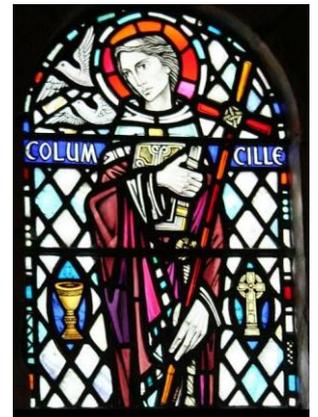


Wednesday Reflection: Dove



Columba, abbot of Iona and Celtic saint, was born in Gartan, County Donegal to an aristocratic family in the year 521CE. In what was probably a non-Christian household, the young child's given name was *Crimthann* meaning 'fox'. A student at Clonard Abbey, Crimthann was baptised with the name *Colum* meaning 'dove', which in Latin is '*columba*'. As his faith grew, he immersed himself in learning the psalms, which earned him the nickname *Colum Cille*: 'Dove of the Church'.

Many of us will be familiar with the majestic abbey on Iona's eastward side. The exquisite Book of Kells or Book of Columba, an illuminated manuscript containing the Four Gospels, may have been made on Iona. The book is a work inspired by the saint's ministry. Pilgrims from across the world journey to the tiny island lying beyond Mull, to one of Scotland's holiest sites. The restoration of the twelfth century Benedictine abbey began in the early twentieth century. The iconic stone structure is likely located on the site of Columba's timber-built monastery. The monks of the sixth century lived in the 'great house', the *magna domus*, while the abbot lived alone in a little hut with a flat stone for a bed. The monks spent much of their day in a schedule of services and in the *scriptorium* reading books and copying manuscripts. The reading of religious texts was an act of devotion to God.



Columba died in 597CE. His body was wrapped in a linen shroud; his grave was marked by a simple stone rather than an ostentatious tomb or richly adorned mausoleum. While the location of the grave is not known for certain, pilgrims to the island visit St Columba's Shrine.

According to the Roman poet Ovid, it was doves which drew the chariot of Venus through the skies, associating the stout-bodied birds with love and divinity. In the Bible, it was a dove which brought an olive leaf back to Noah at the time of the flood. At the

baptism of Jesus, it was a dove which descended from heaven as a sign of the Spirit of God. Early Christians often had the symbol of a dove on their tombs.

In Columba's day, Iona was probably known as Io, from the early Irish word meaning yew tree. Whether there were yew trees on the island we do not know, but there is evidence of oak, ash, birch, willow and perhaps hazel. Known for its longevity and regeneration, the yew tree came to symbolise death and resurrection in the Celtic culture. On the night the Venerable Abbot died, it was said that he read Psalm 34 and stopped at verse 10: 'They that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing'. Columba then told his monks to love one another with sincerity. At the moment of his death the whole church filled with light and Columba's face was transfixed with the wonderful joy and gladness of seeing angels come to meet him.

Let me close with a Prayer of St Columba:

Be a bright flame before me, O God
a guiding star above me.
Be a smooth path below me,
a kindly shepherd behind me,
today, tonight, and for ever.
Alone with none but you, my God
I journey on my way;
what need I fear when you are near,
O Lord of night and day?
More secure am I within your hand
than if a multitude did round me stand.
Amen.