

Today is the Feast of St Columba, one of the towering figures of the early Irish Church.

A native of Donegal, of noble birth, he was one of several of famous Irish saints who came under the influence of St Finian. He was one of a number of Irish monks who were to embark upon a programme of evangelisation of Scotland, Northern England and on into Northern Europe. Columba himself, along with twelve others sailed from North Antrim to establish the community in Iona, where he was to spend the rest of his life.

75 years ago, the present ecumenical community of Iona was founded by Rev George McLeod, a minister in the Church of Scotland. In 1938 he led a group of unemployed skilled craftsmen from the dockland Parish of Govan in Glasgow along with a group of trainee clergy to rebuild the ancient Abbey on Iona along with the living accommodation and to re-establish the common life. This initiative was to be a sign of hope and rebuilding of community in a Scotland that was re-emerging from the Great Depression.

The influence of that community was to spread way beyond Iona and Scotland. It was to be one of the communities that inspired the Rev Ray Davey as he established the Corrymeela community in Ballycastle in Northern Ireland just before the outbreak of the Troubles. Inspired by the vision of George McLeod, the Iona community has been a centre for those working for Justice and Peace both in Scotland and abroad. Alongside this, the Iona community has been a centre of Celtic Spirituality and one of the key figures in that part of its work

has been Rev John Bell, several of whose hymns appear in our current hymn book.

Columba and the monks that set out from the North Antrim coast, George McLeod and those who accompanied him to breathe new life into the ruins of the old Abbey on Iona, had a vision of bearing witness to Christ in their own time to their own generation and their legacy continues to live on.

It does not fall to us to leave home, to establish new communities. We in our own day are called to bear our own Christian witness in the time and place in which we live. The lessons appointed for this St Columba's Day all speak of the distinctive nature of witness, of personal and community peace.

At the beginning of our Gospel reading, we hear of a group of Greeks who approach Philip with the simple request, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. The way it is presented in John's Gospel, this is more than just a group wishing to get a private meeting with a celebrity; this is a group seeking a deeper insight into who Jesus is. There is a world out there beyond our doors that is seeking inspiration, that is seeking direction. A few weeks ago I was reflecting on the words of Archbishop William Temple as he remarked: 'The Church is the only society that **exists** for the benefit of those who are not its members'

Back in 563 Columba left his native land and set out with his companions for Iona. Looking back on the history of the Church from the Acts of the Apostles, it would have been very tempting for the early Church to have simply remained within its Jewish heartland. It would have been similarly very tempting for

those early Irish monks to have stayed on this island, secure from the troubles of a world descending into the Dark Ages following the collapse of the Roman Empire. I am sure George McLeod could have found some comfortable Scottish Parish within which to live out his ministry. But each in their own day felt the call to look beyond themselves, to move out from their comfort zone and out into the world in the name of Christ.

It is very easy for us to get wrapped up in ourselves, our own problems, be they finance or fabric, our own particular way of doing things and to lose sight of our fundamental vocation which is that of witness, of presenting Christ, of being the Body of Christ in the world of today.