

**A Sermon for St. David's Day, given Digitally to Jesus College Chapel, Oxford.
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Transcribed by the Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford.

Yn enw'r Tad, a'r Mab, a'r Ysbryd Glân. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's often been pointed out that all the patron saints of the British Isles have this in common: that they're all foreigners. That is, foreigners to the countries they are supposed to be patrons of. St. Andrew, of course, is a Jew, and not obviously connected with Scotland. St. George, well, goodness knows exactly who St. George was, but he certainly wasn't English. St. Patrick was kidnapped as a slave when he was a teenager, from somewhere along the west coast of Britain, it might have been Wales, it might have been Cumbria. And even St. David, who at first sight looks the most promising of them all, almost certainly came from an *Irish* family that settled in west Wales.

Does this tell us anything about what it means, and what it doesn't mean, to have a patron saint? And indeed, does it tell us anything at all about what saints are, in fact, really about?

Think of Jeremiah's words, in today's Old Testament lesson. Jeremiah is being sent to a people whose language he knows, whose history and culture he knows, and yet he has to speak to them words that are deeply disturbing, very strange. It's something that's underlined even more strongly in the prophecies associated with Ezekiel, where God says to Ezekiel, 'I'm not sending you to foreigners, I'm sending you to your own people, and that's why it's going to be difficult. They think they know who I am, but they need to learn it all over again.'

And I wonder whether there isn't something of that going on in this business of the patron saints we think about in the British Isles, [inaudible]. Something to do with the fact that it often takes a stranger to bring us up short, to remind us of what we don't know, and what we don't know that we don't know. Someone who can open our eyes to see ourselves afresh, not in a hostile, or competitive way, but perhaps to see ourselves a little bit more from God's point of view. And that's something that we find very difficult to do for ourselves, if not indeed impossible,

A holy person, or a holy presence, that is really going to speak to us in way that changes the world we're in, and after all that's what holiness does, needs to be somebody who really does, like Jeremiah, know the words, know the story, and yet also someone who stands at a bit of a distance. Holiness speaks to something that we can recognise, because we're all made to be at peace with God and one another. And yet holiness also opens to us a perspective on a world we've hardly dared to dream of, a world that's so strange that at first it can be very frightening, and at the same time, potentially very liberating.

So yes, we expect the saint to know a bit how we work, to share something about our ordinary human condition. Saints aren't very much use to us if they don't seem to connect at any point with the human life we recognise as ours, and certainly that tells us a lot about why the lives of so many saints are so dull and uninspiring, at least, as recorded by the pious convention.

We need that edge of foreignness, it seems. We need to be reminded that, just as we can't see ourselves fully and truthfully just from inside, so we can't love ourselves into life and renewal. We have to be loved. We have to sense that something unexpected, undeserved, and uncontrollable is arriving in our lives from outside.

And of course, when we think of the central mystery of our Christian faith, all of that is drawn together in the most dramatic way possible. Here, in the life of Jesus, is somebody who is supremely and insider, belonging to God's people, knowing the history and the language of the Jewish faith that he's inherited, inhabiting the Covenant that God has made with God's people. And at the same time, here is someone who speaks, as it seems, from outside, who summons God's people to a new relationship, as if he's not just part of it, not just immersed in it.

And as the Church thinks this through across the centuries it comes up finally with that greatest paradox about being an insider and an outsider, the doctrine that tells us that Jesus is completely an insider to the human condition, sharing human nature in all its aspects, and at the same time that his life is saturated with the life of God, so that he speaks as a stranger, a divine, exhilarating, terrifying stranger. No wonder that, at the end of St. Mark's Gospel, when the Resurrection is first announced and witness, the women who witness it are initially too terrified to say a word. It's too strange for them. The mystery of the risen Jesus is too big for their categories.

