

Isaiah 61:1-3
1 Corinthians 3:11-23
Luke 10:1-2, 17-20

The Ordination of James Edward Harrison 12 June 2010
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Columba, Abbot of Iona

Such violent scripture readings for the feast of a gentle saint known as the Dove of the Church! Such violent scripture readings for the priestly ordination of a man who is equally gentle. In our reading from Isaiah God's Spirit anoints a prophet specifically to proclaim the day of God's vengeance, an opportunity for payback that will rejoice the faithful. Paul warns the Church at Corinth that the world will end in fire, perhaps in the very near future, and only the church communities founded by *bona fides* apostles will survive it; for good measure he also reminds those wacky, lewd Corinthians that if they persist with their creative lifestyle choices God is going to personally take each of them out. And in the gospel Jesus surveys the mission field like Wellington at Waterloo and sees it strewn with deadly reptiles, stinging insects, and a host of noisy demons, the whole scene lit up by Satan streaking through the sky like a Roman candle. Someone really ought to turn the bible into a graphic novel; it would sell like hotcakes.

I submit to you that these violent passages from scripture are in fact well chosen for the Feast of Columba, Dove of the Church. In 563 he sailed from his native Ireland to found a monastery on the tiny island of Iona, which is off the coast of a much bigger island called Mull, which is off the west coast of Scotland. I would guess that a number of you have been there. Iona has been very important in my life, and it is sacred ground for Jim, the place he took the first step on the journey that led him to this ceremony this morning. Iona was and is a very peaceful place. Thousands of people make it the goal of a pilgrimage every year, but, because no cars are permitted on the island, the tiny town is bathed in holy silence, broken only by the sounds of singing from one of the two religious communities, the Anglican Bishop's House and the ecumenical Iona Community. From this peaceful island Columba sent out scores of missionary monks who converted the Picts to Christianity and established the church in Scotland. But his three decades of gentle rule from Iona were all one big act of penance for Columba, to atone for the violence that had filled his early days as a monk.

Columba was an Irish aristocrat, born into the influential clan Donnell and descended as well from the High Kings of clan Neill. He showed an early aptitude for scholarship and entered the monastery at Clonard as a teenager, where he was later ordained priest. Under the direction of Saint Finian he painstakingly copied out a great psalter and then claimed that he had the right to keep it. Finian thought otherwise, and the dispute between them escalated to the level of warfare. Columba stirred up his own clan Neill to wage war on King Diarmait, and their two armies clashed at Cúl Dreimhne in 561. Three thousand men died. The blame for these deaths was laid directly at Columba's doorstep by a council of the Irish church. He was offered a choice: excommunication or the life of a missionary, charged with saving one soul for every life that was lost at Cúl Dreimhne. So off to Iona he went.

That the second half of Columba's life was a successful atonement for its violent beginnings is beyond question. He died peacefully at the age of 78, supposedly with a smile on his face. But the violence that had led him to Iona did not cease with his death. A psalter believed to have been the one he copied for Saint Finian was enshrined in a reliquary made by the monks of Iona and entrusted to the ruling clans of Scotland. The psalter acquired the nickname "Cathach," "the warrior," and was used to bless Scottish troops before they went out to war. Some of Columba's relics were also enclosed in a portable shrine and carried into battle for centuries; they were credited with the dramatic Scottish victory over the English armies at Bannockburn in 1314, seven centuries after the abbot's death. Columba's life and legacy seem to be proof of the maxim that what goes around, comes around.

Well, that's all very interesting, but what has it to do with this ordination? Jim is clearly a man of peace, not guilty of any crimes we know of or at least that he's admitted to, and here we sit in this lovely peaceful church in lovely peaceful Winnetka on a lovely, peaceful — if rather damp — June day. But we are in fact here to do nothing more nor less than empower this gentle man to take bread in his hands and declare it the body of Jesus and then break it into pieces, not once, but week after week, year after year. We are inviting him to offer sacrifice on our behalf, the violent and bloody sacrifice of Jesus, made palatable by noble architecture, beautiful flowers, and soaring music. What a terrible thing to ask of such a nice man.

