

Readings for Today: *Colossians 1: 24 – 29; Psalm 16 (15); Mark 10: 17 – 30.*

Saint Columba is the link between the Celtic Christianity of Ireland and the conversion of the northern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. He was born into a noble Irish family about AD 521 and became a student of the Scriptures. He was ordained priest and set up a monastery on the site of the city called Derry – or, by its English conquerors, Londonderry. From there he travelled widely in Ireland for about fifteen years, founding monasteries.

When he was about forty, he was involved in a tribal conflict which led to the death of some three thousand men. In AD 561 (perhaps following the Celtic practice of ‘exile for Christ’) he left Ireland with twelve relatives and sailed to the Island now called Iona, where they built the monastery from which they worked first among the inhabitants of Irish descent in Argyll and Bute. They then turned to the evangelization of the pagan Picts of Northern Scotland.

Adomnan, a successor as Abbot of Iona, wrote in a biography, based on the memories of those who had known Columba, that “he had the face of an angel; he had an excellent nature, polished in speech, holy in deed, great in counsel. He never let a single hour pass without engaging in prayer, reading or writing.”

Columba died in AD 597, the year of Augustine’s arrival in Kent, and from their separate missions the Gospel spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It was Aidan, a member of the Iona community, who, in AD 635, became the first Bishop of Lindisfarne and began the renewed mission to the Northumbrian kingdoms. The two strands of Christianity – Celtic and Roman – continued their separate development. At the Synod of Whitby in AD 663 a reconciliation of most differences between them was achieved, although Iona retained its own practice for many years. Columba’s last blessing for Iona was this: “Unto this place, small and mean though it be, great homage shall yet be paid, not only by the kings and peoples of the Scots, but by rulers of barbarians and distant nations with their peoples. The saints, also, of other churches shall regard it with no common reverence.” This blessing has been amply fulfilled: Until the end of the eleventh century many of the Scottish kings were buried on the Isle of Iona, and to this day Iona remains a place of prayer and pilgrimage, as one of the founts of the Christian faith in Britain.