



Podcast: Saint Bega and the Lakes

Mgr Daniel McHugh

Journey of Faith - Life from Holy Mass - with Monsignor Daniel McHugh

When I came to the Lake District for a short break: enjoying the scenery, walking in this beautiful land and visiting places of interest, I was keen to find historic Churches too. The guide books focus on the lakes themselves, interesting boat trips and walks and places to eat and drink. Important as these are of course, Historic Churches don't get much of a look in! The internet came to the rescue! In fact there are many Churches of historic importance and worth exploring.

The Church I focused on for a visit is St. Bega's on Lake Bassenthwaite. The building dates from about 950 A.D. though the site may be older. It is always open and visited by people from all over the world. Some of the more famous were the poets Wordsworth and Tennyson. More recently Melvyn Bragg made it the setting for his novel "Credo", and he heads up a Charity dedicated to furthering the development of the Church and the associated St. Bees' Priory on the coast near Whitehaven, where St. Bega arrived from Ireland, most likely sometime in the 7-800s. Her story is wonderful: some of it legend, but with a great Christian life at its heart.

Bega an Irish Princess escaped an arranged marriage with the son of the King of Norway, because she valued a life of virginity and chastity more. The place where she arrived in a small 'coracle' boat is called St. Bees Head today; St. Bees means the Church of St. Bega. She found the place covered in thick forest, well suited to the solitary life where she remained for many years. Apparently her intention was to establish a "religious community" which came to fruition later in Northumbria where she was admitted to religious vows. Her holy life led to a number of miracles being claimed through her intercession. In later years the Priory of St. Mary and St. Bega was established on the spot of her earlier Church; the Benedictines treasured her relics, especially a bracelet she left behind when travelling to the other side of the country. The Priory recently celebrated 900 years of its foundation, though it suffered a great deal of destruction at the time of the Reformation. The Church on the shores of Bassenthwaite Lake is said to have been where she died.

Just over 2 weeks ago we celebrated the Feast of St. Anthony of Egypt who is credited with the founding of Monastic Life in the 300s. It is interesting to note that a few hundred years later, a female Saint from Ireland, was inspired to set out on a similar mission in England. A life dedicated to being the "spouse" of Christ may not make the guidebooks but it continues to inspire many today. On the door of the Church of St. Bega I saw these words from the Gospel of St. John posted: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not defeated it." (Chapter 8). St. Bega believed those words and by her life has led Pilgrims from all over the world to her church at Bassenthwaite.

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Reflecting on the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time where the relationship between Jesus and Peter continues to develop after the healing of Peter's mother in law, we hear of the miraculous haul of fish at the lake, and Peter being told by Jesus that it is men that he will catch rather than fish in the future. Clearly Peter continues to bring many to the Church because of his belief in Him and love of Him, even in our time. We thank God for the special ministry of Peter and his successors in the Church today as "fishers of men". We thank God for all those who draw others to Jesus too, not least those who consecrate themselves to Him as St. Bega did. We ask her prayers that many will hear the call she heard all those centuries ago in Ireland, that flourished in her life of prayer and charity in the Lake District, and continues to draw others to Jesus today.

I conclude with a hymn to St. Bega preserved in the Bodleyan Library. In the same volume the Saint's day falls on 7 November.

Bega maiden fair of face
Daughter of an ancient race
Honoured more of Godly grace
Than for human provenance

Make us loathe all evil ways
Teach us what you learnt, to praise
Christ our Lord in joyous phrase
Proud at our inheritance.

Amen

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