

St Colmcille – Patron Saint of Ireland



I am Columba. I am a Prince of Ireland. I am of the Cenel Conaill, the Kindred of Conal. I am the great-great grandson of Naill of the Nine Hostages who was the first King of Ireland to be converted to Christianity.

No, I cannot start like that. I am Colmcille. I am a great Christian scholar of my people. I have studied at the great seats of learning in Ireland and I have founded monasteries where men and women of prayer learn about our faith and from where they go out and teach others.

No, no that sounds no better. I had better start at the beginning I was born on 7th December in the year of our Lord 521 to Fedlimid and Eithne of the Cwenel Conaill in Gartán beside Lough Gartán. My father always told me that I was descended from Naill of the Nine Hostages, so that would make me a prince. I was named Crimthann at my birth, which means ‘fox’, but I have also in my long life been called both Columba and Colmcille, the Latin and Irish both meaning ‘the dove of the church’. I am not sure why I was given that name, but it echoes that of the prophet Jonah, which is the Hebrew for dove. I was never in the belly of a fish, and I hope that I never disobeyed God when he called me to do something.

I lived the first 5 years of my life in what people have now renamed Glencolmcille. At that age I had sufficient learning to enter the monastic school at Movilla in Newtownards, studying under Finnian of Moville. I finished my training there at the age of 20 years, and I was Ordained a Deacon. I decided that it was time to spread my

wings, so I left Movilla and travelled to Leinster where I met an old bard called Gemman. We spent many hours together talking and debating. He filled my head with stories of my ancestors of the origins of my people. I learned of giants and fairies, of gods and goddesses whose whims governed this island. I could have forgotten all of my training, and all of my prayers and learning about the God of Jesus and of Abraham, but funnily enough, the more I heard of the terrors inflicted on us by playful or vengeful gods, the more I fell in love with Yahweh, the god who loved us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins. The more I listened the more the stories of the life of Jesus came into focus with his healing and his preaching about the nature of Yahweh. I became determined to do better, to be a better Christian, and to completely throw off the paganism of my ancestors, so I decided to enter the monastery of Clonard, and study there under another Finnian, of Clonard, the monastery he had founded when he returned from his studies in Wales, where he had learned at the feet of their great scholar David. Here I learned about the traditions of the Welsh church, which have influenced me for the rest of my life.

It was a wonderful time to be a Christian and scholar. At any one time there would be about 300 of us learning Latin and Christian Theology. I became a monk in the community at Clonard and I sat at the feet of the greatest teacher of the age. Some of those I studied with have become great preachers and teachers as well as I. I remember Ciaran of Saighir and Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, Brendan of Birr and Brendan of Clonfirt, Mobhi of Glasnevin, Columba of Terryglass and Canice. I could go on. They were all wonderful Holy men, who all have gone on to make a great impression on the spirituality of Ireland. When Finnian decided I had learned enough, he Ordained me a Priest and sent me out into the world to teach and preach.

I went first to Mobhi of Glasnevin as I tried to work out what God wanted of me, but a great pestilence swept the country and people left the monasteries and returned to their homes. I returned to Ulster to my people the Ui Neill. I began to teach and preach as I had been taught. I am a tall man. I am told I look more like a warrior than a scholar, and I have the voice of one capable of leading men into battle. One of my friends told me that he could hear me right across the valley when I shout. Whether it was the volume of my voice, or the height of my body, people came to listen and to learn, and I rejoiced. I collected a group of young men around me, and together we founded a monastery at Derry, at the southern end of Inishowen. I gathered another group and we built a monastery at Kells in County Meath. I founded yet another monastery at Swords in County Dublin.

I wanted to travel more widely than Ireland, so while I was still living at Derry, I set off by ship to travel to Rome and the Holy Land, but I only got to the land of the Franks and the town of Tours. There I got a call to return to sort out a problem in Derry, and I returned carrying a copy of the gospels which had lain on the bosom of St Martin of Tours for 100 years. The monastery there was short of money for some new building works, so they sold it to me for a great price. I have given those gospels to Derry to be cared for.

