

Columba's prophecies: a cynical view

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to continue my analysis of the 99 prophecies of Calum Cille (St Columba) recorded in the 'Vita Columbae' or 'Life of Columba' by St Adomnán. I want to look in particular at a crucial group of eleven prophecies, in at least five of which the saint's knowledge of an individual's prospects could have been gleaned from medical diagnosis, perhaps with the help of the confessional, and in the other six of which the saint could himself have secured the fulfilment of the prophecy.

First there is the story of two strangers who shouted across the sound from Mull. Calum Cille knew immediately that they were from a distant land, which suggests that their speech was neither Gaelic nor Pictish. After being ferried over, they asked to stay in the monastery for a year. Calum Cille refused to allow this unless they first became monks.

Now to Adomnán this was an astonishing breach of hospitality, and he remarks: "When those who were present heard these words addressed to strangers who were only newly arrived, they wondered very much." My own interpretation is that Calum Cille was the man who paid the bills, and if his struggling new foundation had to feed a pair of well-heeled travellers, it wasn't going to do it for nothing.

The strangers, who were brothers, immediately consented. Adomnán tactfully does not mention it, but of course their wealth, whatever it was, now belonged to the community. What happens next is more worrying still. Calum Cille promptly prophesies that the two brothers are 'a living sacrifice to God' and will 'pass away in peace this very month to Christ our Lord'. So it happens. Had the saint diagnosed them as suffering from a terminal illness?

Another time when Calum Cille heard someone shouting from across the sound he said, "That man who is shouting is much to be pitied. He is coming here to us to seek a cure for the disease of his body, but it would be better for him today to do penance for his sins, because at the close of this week he will die."

Adomnán tells the story with a sense of wonder, but that is only appropriate if we see Columba's attitude as charitable rather than vindictive. A humanist interpretation suggests that Columba was familiar with the voice and familiar with the case, and gave the man a week to live on the basis of the treatment he would receive — bleeding, perhaps. When the poor man stepped off the ferry he was promptly told what the Abbot had said about him, and probably took fright, because as soon as he had had his treatment he was off again — but of course his flight was going to do him no good now, and sure enough, as Adomnán says, before the end of the same week he died.

Another man who was dead within a week of coming to Calum Cille was his own disciple Caitlan, whom he had placed in charge of a cell called Cill Diuni at Loch Awe. Calum Cille sent messengers to fetch him from there, saying simply, "Run quickly to Caitlan, and tell him to come to me without delay."

Caitlan came very quickly, which suggests that he was in good health. When he got to Iona Calum Cille said to him, "I sent for you to come to me because, loving you like a friend, I would want you to end your days with me here in true obedience. For before the close of this week you will depart in peace to the Lord."

Caitlan fell sick that very night, says Adomnán, and died the same week. Now there are one or two disturbing things about this tale. We are not told that the saint knew of Caitlan's terminal sickness before he arrived. Did the journey kill him? Or worse, what is that about 'true obedience'? Had Caitlan been summoned on a disciplinary matter? Was his death in any way akin, for example, to that of General Sir Hector MacDonald, who took his own life in 1903 when summoned by his military superiors to answer a charge of sodomy?

Now two final cases of the 'diagnosis' type, one with a twist. When Colmán son of Beogna, a priest, set sail for Ireland, the saint prophesied that never again would he see his face in the world. And that was true, because Colmán passed away that selfsame year. But he made the same prophecy with regard to another priest, his aged uncle Ernán, when he sent him away to take charge of a monastery he had founded in an island called Hinba — perhaps Jura? After a few days Ernán became very unwell, no doubt much as expected, but then the prophecy began to unravel. Ernán asked to be brought to see his nephew one more time. Calum Cille, says Adomnán, rejoiced at his return, and set out for the harbour. Weak though he was, Ernán tried to walk up the hill unaided to meet him. Then, with only twenty-four paces between them, Ernán collapsed and died before his nephew saw his face in life.

What are we to make of this? I would suggest that an inner circle of Calum Cille's monks did not like their hero to be proved wrong, and Adomnán tells us a strange thing that seems to confirm my verdict. "On that spot," he says, "in front of the door of the kiln, a cross was erected, and in the same way another cross was erected where the saint was standing when Ernán died, which is there to this day." It sounds as if the Ernán affair was controversial in its day, and that the supporters of Calum Cille's sainthood went to the length of building two crosses to shore up their side of the story.

