

The Fourteenth Centenary of St Columba's Landing on Iona

Two years ago we celebrated the fourth centenary of the Reformation in Scotland. This year we celebrate the fourteenth centenary of Columba's coming to Scotland. These, it might well be claimed, are the two most important dates in the history of the Church in Scotland.

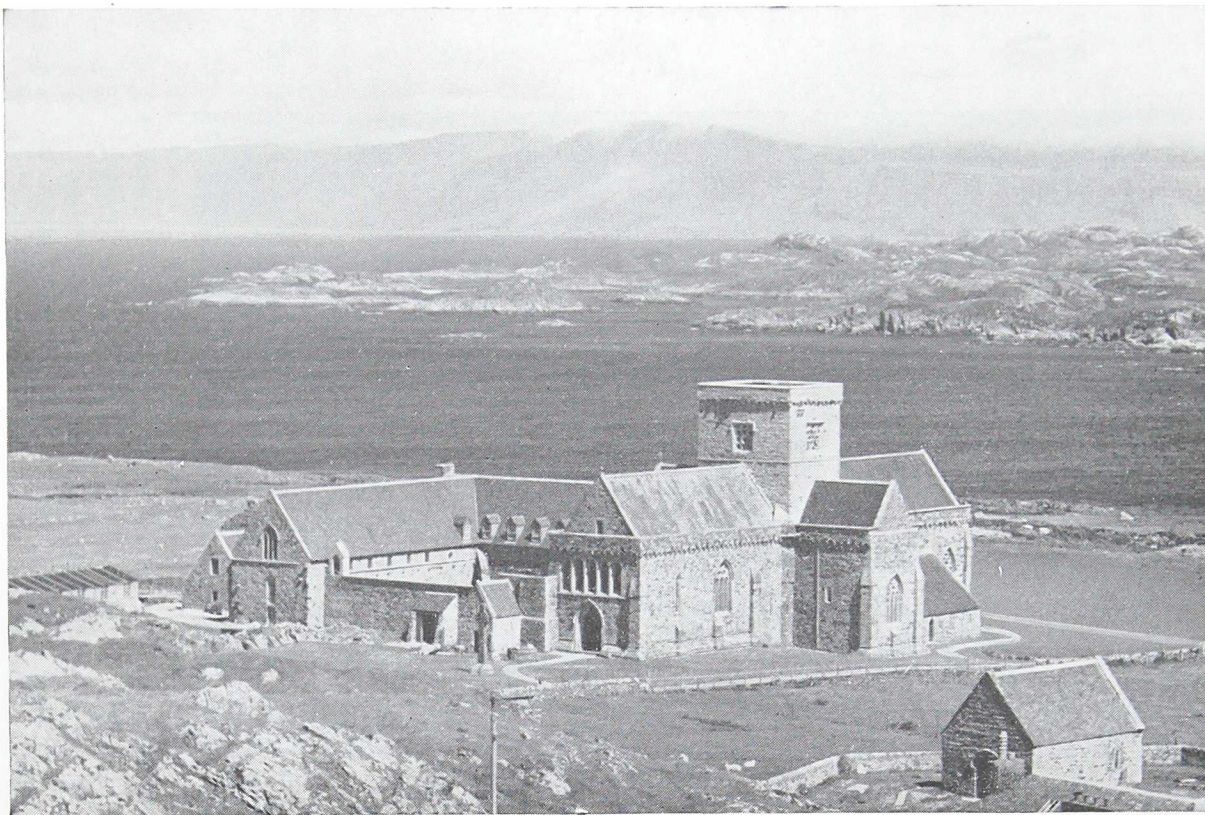
The Purpose of Centenaries

The celebration of centuries is a peculiarly Western custom. It has its roots in the Bible—in the jubilee of the Old Testament and the millennium of the New. In the religions of the East you find no such interest in time. This was once brought home to me vividly in China. I asked the senior class of boys in school how long ago it was that Confucius lived. At that time the teaching of Confucius was taught in school ; and in the school there was peculiar reason why the questions should be relevant. The minister of the local church was a descendant of Confucius in the seventy-fifth generation in direct male descent, and his son was a pupil in the school. But no one in the class ventured to make a guess. Ultimately one boy, greatly daring, put up his hand and suggested a hundred and fifty years. The Chinese have no sense of time. This is deeper than a lack of punctuality. Time has no meaning and the measurement of time no relevance. It would never occur to them to celebrate a centenary.

