

Saint Columban

Sermon

preached on St Columban's Day (November 26 tr.), 2005,
in *Luisenheim* Chapel, Karlsruhe

Song of Songs 8:6-7; Psalm 34:1-8; Philippians 3:7-15; Luke 9:57-62

“Love is strong as Death, passion as relentless as Sheol. ... Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown.” These words we heard in our Old Testament reading from the Song of Songs. In our second reading St Paul tells the Christians at Philippi what that means to him: “Forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.” And Jesus himself, in our Gospel reading, sums all this up. He appears to discourage the man who comes to him saying full of enthusiasm, “I will follow you wherever you go”—this may remind of St Peter’s, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”ⁱⁱ And we know what followed. On the other hand Jesus shows the urgency of his call: “Leave the dead to bury their dead; your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ It has been said that this was the only case that Jesus definitely urged a breach of the law—to bury one’s father.ⁱⁱⁱ

All these words may sound very strange to postmodern ears of our present time. “Love is strong as Death, passion as relentless as Sheol. ... Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown.” Words like these, we may permit a place in romantic love-stories we like to read on a dark evening sitting beside the chimney-piece, or more likely beside the central-heating. But in real life, they seem to have no place.

We celebrate today, for the third time in our local history, the memory of our Patron Saint, Columban. Why those readings on this occasion?

Saint Columban was born in Ireland c. 540, roughly half a century before St Augustine’s arrival in England. Against the wishes of his mother, he became a monk, and lived in Irish monasteries until he was about 50 years of age. Only then, practically at the same time when St Augustine reluctantly left the Continent in order to preach the Gospel to the English at the command of Pope Gregory the Great, he made up his mind to leave his home country and go to Gaul to preach the gospel of Christ there. With 12 companions he put to sea and eventually landed in Brittany. From there he made his way to Burgundy where he was able to found monasteries at what is now Luxeuil-les-Bains, Annegray and Fontaine, all of them slightly west of the Vosges Mountains, not too far from us here. Some years later, the Frankish king Theodoric, whose dissolute life he had vigorously reproached, forced him to leave the country. St Columban decided to go to Italy. He travelled by boat down the river Moselle and up the Rhine, passing by this place also, and eventually he crossed the Alps, and founded his last monastery in Bobbio. There he died in peace at the age of 70 odd years—very much in accordance with Psalm 90: “The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength (and St Columban had much strength); yet their span is but trouble and sorrow”^{iv}—and this is to a large extent true about St Columban’s life too.

Many Anglicans, Episcopalians, and other English speaking people in our parts may find some similarity between Columban’s and their own lives. They have come to this country from afar, part of them from much farther away than where Columban started. It’s true; travelling is not so dangerous today as it was at St Columban’s time. But some difficulties and troubles, and dangers also, have remained, and I hope we have felt God’s guiding hand leading us through them. Most of us have not come to this country for missionary reasons like Saint Columban. But we have brought our particular tradition of Christian faith and life with us, and without forcing them upon the people living here—Saint Columban didn’t do so either—we may feel called to make its merits and its splendour visible in this place. This is why our Mission Statement contains the phrase that we wish to make “the Anglican tradition visible in the local Ecumenical environment.” Like Saint Columban we believe that our tradition has something to offer even to Continental people who like us can look back on a long Christian history.

When we looked around to find a patron saint for our little community some years ago, Bishop Jeffrey, Bishop Pierre's predecessor, recommended Saint Anskar, archbishop of Hamburg and missionary to Scandinavia, because - he said - he was a devoted missionary, but rather unsuccessful. It appears that he didn't expect us to have resplendent missionary success. But at least it seems that he trusted us to be devoted to our missionary work. Now, when we look at the average attendance figures of our services he appears to have been quite right in the first part. If we have justified his trust in the second part is not so easily to be seen. We must try to do our best in that without guarantee that anyone will see it – anyone but God, of course. He sees what is hidden; he is able to look into our hearts.

Saint Columban wasn't much more successful. He founded a number of monasteries, but most of them do not exist any longer. Even the number of churches dedicated to his memory is not great if we compare it to the number of churches dedicated say to St Andrew or St Patrick, not to talk about St Peter or St Paul or the BVM. In Germany I know of two churches only, in Friedrichshafen on the Lake of Constance and in Wendlingen, southeast of Stuttgart. There is indeed an international society called "Amici di San Colombano", Friends of Saint Columban, and they meet once a year around the first weekend in July. I took part in it last year in Friedrichshafen, but I wasn't able to go to Vernasca in Northern Italy this year because we had planned to have our Summer Fest at the same weekend. Perhaps we should consider to go to one of the next meetings as a group. I don't know yet where next year's meeting will take place. But I know that last year there were not only Italian, German and French people but also Americans and Irish; so we wouldn't be the only English-speaking participants. And going as a group may make the journey less expensive.

"Love is strong as Death, passion as relentless as Sheol. ... Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown." Saint Columban had a great love for Christ and for all those people to whom he preached the gospel. Even the reference to death and Sheol seems to go easily with his character, for he is reported as being rather severe. He took his task very seriously, and he expected people around him to do so too. And when they didn't do what he told them he could be rather harsh. So when St Gall wasn't prepared to follow him to Italy because he felt very ill, Columban left him behind strictly forbidding him to celebrate Mass until the day he, Columban, died.^v

I am not sure whether Columban's methods would be appropriate nowadays. But one thing is quite certain: his love of Christ and of his neighbour was fervent, and he was always prepared to forget all that lay behind him, and to strain forward to what lay in front, to race "towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." In that he may be a good example for us, even if we are not called to do such things as he did. Amen.

ⁱ Mat 26:35.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Mat 8:22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 1985, pp. 252-255.

^{iv} Psa 90:10.

^v Cf. Katherine Lack, *The Eagle and the Dove*, p. 121.