

Service at Glasgow Unitarian Church led by Barbara Clifford

2 March 2014

SERMON: St David

Yesterday was the first of March, supposedly the first day of Spring under the new definitions, but more importantly it was St David's Day - the Welsh equivalent of St Andrew's Day. In Wales, many people will wear a daffodil or leek on St David's Day - both of these being symbols of Wales; the other Welsh symbol, the Red Dragon, is portrayed on our flag, which will have been flown on many more buildings in Wales than usual. The leek is a very old symbol of Wales and goes back to a 16th Century battle between Welsh and Saxons when the Welsh wore leeks to help them tell friend from foe in the midst of battle. As a small child I remember going to the garden with my grandfather on St David's Day to pick daffodils and dig up leeks, which we would take to school. Both leeks and daffies are *cenhinen* in Welsh, which may be how the daffodil came to join the leek as a Welsh symbol.

Today I'd like to share with you something of the culture and religion of Wales and we'll start with St David. He was a real person about whom many legends accumulated. His first biography was first written 400 hundred years after his death on the First of March in 589 and this was at least in part an argument for the independence of the Welsh Church from Rome. Very little is known about his early years - including his birth date, which is variously given as between 480 and 512. For schooling he attended the monastery in Aberaeron, where he was taught by Paulinus, a blind monk. When David cured Paulinus of his blindness his reward was to be sent by him on a mission to convert the pagan people of Britain. Many monasteries in Wales trace their foundations to David, of which probably 12 are authentic. In his monasteries, he believed in simplicity and a harsh life. He believed that ploughs should be pulled by monks, not horses, and speaking should be limited to praying. Not surprisingly, he was not always well liked by his fellow monks. In spite of this, his charisma impressed many and his strengths as a teacher, a prophet, and as a miracle-worker held the communities together. He is often portrayed with a dove on his shoulder, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, and the source of his eloquence in preaching. There is a distant link to Unitarianism here - David is credited with saving the Welsh churches from the heresy of Pelagius --- the idea that people could work out their own salvation. Catholic doctrine leaves some room for personal decisions but still insists that the grace of God is essential. In one of his rants against Pelagian heresy the earth rose up beneath him and gave him a hill on which he could be seen and heard. When he died in 589 he

was a bishop; some stories make him an Archbishop and the leader of Welsh Christianity. This was, of course, in the Celtic Christian Church that only accepted the primacy of Rome a couple hundred years after David died.

Rowen Williams, former head of the Church in Wales and the Church of England, sees David's message of simplicity as very modern. In his last sermon, David told his fellow monks to “do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing” and Williams wrote of this: “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”.

In primary schools last week many children would have worn their traditional outfits: for girls this could mean a tall, wide-brimmed hat with lace, a long skirt and apron and full petticoats while for boys it could mean a flat woollen cap (known as a Dai cap) as worn by Welsh miners, a Welsh flannel waistcoat with black trousers and long woollen socks. Both boys and girls, of course, would wear a daffodil or possibly a leek. Many schools will hold an Eisteddfod - a festival of singing, dancing, and recitation. The highlight is usually the choir singing, especially the male voice choirs. Eisteddfod literally means “sitting down” and is something akin to a Scottish Ceilidh.

Singing has always been a central part of 'Welshness', from chapels to miners institutions to public festivals. Some Welsh hymn tunes have found their way into our hymnals and we are singing a few of them today. Many churches and local organisations will have an annual Cymynfa Ganu, or singing festival. John and I were able to attend one two years ago organised by the SE Wales district when fifty hymns' first verses were sung without break.

In school I was exposed to Dylan Thomas, the greatest Welsh poet, although he wrote only in English and spent much of his life outside Wales. October this year is the centenary of his birth. As a modern poet who used ordinary language in powerful new ways, several of his poems remain with me, with his descriptions of how life was in the valleys - *Under Mild Wood* and *A Child's Christmas in Wales* may be known to some of you. He was an atheist but felt the pull of religious imagery in his descriptions. As Wikipedia says of his poetry:

“Thomas'... images were carefully ordered in a patterned sequence, and his major theme was the unity of all life, the continuing process of life and death and new life that linked the generations. Thomas saw biology as a magical transformation producing unity out of diversity, and in his poetry sought a poetic ritual to celebrate this unity. He saw men and women locked in cycles of growth, love, procreation, new

growth, death, and new life. Therefore, each image engenders its opposite. Thomas derived his closely woven, sometimes self-contradictory images from the Bible, Welsh folklore, preaching, and Sigmund Freud.”

