still.

But there's a danger here: one that the fashionable opponents of religion are only too quick to remind us of. Belief can easily become a stick to beat others with, and faith can be perverted into fanaticism and end up planting bombs or firing bullets.

The antidote which gives faith and belief both depth and real meaning is that third command which David inherited from Non: 'do the little things...'

The 'little things' represent faith and belief lived out in everyday life through apparently insignificant but in fact hugely significant acts of loving-kindness. I don't know if Mother Teresa of Calcutta knew much about St David, but I do know that she was on the same wavelength as him when she said 'We can do no great things, only little things with great love.'

Non's gift to David was Our Lord's gift to her – and has become David's gift to us, his spiritual family in this corner of Wales: a faith expressed through joyful praise and a belief lived out through the

small kindnesses that heal wounds and bring hope and enable the rich variety of humankind to live in harmony one with another.

That's the 'fine linen bright and pure' which St John the Divine speaks of in the words we heard from Revelation: the righteous deeds of the saints which clothe the church to make her a fitting bride for Christ.

Amen.

*Canon Chancellor Dr Patrick Thomas*