So, maybe, when we think about this strange fact about our patron saints in these islands, we learn something after all about holiness. About the healing and disruptive presence of God. We need the word of God, the word of God's healing, and revelation, and promise, to come to us as a surprise. Not just something we've ordered, not just something that comes in the Amazon packages we're all so drearily familiar with these days, because we've ticked all the boxes, and filled in the forms, and paid the price.

No, this is not about fulfilling our needs, answering our questions, coming in to plug the gaps in our lives, giving over something we've paid for. This is gift. It's a surprise. We human beings, it seems, are worth more than we ever imagined in the sight of God. Our possibilities for love, forgiveness, effective, challenging mercy and reconciliation, are more dramatic than we could have dreamed. We couldn't think that or imagine it for ourselves. It's a word from beyond. It's the word that comes from the mystery at the heart of everything, the mystery we can't access or exhaust. That mystery which continues to pour itself out in our direction, into our hearts and our minds.

And yet, we couldn't begin to get a glimpse of it if that outpouring life weren't at the same time the life at the very centre of who we are and what we are. This is familiar, and so many of the saints write about the way in which the life of grace is a life where we recognise at some level that what is communicated to us from God, shared with us by God, is the most natural thing in the world.

We don't have to turn ourselves into something other than human beings. On the contrary, the loving grace of God will turn us into fuller, truer, human beings, will put us more deeply in touch with who and what we actually are.

David probably came from a family of Irish aristocrats, who, like so many, had settled in and controlled South West Wales by the Sixth Century. And we hear quite a lot about how the native Welsh, over the centuries, resisted, eventually pushed them out – and yet, they left a deep imprint on the life of the area. Some of the stories about David's birth and origins suggest that, perhaps, his mother had been kidnapped, even raped, by one of these Irish aristocrats. Perhaps a local woman caught up in the horrors of civil war and local oppression. Perhaps he carried it himself, that dual identity of belonging and not belonging.

When we read the records of him, the very earliest records of him, a lot of them actually have to do with Ireland. He was welcomed there as a teacher

and witness to the faith as much as in Wales. But it was in Wales that he, so to speak, took root, that his tradition was established and handed on and elaborated in the way it is through all those slightly unlikely saints lives that bear witness to him across the Middle Ages.

He was somebody who, by belonging and not belonging at the same time, did what Christian saints always have to do: speaking from the centre, and speaking from the edge. Speaking from the centre of human experience and human need, but, at the same time, and it's a big of a risk and a bit of a miracle, being free to speak from the edge, from beyond, to speak on behalf of that healing, absolving, renewing word that we can't just think up for ourselves and communicate to ourselves.

Well, we could go through the other patron saints and see how their stories map onto this, but it is, of course, David's commemoration. And so, as we give thanks for our patron saint, let's give thanks for all those moments, dimensions in our lives, when we have sensed ourselves, addressed, shaken, renewed, by a relationship, an encounter that we hadn't expected, but which speaks somehow to that which is deepest within us.

Isn't it true of every kind of serious love that the loved person goes on surprising you? They're not just there to perform your script, to go along with your agenda. So it is with the saints. So it is with our saviour Jesus. So it is with God. Speaking from the centre. Speaking from the edge. Speaking the language we understand, yet speaking in it words we could never have dreamed of hearing, reminding us who we most deeply are already, but also telling us who we might be.

And we might, ourselves, be holy, by the grace of God. We might ourselves one day grow in confidence in God, to the extent that we can truly speak to those around us in words they will understand and resonate with, yet also say things that are new, healing, and transfiguring.

Our prayer for the church surely must be that the church learns that kind of dual skill. Speaking the language people actually speak, and tackling the questions people are actually asking, not the ones we think they should be asking, and having the confidence in God, and the gratitude to God, that will enable us to speak into the mess, the fear, the loneliness and the anxiety around us and within us, the words of the God who is the source of all holiness, who raised up David and all the saints to speak to us of a new world,

which is, in fact, the world that we have known all along, only uncovered for the first time in its full beauty and its full depth. Because that's what holiness is about.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.