For Christians time has a meaning. The world was created in time. In the fulness of time Christ came. Time, as well as matter, is redeemed. The measuring of time has a profound meaning. Centenaries have their place in the life and worship of the Church : and for three reasons.

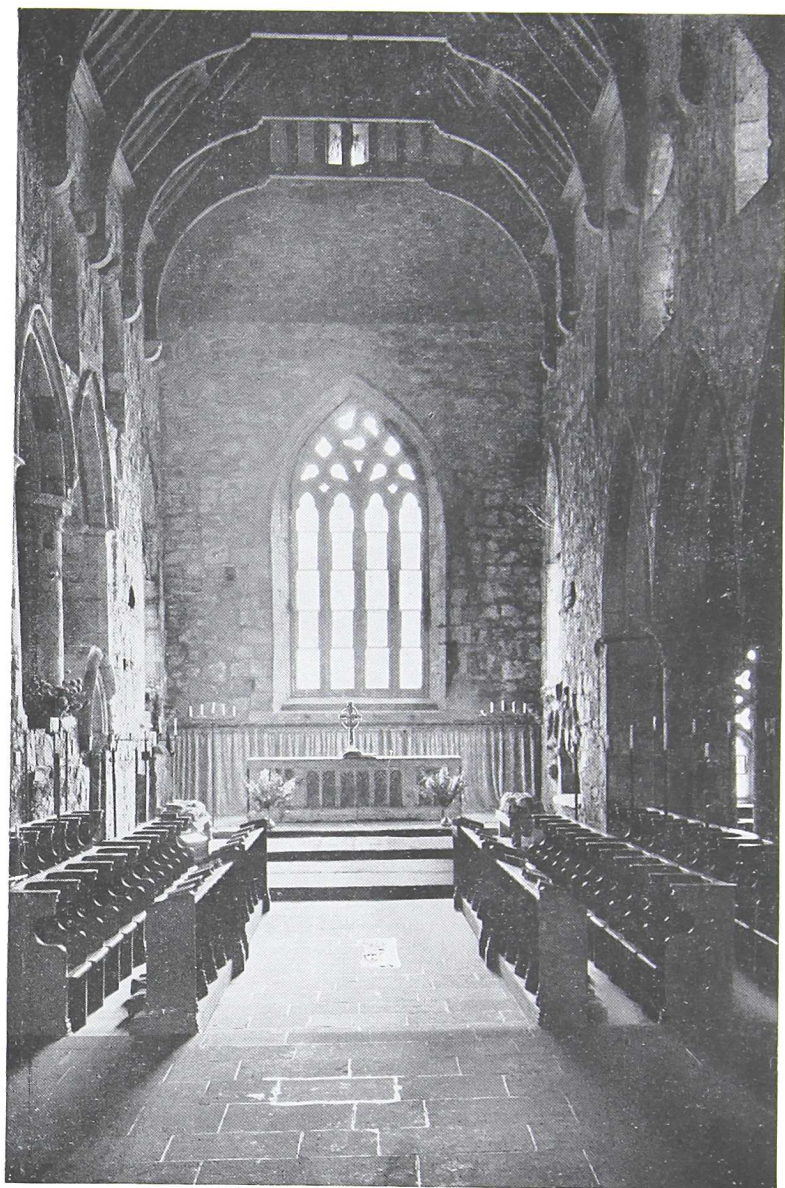
The first is that a centenary reminds us of what God has done at a particular time in the past. We keep the Christian Year to remind us of what God did in Christ at particular times in His life—Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. We keep these anniversaries every year. We remember what God has done through His other servants by remembering certain events in a special way every century.

The second reason is that the celebration of a centenary is a present activity. It reminds us that we today belong to



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the same succession as we commemorate; we are heirs of the same events. We celebrate the event now because it belongs to us now. We keep the Christian Year not so much to remind us of what happened so long ago, as to rejoice that this year is the year of grace; that Jesus' birth, death and Resurrection are as real for us today as for His contemporaries. We keep centenaries to remind us that what we commemorate leads up to us.

