

Brendan the “Navigator” - such faith and trust in God !

It always gives me great comfort to see other people demonstrating their resolute faith and trust in the Lord following God’s calling into pastures new. Would I have that same trust and faith ? Would you ? If ever the case arose, would I drop everything and follow God or would I falter, make excuses and carry on as normal ? One thing if it was on my radar screen in some shape or form but what if it was something way out of my comfort zone, something quite extraordinary ?

So many people however throughout the ages have answered God’s call very bravely and without hesitation. One person who did this and who I admire greatly is Brendan the Navigator, a well known early Celtic Saint, famous for his remarkable sea voyages in the early sixth century. Many historians now credit Brendan with actually reaching Newfoundland and North America particularly since the voyage of Tim Severin in the 1970’s who proved that it was quite possible, amazing though it seems, for Brendan and his companions to have sailed across the Atlantic a thousand years before Columbus, in a very small curragh made out of unseasoned wood covered in oxhide and smeared over with animal fats with a roll of leather in the bottom of the boat for repairing leaks !

Brendan’s travels were compiled into the “ Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis” by an Irish monk in the ninth century from oral traditions still circulating about the exploits and adventures of this evangelist and missionary . At one time these accounts were considered fanciful and allegorical but it has been proved that he did indeed visit real islands. Descriptions of “tall pillars of glass towering out of the sea” in the Navigatio were probably icebergs and glaciers for example. “Mountains in the sea spouting fire” were probably volcanoes and monsters with catlike heads and horns growing out of their mouths were maybe walruses. His second voyage, commencing in 530AD lasted seven years in total . He returned to Ireland full of missionary zeal and went on to found many more religious communities and monasteries until his death in 575AD.

Born in 484AD in County Kerry and of noble lineage, Brendan was fostered by the mystic teacher Ita having been baptized by Bishop Erc. He grew up in monasteries and later on founded many large monasteries himself such as Clonfert in Galway. It is said that he once asked Ita what were the three works most pleasing to God and the three things most displeasing to God. Ita answered “ The three things that please God most are true faith in God with a pure heart, a simple life with a grateful spirit and generosity inspired by charity. The three that displease God are a mouth that hates people, a heart harbouring resentments, and a confidence in wealth”. Brendan was hugely influenced by the teachings of Ita and he became known as a truly devout man eager to spread the Gospel wherever he could.

Brendan grew up next to the sea and looking westwards had grown up hearing stories about “The Promised Land of the Saints” He became convinced that God was calling him to voyage into unchartered waters to find this land. He ascended Mount Brandon , at the end of the Dingle peninsula to be alone and meditate, listening to God and searching his own heart, considering the perils that would lay ahead of him.

He is credited with an inspiring prayer, called his mountain prayer . There are two versions of this prayer which you may care to read. I love them both

Shall I abandon the comforts and benefits of my home,
Seeking the island of promise our fathers knew long ago,
Sail on the face of the deep where no riches or fame
Or weapons protect you, and nobody honours your name?
Shall I take leave of my friends
And my beautiful native land,
Tears in my eyes
As my knees mark my final prayer in the sand?
King of the mysteries, will You set watch over me?
Christ of the mysteries, can I trust you on the sea?

Christ of the heavens,
And Christ of the ravenous ocean wave,
I will hold fast to my course
Through the dangers I must brave.
King of the mysteries, angels will watch over me,
Christ of the mysteries, when I trust You on the sea.

2nd version

Help me to journey beyond the familiar
And into the unknown,
Give me the faith to leave old ways
And break fresh ground with You.
Christ of the Mysteries, I trust You
To be stronger than each storm within me.
I will trust in the darkness and know
That my times, even now, are in Your hand
Tune my spirit to the music of heaven,
And somehow , make my obedience count for You ,
Amen.

Would I have the courage and total conviction to do the same if called ? Would I trust God enough ? This is why I admire Brendan and others like him so much – their faith and trust in God were not just spoken about but put into action . He and his fellow monks embarked on a really dangerous journey into the unknown; many thought it was possible to literally go over the edge of the world then – after some quiet meditation and listening to God.

I have found the words of David Adam very helpful when he writes about pilgrimage . He explains how pilgrims(we are all pilgrims in my mind on life's journey) “seek a new spiritual depth, a beyond in our midst” How every true pilgrimage is not just an outward journey but a journey inwards -“we all have great depths to discover within ourselves” He goes on - “adventurous living is not only going out, it is living in the depths of our being; it is expressed in how we respond to the word of God “

“It is no use talking of the Promised Land unless we are willing to venture into the desert to reach it”

Brendan's life to me is quite inspirational as are his prayers . His faith and trust in God are inspirational . His actions are inspirational.

Life is such a precious gift, God given and an adventure but is it truly an adventure with God our Creator in control or are we ourselves in the driving seat ? What is our response to God's word ? Will our actions be stronger than words? . Will our faith and trust in God hold up when it gets down to the bottom line ? Will it take us forward with God into uncharted waters – out of our comfort zone and into new ways with God - that is the sixty million dollar question !