

Today we keep the feast of Columba (although his day was yesterday), one of the great missionary saints of these islands, whose life is inseparable from the island of Iona, and whose legacy continues to shape how we understand faith, mission, and community in this part of the world.

I have been fortunate enough over the years to spend time on Iona. It is a small place geographically, but it carries a deep weight of history and prayer. You are never far from the sea, never far from wind and weather, and never far from the sense that generations of prayer have been offered there. But it is important to remember that when Columba arrived there in the sixth century, he did not arrive at a place of peace and nostalgia. He arrived at a frontier.

Columba was an Irish monk, formed in the rigorous and deeply demanding monastic culture of early medieval Ireland. He belonged to a world where monastic life was disciplined, communal, and shaped by a strong sense of spiritual purpose. Tradition also tells that his departure from Ireland was bound up with conflict and exile, so that his movement into Scotland was not simply travel, but a turning of life.

He crossed the sea in a small coracle with a handful of companions, a fragile vessel for such a journey. They arrived on Iona not because it was safe or comfortable, but because it was a place from which something new could be born. It was, quite literally, a place on the edge.

From that small island Columba established a community that was at once monastic and missionary. It was not a retreat from the world, but a base for engagement with it. Prayer and work, study and hospitality, discipline and mission were all held together in a single rhythm of life.

And from Iona flowed something remarkable: a network of daughter houses and missionary foundations that shaped the Christian life of these islands for centuries. Columba's significance is not only what he personally accomplished, but what he set in motion. His influence continued through others, including figures like Aidan of Lindisfarne, who carried that same Iona-shaped vision of gentle, patient evangelism into Northumbria.

There is something very distinctive about Columba's way of being a missionary. It is rooted in community, presence, prayer, and persuasion. He is a figure who understands that the Gospel is carried not only in words, but in the shape of a life. The tradition also remembers him as a man of strong character. He was a spiritual father to his community, and the life of Iona was shaped by that sense of shared discipline and shared purpose.

The monastery he founded was not an escape from the world, but a place that formed people to live in it differently. There was a seriousness about the life: the daily rhythm of prayer, the

commitment to learning, and the expectation of accountability. But there was also a deep sense of belonging, a community held together by prayer and mutual care.

What makes Columba so compelling is precisely this combination: strength and gentleness, discipline and compassion, clarity of purpose and openness to others. He was a man whose life was given entirely to what he believed God was calling him to do.

Even his legacy reflects this outward movement. He established a spiritual centre from which others were sent. Iona became a place of formation and sending. It shaped people who in turn shaped regions.

And so, his influence spreads far beyond his own lifetime. The Christian story in these islands carries his imprint, in the quieter traditions of prayer, hospitality, and mission that marked the early Celtic church.

Seen in that light, Columba is not only a figure of the past, but a reminder of what faithful beginnings can become. He began with a small community, a fragile boat, and a sense of calling. What followed was deeply rooted in prayer and obedience.

He set out to be faithful. And that faithfulness, lived in a particular place and time, became something that endured far beyond him.

Most of us are not called to cross seas or found monastic communities. But Columba's life still asks something of us: what does faithfulness look like where /we are? What are we being asked to build, to nurture, or to begin, even in small and uncertain ways?

If Iona teaches us anything, it is that small places can carry great significance.

May we learn from Columba's courage, his discipline, and his single-minded devotion to God. And may we, in our own way, be faithful to what we are given to do.