Most parts of my life I look on with satisfaction, a job for God well done, but there is one part I look on with shame. It started with a Psalter, a beautiful, illustrated Psalter which was in the care of Finnian of Moville at Movilla Abbey. When I was a young student studying at Movilla, I spent hours looking at it, reading the words and admiring the illustrations. It was the most beautiful thing I had seen. When I had completed all of my training and was setting up my Abbeys, I went to Movilla and asked my old tutor whether I could make a copy. It happens all the time. Scholars are sent to an Abbey to borrow a scroll to copy, or to remain there and copy them. Then they take them back to their own Abbeys to enrich their libraries. We have so few scrolls in this country and so many scholars that it is the only way to share the written words of God.

To this day I have no idea why Finnian thought that I wanted to make a copy and leave it in his library. He had scholars a plenty to make copies, and many of them far better artists and copyists than I. My copies are good, but they are not brilliant. He was so angry when I left carrying my copy with me. He sent messengers after me, but I ignored them. I didn't believe that they meant what they reported that Finnian said. I didn't believe it when Finnian involved the High King Diarmait mac Cerbaill. I was surprised that when he was asked to pronounce judgement the High King said 'To every cow belongs her calf, therefore to every book belongs its copy'. This overturned generations of tradition and for years made it difficult for Abbeys to acquire copies of new scrolls. I disagreed with the judgement and would not hand the copy over so the High King came to the territory of the Ui Neill and I rode beside my King when we fought at Cul Dreimhne in Carbre Drom, County Sligo. 3,000 men were killed that day, 3,000 men died for my pride and a manuscript.

The only mitigation I would give in my own defence is that some months earlier Diarmait killed my kinsman Prince Curnan of Connacht. Curnan had fatally injured a rival in a hurling match and had come to me in my Abbey at Kells for Sanctuary as was my right as the Abbot, but Diarmait came with his men and dragged him from my arms and killed him right in front of me. He was never going to rule in my favour. But I had sinned. I had taken up arms in defiance of my vows as a monk. I was tried by a Synod of my peers; clerics and scholars, and judgement was given. I should leave the country and work to claim as many souls for Christ as I had caused to be killed in the battle. So in 561, soon after the battle I set sail with twelve companions, in a curragh covered in leather, making for Dal Riata the land in Scotland that was ruled over by my kinsman Conall mac Comgaill. After hearing my story he made over the Island of Iona to me, and I set up another Abbey there.

I worked hard among the Ulster Gaels of Dal Riata. I was the first to set up a place of learning in the Kingdom, and men flocked to learn. Despite my reputation as a warrior, following the one battle I had fought in, I became known as a Holy man and a man of peace. I was often sent to negotiate for peace when squabbles broke out among different groups of tribes. I spent a lot of my time converting the native Picts to Christianity. Part of my work at Iona involved training Missionaries to work

among the Picts and in the kingdom of Fortriu. I was never able to convert its king Bridei though. I involved myself in the local politics trying to keep peace between the kingdoms of Scotland. I was allowed to return to Ireland for the Synod of Drum Ceat in 574. While at the synod I found time to found a Monastery at Drumcliffe in Cairbre in County Sligo.

I had some adventure travelling around. On one occasion I was travelling along Loch Ness, when a great beast rose out of the water and killed one of the Picts in a village I was preaching in. It then tried to kill Lugne, one of my disciples travelling with me, so I held up the cross lying at my breast and commanded it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to desist killing and return in peace to the waters of the Loch, which somewhat to my surprise it did.

I have spent much time in these last few years writing. I have transcribed and copied many books for my disciples and for the churches I have founded both in Scotland and in the Hebrides. I think it is in the region of 300 books now. I have written several hymns for use in my churches as well. I have succeeded so well in my mission here that I have been sometimes allowed to return home to see my family, my kinsmen and my Abbey communities. I was even allowed to found a community at Durrow in County Offaly.

I now live in dangerous times. In 795 we had the first raid by Norsemen on our community here on Iona. I suppose it was inevitable. They had been conducting raids for years around the coast, and we were only left alone this long as we were further away. Do I leave this place and find a place of safety further inland, or do I stay and take my chances? I will have to make a decision soon.

Footnote

Raids continued on Iona in 802, 806 and 825. Colmcille died according to The Annals on Sunday 9th June 597. He was buried at Iona. In 849 his relics were removed from Iona and divided between Scotland and Ireland. He along with Patrick and Brigid are the Patron Saints of Ireland.