The third reason is that the present celebration of a past event points us to the future. It is a mile-stone on the Church's pilgrimage. The older mile-stones had two faces. The one you see as you approach shows you how far you still have to go. It is only when you pass it and look back that you see how far you have come. A centenary is never just a measuring of the distance we have come. It should be a realization of the distance we have to go and, perhaps, a recovery of direction.

What happened 1400 years ago

It was on Pentecost in the year 563 that Columba is reputed to have landed on Iona. It is this event that we commemorate fourteen hundred years later. What makes this event so significant? It did not mark the first coming of Christianity to Scotland. Ninian was earlier, and he may well not have been the first Christian to come to Scotland. What makes this date significant above all others? It's partly that it is a date, known and fixed, even as there is no doubt of the place of his landing. We could not celebrate Columba with knowledge if it were not for his life written by Adamnan who was Abbot of Iona in the succeeding century. But it was no accident that his life was written so fully and so lovingly and in such detail of place and time. What makes an event memorable above all others to contemporaries and successors are, surely, three things. First there is the accident—or providence—of time and place and circumstance that leads to success. Then there is the peculiar character of the man that fits the hour and changes the current of events. And, lastly, there is the unexplained way in which a man captures the imagination of his fellows so that they write his name in history.

This year we celebrate the 150th birthday of David Livingstone. His name offers a strange parallel to Columba's. He was not the first missionary or the first explorer to go to Central Africa; but his is the name remembered, because of his achievement, his character and the

way in which these were impressed on the imaginations of the peoples of this country and of Africa. And no one would suggest that popular memory was wrong in either case.

Certainly Columba achieved success in what he set out to do. He made Iona what Mrs Norah Chadwick has called "the head of the greatest organization in the Celtic Church in the sixth and seventh centuries."⁽¹⁾ From it the faith was carried to the mainland of Scotland, to Northumbria and then to parts of Northern Europe. Political events enabled this to happen, but it was his statesmanship that enabled Columba to use events for the extension of the Faith. Clearly he had great administrative ability. To build up his monastery on Iona from scratch and to make it a place to which men came for help and to which they sent their sons for education, demanded devotion, discipline and that touch of genius that can bring out of its treasures things new and old. And he lived long. He died in 597, having lived on Iona for thirty-four years. He impressed his name on his contemporaries and on future ages, not so much by the merit of his achievements as by his strong personality, by his gifts as a poet and by the touch which he displayed on the common things of people's lives. And, as with many another, his greatness was seen in the number and quality of those whom he gathered round him and of those whom his example inspired to carry on his work for generations. It is never by what a man does by himself alone that he wins a place in the calendar of those we remember, but always by his power to inspire the unknown many. When this year we look back and remember Columba, we give thanks to God for all that followed from Columba's landing on Iona in 563. But for this event Scotland's history would have been very different and we strange people.

This Year is the Fourteenth Centenary

The passage of time brings us to this fourteenth centenary of Columba's landing. This date is unique for us. It reminds us that we are heirs of that event and stand at a particular point in time. And in this celebration we are uniquely blessed. In Scotland when we today commemorate an event of fourteen hundred years ago, we may stand on the site of that event but often there is little left to fill the centuries. We have to leave to our imaginations to fill the blank. When on Iona we recount the years that take us back

⁽¹⁾ *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, p. 5. Oxford University Press, 1961.

to Columba we are much more fortunate: thanks to the fact that in the main epochs of these centuries there has been the work of building, and parts of these buildings remain; thanks, too, to the fact that Iona, though in the later Celtic period a prey to plunderers who came by sea, was safe in later centuries from plunderers by land, and never saw its buildings converted into manor house or castle; and thanks, not least, to the work of archaeologists of the present day and to those who have financed them. So there is not now on Iona, as there is in so many other places of historic memory, merely a few stones buried in the grass to remind us that men once lived and worked and worshipped here, and nothing living now but sheep and gulls. Instead we have now relics of the work of men in each great age to remind us that the story of the centuries is not a series of blanks but a living succession of men.

