

Wednesday 9th June 2021

Columba, Abbot of Iona, 597

What are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; mere human beings that you should seek them out? You have made them little lower than the angels and crown them with glory and honour
(Psalm 8.5-6)

Dear Friends

I last wrote a pastoral letter on Easter Day at a time when lockdown was easing and Spring was upon us. We are now in the midst of a lovely warm summer spell and the prospect – or at least the debate – about further lockdown easing is once more upon us. Whatever decisions are made by government and church authorities over the coming weeks, we will meet them with the resilience, wisdom and hopefulness with which I believe we've navigated this pandemic thus far.

Today is a very special day in the church calendar for it is the day we remember Columba, that faithful and determined Irish monk who made his way to Iona and thus brought Christianity to that part of Scotland. Liz and I are Associate Members of The Iona Community and this evening we will renew our vows to that worldwide community of faith in an online service. It will be a special time for us amongst people who we know share some of our deepest values about what it means to be Christians in community.

The Psalm quoted at the top of this letter is the psalm set for morning prayer today in the Church of England lectionary. The entire psalm is wonderful but these two verses speak to me with particular clarity. If there is one human trait that I dislike in myself, it is my unwillingness to accept, not simply that I am loved by God, but that I am worthy of God.

When we think poorly of ourselves, we lower our expectations as to what we consider ourselves capable of achieving. There's nothing exceptional about the logic of that, and most people, not simply professional counsellors, would agree with the sentiment.

For Christians however, this logic takes on another, very significant, dimension.

When we think poorly of ourselves, we lower our expectations, not only as to what we consider ourselves capable of achieving, but of what we consider the Holy Spirit to be capable of achieving through us.

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There is a direct relationship between our own sense of worthiness and the ability of the Holy Spirit to build the Kingdom of God in our place and time.

We are regularly reminded that God has no hands or feet but ours with which to do his will. Many a Christian has been propelled into lives of hectic activity as a result – not all of it productive!

Guilt is not a good starting place for Christian discipleship. Please, never do something in the name of Christ because you feel you ought to. Always act out of love, grace and generosity, even when it's really hard work.

Far too few Christians focus on being healthy in body, mind and spirit. It isn't selfish to put oneself first if it means you can then give yourself to others. It's only selfish when your care of self turns into obsession with self.

The deep irony and challenge in all of this, is that the first step towards 'healthy holiness' is a recognition that we are broken. An honest friend who recognises his or her limitations, is much more useful to God than the outgoing, confident soul who lives a lie to themselves, leave alone others.

Psalm 8 reminds us of our potential – God made us only a little lower than the angels. Getting to that place of true self-understanding is a life's journey for most of us. But all the Holy Spirit needs of us is to make a start, in gentle humility.

I have written and spoken often of the challenges ahead for our churches. The challenges are real, but they are not insurmountable. The latest Diocesan phrasing is to emphasise the need for us to develop 'healthy and sustainable' churches. I like that because it's not about growth and worldly success. It's about how we ensure the Christian faith is here in our community for the generations to come. Some of this is about activity; but it's mostly about expectation. Expectation that the Holy Spirit is here, amongst and within us, helping us to believe that yes, we are only a little lower than the angels – and that all things are possible with God.

Be kind to yourselves, expect much, keep your eyes open to the workings of the Spirit.

As always, be assured of my love and prayers:

David

David Ford, Rector
01527 873831

revdavidford@googlemail.com