

ST DAVID TODAY<sup>1</sup>

BY

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HO is St David? Or perhaps we should rather ask: *what* is he? Is he a symbol only, the human equivalent of leek or dragon, mythical, providing a happy opportunity for a patriotic toast or for the annual generalisations of public persons? Or does he remain powerful in his own right, with something still to say to his own people?

There is no harder task than the rediscovery of what is familiar. To see the room in which you sit as new, to know your friends afresh; yes, but good-natured habit and, even more, laziness are always urging us to *accept* instead of to enquire. For the myth grows old and respectable, and its origin was forgotten long ago. Fourteen centuries of time and an infinity of change separate us from St David. To rediscover him means by-passing almost the whole of our history and surrendering quite a lot of our prejudices.

But even to generations much nearer to him than our own, the figure of St David was obscured by the ornament of racial memory, and later by the demands of ecclesiastical debate. His first biographer, Rhygyfarch, wrote five hundred years after the death of David. He claims, indeed, to have drawn on existing records 'principally of his own city (of St Davids) . . . written in the old style of the ancients, although corroded by the devouring of moths'. But of these records there is no trace, and Rhygyfarch's life is frankly concerned to establish the primacy of the See of St David against the growing claims of Canterbury. To support this claim, the life of David is revealed as a catalogue of miracles, from the heavenly signs that proclaimed his birth to his own prediction of his death. His ancestry is traced from 'Eugen, son of a sister of Mary the Mother of God'. His triumphs over the Pelagian heresy, no less than over jealous rivals, entitle him to be called 'head and leader and primate over all the Britons'. Rhygyfarch goes on: 'Renowned as the head of the whole Brittanic race and the glory of his nation, he lived to the age of one hundred and forty-seven years'.

It is easy to ridicule the extravagances of a biography that is in so many respects a piece of special pleading. But David's fame is secure: it lies beyond Rhygyfarch's naïve evidence in a controversy which Giraldus Cambrensis in his 'Life of St David', a century later,

<sup>1</sup> The text of a broadcast talk given from Cardiff on the 27th February, 1949; by courtesy of the B.B.C.

was to amplify for the same purpose. The choice of David to champion the rights of the See of Mynyw is itself a tribute to his special renown. He was not, indeed, as yet the patron saint of Wales in any modern sense. Rather was he the representative member of that group of Welsh saints—Dyfrig, Illtud, Teilo, Cadog—who, in the fifth and sixth centuries, made Wales glorious in Christian history.

For David was, first of all, a monk. And here, once again, the word must be restored to the meaning it had for St David: it must be stripped of its later associations, whether they derive from the highly organised life of the mediaeval abbeys or from the romantic notions of the Gothic revival. The inspiration that led David to establish his monastery at Vallis Rosina or Mynyw, in the far west of Dyfed, in a valley by the sea, was the same as that which had led St Anthony into the desert of Egypt a century before. Faced with a world which, if not altogether pagan, yet denied the total demands of God, he, like Anthony, saw the literal force of the gospel counsels to renounce all things for Christ, to seek perfection. Already St David had accepted the general obligations of the Christian faith in which he had been baptised. He had been the pupil of St Paulinus, and perhaps also a member of the great community established by St Illtud at what is now Llantwit Major in Glamorgan. Coming to Mynyw, David determined on a life of immense austerity, and in describing it Rhygyfarch clearly recalls a well-remembered tradition, of which there is full corroboration in the lives of Breton and Irish saints, and in the records of the Irish monasteries which themselves owed a great deal to the example of Mynyw. 'St David', says Rhygyfarch, 'determined on such rigour of monastic life that all the monks should toil at daily labour, and spend their life in common, working with their hands; for he who labours not, says the Apostle, let him not eat. . . . When the work was done, no complaint was heard, no conversation was held beyond what was necessary. But each did the task enjoined in prayer or holy meditation, and returning to the monastery spent the rest of the time in reading or writing, and above all in praying'.