Thanks to the work of the archaeologists we have now for all to see the foundation of Columba's own cell, and inside it his bed cut from the native rock (and Adamnan tells us that Columba slept on the rock for his bed and had a stone for his pillow) and the stone supports of his table. This is on the top of Tor Abb, the hillock to the west of the west door of the Medieval Abbey and a proof that the Church through Celtic, Medieval, to modern times has been on the same site. It is good that now we have relics of the saint, and especially good that they do not fear the heat of the sun or the force of wind and rain or the thieving fingers of some tourist. Then, of some centuries later, there are the crosses and the well-tower, and underneath the grass the foundations of quite large buildings; probably those the Vikings burned down—and the little Shrine, now up against the Medieval Abbey, where the bones of the saint and his other relics lay. Next, the Chapel of St Oran in the Relig Odhrain, formerly separated from the Abbey grounds by two walls and a field, but now this year united in the one ground; the first church built under the influence of the Roman Church. Lastly the Benediction buildings, begun some two hundred years later but, in the work of building and rebuilding, stretching through three hundred years.

These buildings, ruined or restored and stretching from Columba's time to the present day, have found in the exposed "Street of the Dead" a chain that links them together, in terms of both time and place, for it runs, in the bit that is now exposed, from St Oran's Chapel to the gate of the Medieval monastery and belongs to the Celtic and the

Medieval period. Perhaps it is because this causeway is not a ruin but is as it was—a pavement of round granite boulders—that it does not make us think of ruin and of men long dead, but of living men and the work they did. By the difference of the buildings we begin to realize, if not to take in, the length of those fourteen hundred years, how near Columba was to Christ, and how long the period was from him to the end of the Celtic Church on Iona; and how all through these centuries men have trod the same grass and handled the same stones and looked at the same hills and sea, and served the same Lord. We cannot forget the foundations on which we are built nor the traditions we inherit.

A mile-stone on the way ahead

There is one feature about this centenary which makes it different from other commemorations in Scotland of events long ago. Often, when such commemorations are held on a spot associated with the person or the event, it is on a ruin or even on the site of what once had been a ruin that memory is focussed. Perhaps because of this there is a tendency in Scotland to think that there is something peculiarly religious about a ruin. Is this because, by our rude history, our memorials have been fated to be ruins? Or has a Protestant fear of the power of a building been transferred to a love of ruins? Were ruins to our reforming forefathers a reminder of that from which they had escaped? We have to remember with shame that the only centuries when there was no place of worship on Iona that was not a ruin were the centuries after the Reformation: that the parish church was built, by Telford the engineer, in 1809.

On Iona at this centenary we are released from such depressing thoughts. We make our celebrations when most of the ruined buildings have been restored and are in use, and indeed when the noise of the mallet, the saw and the spade are still heard. For the final stage of the restoration of the Abbey will be begun this summer, when work on the kitchen block outside the West wall of the cloisters is started. This should help us to enter into the spirit of him whom we commemorate. For what we commemorate is the start of a great labour by one who landed on a alien island and had to begin everything from scratch and by improvisation. The one thing that Columba never saw on Iona was a ruin. What he saw of the labour of his community were fields of grain scratched out of the bush and small huts of freshly gathered stones and turf. What each succeeding stage of the history

of fourteen hundred years saw was a new beginning in building and in work. If our approach to this centenary is that of looking back on ruins with a sentimental reverence, then certainly we miss the spirit of him who in sowing where no man had sown and in building where no man had built set that whole history going ; and the spirit too of those who followed—the later Celtic builders, the men who came with Norman skill to build St Oran's Chapel, the Benediction builders, one of whom left his name " Donald " on a capital in the crossing. All those who made the history of Iona in stone but not only in stone were looking to the future : for who builds a building except for use ?

For the last twenty-five years the work of rebuilding has been going on ; for, to compare great things with small, the fourteenth centenary of Columba's landing is also the semi-jubilee of the Iona Community. These years of slow building have been years of preparation, bringing us into the experience to appreciate this remembering and to catch its meaning.

A centenary is not a funeral. A fourteenth centenary is not a repeated funeral. A centenary is essentially a rebirth. A fourteenth centenary is thanksgiving for the miracle of repeated rebirth. Especially when we remember Columba's landing on Iona at Pentecost, we celebrate the beginning of life. We remember that life is always beginning and that at special times and in special ways men are called on to begin a work. And this is surely God's word in this celebration to us in the Church at this time—to us in particular who have found our home on Iona ; to all in the Church in Scotland who know their debt to the missionary work of Columba and of those of his age ; to the whole Church throughout the world to which Columba knew himself to belong. The commemoration of a missionary pioneer is an act of thanksgiving to God for the foundations on which we are built : it is also, and perhaps even more, a call to a like advance in Mission in our own day.