In 2002 when I returned to Wales to live after many years residing in Scotland, my religious thoughts were no longer those of the Welsh Baptists I had attended as a young person. I was a Unitarian, married to a Unitarian minister who was to take charge of three Unitarian congregations in SE Wales. There were many Welsh speakers in these congregations. There was a monthly Service in Welsh at Cardiff, (which John was not expected to lead!), and one of the other congregations always included a hymn in Welsh in their worship. A crash course of Welsh lessons was a must, for as a child I did not learn Welsh in school - it was seldom available in the English-speaking areas. This was one of the first changes I noted, for not only was it available in schools, in my social work there were regular offerings of low-cost courses evenings and weekends.

All of the 8 congregations in the SE Wales District are small, the largest being about the size of Glasgow or Aberdeen, but they have a regular programme of events that bring them together. The 13 Welsh speaking congregations in the South Wales District are generally larger and very close together in the area surrounding Lampeter and there is one small, new, congregation on its own in the far north of Wales.

The annual week-long Welsh National Eisteddfod alternates its venues between North and South Wales and when it is held in South Wales the Welsh Unitarian Department has a booth for publicity and as a place for Unitarians to gather. Literature, coffee, and conversation are available and local Unitarians have a point to rally around. At the National Eisteddfod there is the annual gathering of the Bards, the Gorsedd. Iolo Morganwg is the Bardic name of Edward Williams, born in 1747, died 1826. He was influential in starting the Gorsedd and wrote the Druidic ritual which is part of their gathering, claiming that it represented Druidic knowledge he had discovered in his researches. Much of his research relied on his forgeries and presented a philosophic view that mixed christianity with celtic romanticism and druid-isms that he created. He was a Unitarian and helped set up the Unitarian Association for South Wales in 1802. Being elected to the Gorsedd is a real honour and recent elections have seen this honour include Unitarians, including Rev Eric Jones, former President of the GA.

Our Welsh chapel origins are similar to our English chapels - the growth of non-conformist fervour in the 1600s and the struggle during much of the 1700s for legal recognition of the right to worship free of State Religion.

Economic and political power tended to align with the State Church and this struggle was often tied to the struggle for the rights of the poor people. In Wales this also included the right to speak Welsh, in fact, non-conformist chapels kept the language alive when almost all other social institutions were actively repressing the language. Sad to say, even with the change in official attitude over the last 50 years, the damage was so great that the battle to save the language is on a knife-edge.

One of the first District outings that we attended after moving to Wales was a visit to the mountainside area of Cwmyglo between Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare where an early 17th century illegal religious meeting took place regularly before they were able, after a few years, to meet in the barn of a farm. Hardy folk, these were, needing to walk miles to get to worship and standing during worship in case they needed to flee. They faced severe prosecution if they were caught. One of our existing congregations, Hen Dŷ Cwrdd in Cefn Coed, traces its origins to Cwmyglo. It is located on the outskirts of Merthy Tydfil, the center of Wales's steel industry in the 18th Century and when it was founded in 1747 it would have been fairly secluded. Although all the congregations are friendly, the members at Cefn Coed were particularly generous especially with the Ladies' home baking. Every time John took the service at their Chapel he was mothered by the ladies and their cakes.

Another of our chapels, not far from Lampeter, had a 19th century minister who fought for the rights of people to education and a secret ballot. His name was William Thomas and he was the great uncle of Dylan Thomas, but usually known by his Bardic name, Gwilym Marles. When the landowner of the Chapel he served got fed up with his work for civil liberty and locked minister and congregation out of the chapel in 1876, the following Sunday he preached at the gates to 3,000 people. A successful national appeal for funds to build a new chapel was launched. The dispute was not settled until the landowner died and his sister inherited 3 years later, gifting the land for the Old Chapel to the congregation.

When we remember the courage of these Unitarian pioneers who defied the bosses, defied the established churches, and even defied the law in order to meet for worship - in open fields when necessary - we have a proud legacy of freedom that we are lucky to be able to live up to. Welsh Unitarian history differs from Scottish in the details, but the basic drive to form worshipping communities in accordance with our consciences is the same. I return to the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams on St David's last sermon: "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”.

Before we sing our last hymn, I'm going to play a CD of *What a Wonderful World* sung by a Welsh Male Voice Choir and distribute a daffodil to everyone present as my gift in the spirit of St David's Day.