

St Margaret of Scotland sermon by Andrew 17 Nov 2019

Proverbs 31: 10-31; 2 Timothy 1: 1-7; 2 Timothy 1: 1-7; Matthew 13: 44-46

She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands. She rises while it is still night, considers a field and buys it, girds her arms with strength, makes her arms strong, plants a vineyard, opens her hand to the poor, makes linen garments and sells them.

It's enough to make you feel exhausted just listening to it. This is the Old Testament view of the Good Wife, otherwise known as superwoman. Sort of Nigella Lawson and Mother Theresa all rolled in to one. But in fact, if you look beneath that breathtaking to-do list what you see is the Bible saying: this is the creativity, the energy that just overflows if you seek wisdom and love.

This is what you look like if you seek the Pearl of great price above all else. These readings have always been chosen for St Margaret's Day because that's what people saw in her. She lived up to her own name – Margaret means "Pearl". She was born a princess, heir to an earthly kingdom, nevertheless she knew the kingdom that really matters, namely the one that grows secretly in the heart – the one that's worth giving up anything else in order to possess it and be possessed by it.

I still have my copy of the Ladybird book of saints from primary school days, which shows Margaret arriving at Dunfermline to be met by her future husband, Malcolm Canmore (his name unflatteringly meaning "big head"), Malcolm in my picture looking a bit like a young Howard Keel, and Margaret both regal and demure. I suspect the truth was something different. Margaret probably fell off her tiny ship, green with seasickness having battled up the North Sea coast for days, only to be confronted by a husband who possibly made her heart sink: this rough and ready king of a very rough and ready kingdom. One writer describes Malcolm as a fiery Celtic ruffian who when Margaret first met him, when her ship was blown on to the Northumbrian coast, he was busy sacking the Saxon church at Wearmouth and slaughtering everyone, young and old alike.

So really you couldn't have blamed Margaret if she'd just given up the ghost at this point. Because Malcolm and Scotland were definitely Plan B. Margaret was a Saxon princess from the court of the King of Hungary. She'd been destined for return to the English court for a far more gracious life than anything Scotland had to offer. Only a certain William of Normandy, and an arrow in the eye for Harold, got in the way of all that. Life didn't work out. The glittering prize was snatched from her hands by that unsympathetic thing we call life, so here she is making the best of second best.

Only Margaret clearly didn't see it that way. Margaret embraced her new husband, her new country and her new life not as if they were some cheap consolation prize but as the joy of her heart. This man, this country, this life was the field in which she was going to find the pearl of great price. What a lesson. Can you or I believe that the place we land up, those regions of the spirit or of our emotions, that we never planned on visiting – these are our precious field? Just scrape away some mud and there is the pearl of great price.

So here's an astonishing thing that maybe one of the first and most outstanding figures of our history was a woman, a foreigner, someone who never planned on being here at all; and yet she's perhaps one of the first of our famous figures and you can almost feel

her personality. She is Proverbs woman, beyond a doubt. I like to think of her as our Grace Kelly – bringing into the grimness of a dark and violent Scotland just a touch of stardust, a bit of Hollywood.

But more than that Margaret brought faith. Some folks today question whether the Roman version she brought with her finished off the last remains of a Celtic Christianity people sometimes idealise. But the Church needed the organising energy of Proverbs woman, needed that discipline which is the grit in the oyster that forms the pearl. Christianity is a tough, sinewy, get your sleeves rolled up kind of religion every bit as much as it's a faith of contemplation and prayer – maybe more so – and Margaret understood that. And my Ladybird book of saints picks up at least one thread of that. Margaret feeding and washing poor children who came daily to her castle door. Margaret reading gospel stories to her children, and especially her son, David, our very own David of Scotland, who would be king and saint in his turn, founder of all those monasteries that would for centuries be our schools and hospitals, centres of light and learning.

Not a bad record for someone who never aimed to be here at all. Malcolm probably felt he was the luckiest man alive: Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all. She knew that you can find your Pearl anywhere - we all can - when things don't work out, when you're not where you want to be. Dig and you'll find it.

I think there's something inspiring in the fact that the oldest remaining building in Edinburgh is Margaret's chapel. It's tiny and how it hasn't been swept away by the ravages of our violent history and countless sieges, heaven alone knows. It's vulnerable and unimposing, but it has clung to that great rock for almost a thousand years, just like Margaret clung to Christ. At the heart of the city, that amazing, busy, industrious woman's place of prayer and the source of her strength still stands.

So, this is her message for all of us: however your life has turned out, no matter what's happened, cling to the rock that is Christ; and wherever you find yourself dig for the pearl of great price. Amen.