

## ST DAVID'S DAY 2020

Bore Da a Dydd Gwyl Dewi Sant hapus iawn i chi gyd!

I'm very grateful to Nigel for inviting me to preach today, not least because it is a rare opportunity for me, a Welshman named David after my grandfather, Dewi, to preach on St David's Day, which this year falls on a Sunday, and in a church dedicated to him. So you'll have to forgive me the indulgence of a little local colour in the old language - yr hen iaith, as the Welsh Anthem puts it.

It's a rare opportunity because the day won't fall on a Sunday again until 2026, by which time I'll be getting on rather, if I'm still around, and after that not until 2037, and if I'm still going, by then I'll be too old and doddery to preach let alone be worth listening to! (Dodgily assuming that may ever be the case!)

So St David, Dewi Sant. What we know of him is not much, other than that his mother too became a saint - St Non - and that he was born possibly in Cardiganshire in a place called Henfynyw near Aberaeron. He went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and it was there he was consecrated bishop, eventually rising to become the Primate of Wales, with his episcopal seat in what we now know as St David's in Pembrokeshire. He died around the

year 600, having established a monastery at St David's as well as others across South Wales, and been quite an influence on some Irish saints, including, possibly, St Patrick.

As an abbot he was austere, so it's somehow appropriate that his day should always now fall in the season of Lent. Known as 'Y Dyfrwr' - the waterman - his community probably only drank water and had a vegetarian diet.

But if he was austere as an abbot he was also known to be pastorally very kind as a bishop, especially to the sick and the poor, for whom he had a real concern all his life. He seems to have been hard on himself but gentle towards others. His emblem, as we can see in his statue here, is the dove, both a symbol of his inspired spiritual gifts, especially his preaching, and also, I would suggest, the gentleness of his nature.

So, whilst his own personal life bore the mark of the cross in his self-denial, his interaction with others was marked by a generosity of spirit. So he exemplifies for us the characteristics we hear about both in this morning's gospel - 'if any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' - as well as in Paul's exhortation to the Christians in Thessalonica - 'we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.'

And that's what saints do - they show us what it is to try and live like Christ at a particular time and in a particular place. They incarnate the gospel for us and ground Christian faith in a real human life.

I think we sometimes suffer as Christians from too much Lent, if I can put it provocatively. It's a word often associated in our minds only with suffering and hardship and is a tributary of that stream of sometimes extreme asceticism which emerges occasionally in the Christian story - the self-flagellation, the hair shirt, the over-zealous denial of food, or laughter or fun.

It was the kind of thing that emerged briefly into the open in England during the Commonwealth when Puritanism was at its height and Christmas and other Christian festivals that had relieved drab lives and given them a taste of heaven, were banned along with the closing of theatres and prohibition of games. 'What are you giving up for Lent?' we ask. And if we're not careful there creeps in by the back door a kind of harshness that runs actually counter to what the Gospel tells us about the nature of the God who comes to us in Jesus.

If you look up gentleness in a biblical concordance it will lead you in the OT to the word for loving-kindness in Hebrew - *chesed*. And there are many examples, notably in the psalms like Ps 63 -

O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;  
my soul is athirst for you...  
So I would gaze on you in your holy place ,  
that I might behold your power and your glory.  
Your loving-kindness is better than life itself  
and so my lips shall praise you.'

Here is a word that encapsulates what the NT discovers about God in Jesus. He only comes to us out of love and kindness - God so loved the world he gave us his only Son. He takes up his cross only because of his kindness and gentleness towards us. 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.'

Paul was particularly aware of this aspect of God in Christ because he was conscious of how much he had been shown mercy. The hard-edged Pharisee in him had been touched by God's gentle loving-kindness on the road to Damascus. But I think, like David, Paul subsequently accepted discomfort, beatings, shipwreck and all the rest for himself but was - on the whole - generous to others, as he is in today's epistle. If he's sometimes harsh it's born of his genuine concern for people in his churches.

So I think that's my message on this St David's Day, this First Sunday in Lent, be gentle with yourselves and with other people. Show loving-

kindness as God in Christ has shown gentle kindness to you. And do this in the everyday things of your life.

In his last sermon David told his monks to "do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing".

Archbishop Rowan Williams thinks that phrase resonates with modern people because...

'It reminds us that the primary things for us are the relationships around us, the need to work at what's under our hands, what's within our reach. We can transform our domestic, our family relationships, our national life to some extent, if we do that with focus and concentration in the presence of God.'

I happened to listen to a podcast of a conversation with the author Jan Morris the other day. She lives in NW Wales and comments on the kindness of her neighbours, who, she says, would do anything to help her if she needed. She declares herself to be 'glad to live somewhere where kindness is so prevalent' and asserts that 'Most horrors of the world can be circumvented simply by the exertion of kindness.'

Last year, her ninetieth, she published a book called *Battleship Yamato*, the story of the last great Japanese battleship, and its sinking by the

Americans. Subtitled *Of war, beauty and irony*, Jan Morris accompanies the story with various illustrations, the last of which is a huge canvas (10 ft x 12 ft) painted in 1634 by Velázquez called *The Surrender of Breda*, or sometimes in Spanish *Las Lanzas* because of the forest of soldiers' lances against the skyline, underlining the martial background of the event.

'It shows', says Jan Morris, 'a Dutch commander surrendering the city to his victorious Spanish opponent... but there is no dazzle of triumph in this picture, and no shame of failure either... the two commanders meet courteously, like friends or comrades: and the message of the painting, as moving today as it was when it was painted four centuries ago, is one of kindness - which is, to my mind, the truest concomitant of beauty [and] the prime antidote to the madness of war..'  
Paul puts it like this to the Galatians -

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.'

'Do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing.'

Good advice for Lent from two great saints.