He describes a life that is one of strict mortification, rooted in prayer and in the classic monastic virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience. What seems excessive—and the contemporary Gildas reproached some Welsh monks for being more abstemious than Christian—must be related to the mood of the times and to the need for desperate remedies to meet a desperate disease. It is idle to gloss over these acrobatics of asceticism; but it is equally idle to ignore their fruits. For St David, the monastic life was not an end in itself; it was a school of the Lord's service, a 'training-ground for

the apostolic work of preaching the Christian faith. St Paul had long ago anticipated St David's ideal: 'But I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, lest perhaps when I have preached to others I myself should become a castaway'. And from that store of prayer and renunciation sprang the evangelisation of Dyfed and Ceredigion and beyond, which remains St David's primary achievement, for its direction was his. It was the monastic perfection of Mynyw, more than anything else, that led to the missionary conquest of Wales. St David was both Abbot and Bishop; he was the father of his own community, as he was, too, the father of all those Christian congregations which his missionary monks had established.

And it is within the setting of his monastic ideal and its significance that the familiar incidents of David's life must be judged. His intervention at the Synod of Llanddewi Brefi, which resulted in the quickening of the religious life of priests and laity alike through the whole of Christian Wales, depends on his sanctity. He speaks with the authority, naturally, of his office: but that authority is immensely enhanced by the sanctions of holiness. The legend which says that when he was speaking at the Synod a white dove descended on his shoulder, while at the same time the place where he stood rose up to form a hill, is itself a testimony to a popular devotion that saw in him the personification of sanctity. To enquire into the historical truth of a legend is not the end of the matter. It is at least as important to discover why the legend came to be, and to understand the motive that inspired so many holy marvels.

When David came to die, he turned to his brethren and urged them to be joyful and to keep the faith. 'At the hour of matins', says the Life, 'when the brethren were singing the divine office, the Lord Jesus granted the comfort of his presence to David, as he had earlier promised by the message of an angel. And seeing him, David rejoiced in spirit. "Take me", said he, "take me after thee." Having said these words, with Christ for companion David gave back his life to God and, accompanied by a host of angels, he came to the heavenly places.'

St David's legacy, then, is one of joy and steadfastness in faith. Never were they more needed; there could be no better patron for a generation that dies for lack of them. The true figure of St David owes little to the prodigies of popular mythology, still less to the labels of patriotic fervour: it owes everything to the contemplative source that made him holy, that made him worthy to be called a saint. And if there is one word that sums up the life of St David, it is simply 'contemplation'—seeking the things of the spirit as primary in life, making all else spring from, depend on, them alone.

That made David great, and his essential glory would have been the same had the chances of history left him as one among many others who shared his faith and joy, and drew their strength from the same source.

It is a far cry from the world of Mynyw, single and unquestioning in its acceptance of God and the hard demands of faith, to the world of Bute Street or, for that matter, of St Davids as it is today. The long fasts, the perpetual silence, the midnight rising, the unremitting toil in the fields: these can never be the accepted immolation of more than a few. They are, if you like, the privileges of aristocracy—an aristocracy of the spirit to which most of us can lay no claim. But in all ages, even in our own and in Wales today, there are men and women who are called to this heroic reminder that what is valid in Christian life can never alter.

But for all men everywhere, the need for contemplation, for seeking the real source of joy, grows ever more urgent. In a broken world, in which pity dies afresh each day, in which cruelty and injustice unimagined until now seem to grow in power: in such a world there seems a special irony of speaking of peace and joy. But for Wales there is a providential meaning in a patron saint whose life is precisely one of reconciliation, and above all of that joy which in Christian tradition is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

In a whirlpool—and it is an apt enough figure of modern life—the centre is still. All around there is noise and tumult, yet in the centre you may see a twig or a leaf suspended: no movement, utterly at rest. The deepest places of the human spirit, too, are beyond the invasion of pain and loss—beyond death, even. The mystic has his own words to describe that experience, but for all men the need remains for peace, for that interior peace that is exempt from any disaster. St David is the patron of Wales, and a patron exists to inspire those who look to him, to bring them to a knowledge of what he was—and why.

Writing after the first World War, C. E. Montague envisaged those who 'working apart from the whole overblown world of war valuations, the scramble for honours, earned and unearned, the plotting and jostling for front places on the stage and larger letters on the bill, the whole life that is commonly held up to admiration as great and enviable . . . will live in a kind of retreat, almost cloistral; plenty of work for the faculties, plenty of rest for the nerves, control for desire, and atrophy for conceit. Hard? Yes, but England is worth it'.

*And Wales is worth it, too; St David's Day is an opportunity to discover why.*