This is the obvious first implication of this centenary. The monks of the Celtic Church carried the Faith to a large part of Northern Europe. The world into which they went was pretty grim and they were not assured of a welcome. Division and uncertainty at home may have been among the reasons that sent Columba and others out. Division and uncertainty were among the things they certainly found wherever they went. It was not an easy time in the history of Europe. But times of great economic and political

turmoil have always been the times of the Church's missionary advance. The times of the Church's greatest witness have not been the times when all went well with the Church and the Church had an accepted place in society. In the even greater turmoil, economic and political, of the world today, the Church is called to missionary advance even as in Columba's day. But today the advance needed is not into geographical areas where Christian foot has never trod, but into areas of social, political and intellectual life where the Christian faith has not been expressed. These were not foreign areas to Columba. His labours had to do with agriculture and fishing, with politics and education. But he was creating a new pattern of social life in a land where all he did was strange. The Church in our day has to find new patterns of life in a land where everything is familiar and in a world in which men of all kinds of opinions have to learn to live together. Columba had to open by miracle the gate of Brude's Castle. The Church today is called to challenge the greater fear typified for us in the bomb. These political challenges are the spheres in which pre-eminently the missionary task of the Church can be carried out. The commemoration of Columba is the recall to the total mission of the Church—to its concern with the whole of life and with the whole world.

But the mission of the Church can never be carried out merely by realizing that we have to do with the whole of life. What the Church is concerned with is the personal life of men—not just that men should find the right ordering of their lives but that they should know God in their life together. And the way by which the Church, under God, carries on the work of man's salvation, is not through the expounding of a theology or a description of an ideal society, but by a life lived. This was manifestly true of Columba and his fellows. The practical discipline of their lives, seen in their devotions and in the tasks of common life, is described in Adamnan's biography of the saint. This life, different, mysterious, demanding and yet attractive was what drew men to Iona, then and later. The Church cannot commemorate Columba without facing urgent questions about its way of life—its devotional life, expressed in prayer and worship; and its practical life, expressed in the way its members use their time and their money. The devotional practice of Columba's day is difficult for us to discover and impossible for us to recover, even as his ways of husbandry and building cannot be revived, unless pedantically. Our duty is to find in our day and for the tasks of our day a way of life as demanding,

as attractive and as relevant as Columba's way in his. This is why a reconsideration of our Christian way of life, devotional and practical, is so urgent. It is a pre-requisite of mission. It is the scaffolding of the building of faith. This is why the Iona Community is concerned about a rule of life. It is to help in this that the ruined buildings on Iona are restored ; the place of worship and the places of ordinary life—the Church and the kitchen, the Chapel and the library, the Chapter House and the refectory. We celebrate Columba not, as a hundred years ago, with only ruins to remind us of the past, but with the buildings waiting to be fully used. What the fulness of that use will be depends on the Church and the kind of life it seeks to live.

Something would be missing from the commemoration of Columba if it were only in term of mission and discipline. Columba is a slightly enigmatic figure. A great missionary whose greatest work was in the men he inspired and sent out, and one who combined gentleness and hardness, is bound to be hard to understand. Perhaps the secret of Columba's character is to be found in his poetry, in his love of beauty, in the sense of being strangely at home with all creation. These things were not unique in Columba. Joy in the Gospel of Creation was a common note of the Celtic Church. The praise of song was its great contribution to the worship of the Church. Its extant relics are illuminated manuscripts of brilliant colour and intricate design. Columba was a leader among men and a supreme artist of the Gospel for them, because he possessed these qualities in a high degree and could use them to lead men into a new understanding and a fuller way of life.

This quality of joy and beauty cannot be omitted from a worthy celebration of Columba. Without it we cannot understand Columba or his achievement. Without it we cannot undertake the Church's mission today with any of the joy that will commend it to men. And perhaps this, too, is the clue to unity. For it would seem that to Columba Church unity was certainly not a matter of the absence of discussion and dispute, but rested on the unity of God with all created things.

It is to be hoped that this new century of Columba's heritage into which we enter will be marked by a new interest in the work of musician, artist and poet, and by a new acceptance of the necessity of their contribution for our understanding of the Faith and by a readiness to find a new unity in the Church in the joy of the Lord.

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