Surely I exaggerate on this point. We don't need to think of the comforting service of Holy Communion as an act of violence done on our behalf, do we? Well, the language *is* pretty straightforward: "This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you." "Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice." Do we really want to say that these words are just symbolic in a day and age when our young men and women are giving their bodies and shedding their blood on our behalf in Afghanistan and Iraq? If we do we might find ourselves in the awkward position of those defendants in court cases about nativity scenes erected in public squares. The atheists charge that the crèches are religious symbols and the Christians end up arguing that they're just part of the winter holiday, like snowmen and candy canes, so they can keep the displays up. No, let us say plainly that the eucharist is truly about death and sacrifice on our behalf, and we are asking Jim to join his life to that death and sacrifice in an indelible bond. It is a lot to ask.

But the violence enshrined in our liturgical tradition is not the only problematic aspect of what we are about this morning. We are also making Jim the very embodiment of the Christian faith in a very public way. And that means he'll have a lot of explaining to do. However committed you and I may be to living peacefully in our daily lives we cannot escape the fact that Christianity is the world's largest religion today because so many of the earth's people were forced to embrace our faith at the point of a sword. For every Anglo-Saxon and Pict who responded to the earnest preaching of monks like Columba and freely chose the faith of Jesus there are ten or twenty or a hundred others who were baptized against their wills because they were snatched from their homelands and enslaved or lost a war and had to submit to their conquerors' religion. And then

there is the bible itself. Without doubt it contains many words of love and peace, but they're given stiff competition by the words of violent retribution like those we've heard today. We naturally gravitate toward the nice bits without really trying to account for the rest. But it turns out that the people who aren't sitting with us here today, or any day, have taken notice. In his groundbreaking 2007 book, *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman surveyed thousands of Americans between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine who had no religious affiliation and asked them their impression of Christians. Eighty-nine percent chose the word "judgmental" followed by eighty-five percent who described us as "hypocritical." Interestingly, fifty-five percent of churchgoers described Christianity using the very same words. So this may not be a bum rap from people who don't know us. Once again, it seems, what goes around, comes around.

Yet now we're asking Jim to be a spokesperson for our religion, a public representative who will be called on to explain our perceived judgmental and hypocritical stances, because he'll be the one with the collar, the designated Christian. People will assume he's going to say something judgmental and prove himself a hypocrite every time he walks into The Depot to have a chicken salad sandwich. Wasn't it enough that we're asking him to take Jesus' body and break it in two every week? Do we have to make him our mascot as well? A lot of mascots get pretty roughed up. What a terrible thing to do such a nice man.

On the other hand, you do understand that he only *seems* nice, don't you? That's just his cover. Give him a couple more months. You'll find out. He's going to mess with your minds and break your hearts and bring many new and old souls to Christ and things will get completely out of control because suddenly it'll all be so *real* and when did *that* happen? We didn't see it coming because he *seemed so nice*. Jim may be one of Seabury's last gasps but he's hardly anyone's idea of a death rattle; he's more like one of those new cremation services that launches your ashes into the air in a bottle rocket. Talk about going out with a bang. In Jim Harrison, Seabury's M.Div. program has definitely gone out with a bang.

So, does that mean that these violent readings are in fact well chosen for the ordination of this (seemingly) gentle man? It does indeed, because when they are used to interpret the life and call of Jim Harrison they reveal the beauty dwelling side by side with the violence. Isaiah's prophet is anointed not only to declare the day of God's vengeance but to bring good news to the oppressed and build up the ancient ruins. In the midst of his threats Paul also reminds the wacky, lewd Corinthians that the world and life and death — their entire experience — has been handed back to them like a gift in Christ, because through baptism they belong to him and he belongs to God. And in the midst of that terror-strewn mission field that Jesus surveys he also tells his sent ones: "Nothing will hurt you." In Jim Harrison the church raises up a leader who will help us sift the beauty from the violence in our tradition, one who will help us to build up the ancient ruins, remember whose we are, and renew our faith that nothing can hurt us if we are truly doing the work Jesus sends us to do. With you, his brothers and sisters in this Christian community, he will strive to live a Christianity that is non-violent, non-judgmental, and anything but hypocritical. He will change you. And you will change him. And Christ will be honored in you both.

O Columba spes Scotorum... begins a 13th Century prayer. “O Columba, hope of the Scots! By the mediation of your merits make us companions of the blessed angels.” A remarkable request for a man who had once been given a choice between excommunication or exile. Sometimes what goes around does not come around. Sometimes a new story is begun. In the providence of God, may a new one begin today.