Calum Cille was clearly no Jesus, no St Francis. Different writers have in fact compared him rather to Moses and John Knox. If you think some of the above makes him sound just a little like Josef Stalin or Saddam Hussein, then consider the following prophecies of which the saint might — I repeat, might — have himself organised the fulfilment. Bear in mind, too, that the kind of zealots who erected the two crosses might equally be responsible.

When Calum Cille rebuked a man called Neman son of Gruthrich for his faults, Neman responded with derision. "In God's name," said the saint, "I will declare these words of truth about you, Neman, that your enemies will find you in bed with a prostitute and kill you, and evil spirits will carry off your soul to the place of torments." And so it happened — a few years later 'his enemies' found him in bed with a prostitute and beheaded him. Coincidence?

It is clear in some cases that Calum Cille himself was best placed to ensure the outcome, most obviously of course when the prophecy concerned himself: "My dear children," he says towards the end of his life, "I know that from this day you will never see my face again anywhere in this field." It takes no great leap of the imagination to suppose that he had probably spent his life stage-managing the lives of others much as he stage-managed his own. For example, one day in Skye he whacked the ground close to the shore with his stick and said, "Strange to say, my

children, today an aged heathen who has preserved a natural goodness all his life will be baptised, die and be buried in this very spot.”

The old fellow — described as ‘Artbranan, chief of the cohort of Geona’ — duly arrived by boat an hour later, and given that Adomnán tells us that ‘two young men took him out of the boat and laid him at the feet of the blessed man’, it is clear that he had been fetched from his deathbed; fortunately for the saint, he did not die until shortly after the rite of baptism had been safely administered.

There are other such cases, as I have made clear. One torrid instance involves Findchan, ‘a priest and soldier of Christ’, and a bloodthirsty murderer called Aodh Dubh whom Findchan had brought over from Ireland. Findchan ‘was greatly attached to Aodh in a carnal way’, Adomnán tells us, and had him irregularly ordained priest — he invited a bishop to come and ordain him, the bishop consenting to lay his hand on Aodh’s head provided Findchan put his own hand on Aodh’s head underneath the bishop’s.

When Calum Cille heard about this he was furious. “That right hand which, against the laws of God and the Church, Findchan placed on the head of the son of perdition,” he prophesied, “will soon be covered with sores, and after great and excruciating pain will precede himself to the grave, and he will survive the burial of his hand for many years. And Aodh, thus irregularly ordained, will return as a dog to his vomit, and be a bloody murderer again, till eventually he is pierced in the neck with a spear then falls from a tree into the water and is drowned.”

Well, well. What happened according to Adomnán was that Findchan’s right hand festered from the effects of a blow and went before him into the ground, being buried in an island called Ommon (not identified), while he himself lived on for many years. Who administered this judicial-sounding blow that so shattered his hand, one wonders?

Aodh’s fate is interesting in a different way — a priest in name only, he went back to his old way of life; one day when standing at the prow of a boat he was treacherously wounded by a spear, fell into the loch and was drowned. As in other cases there is a ring of truth about this. Had Aodh died by divine intervention, or had the story been a fabrication, he would surely have been up a real tree in the cowardly fashion prophesied by the saint. The zealots had had to make do with second best, and the story could not be fabricated — Aodh’s death is recorded for all to see in the Annals of Ulster. “588, the death of Aodh Dubh, son of Suibhne, in a ship.”

Finally, two cases in which Calum Cille remains centre stage throughout. In the first he is in the fortress of the Pictish King, Brude, at Inverness. He demands that the King’s foster-son, a druid called Broichan, release a Gaelic female slave whom he has in captivity. Broichan refuses, and the saint gives him one more chance. “If you refuse to set this captive free you will die suddenly before I leave this province.”

Down by the Ness he picks up a pebble and blesses it. “With this white pebble God will cure many diseases among this heathen nation,” he tells his monks. And he goes on: “At this very moment an angel from heaven has been punishing Broichan, hitting him hard and breaking into pieces the glass cup he was drinking from. He has left him gasping for breath and half dead. Let’s wait here a short while, because the King has sent two messengers after us to ask us to help the dying Broichan, who is willing to set the girl free now that he has been punished so terribly.”

And so it happens. The messengers arrive at once, the girl is released, Broichan is cured by water into which the pebble has been dipped. The whole thing can be explained if we assume that Calum Cille’s hit-man, after beating up the dissolute and intoxicated druid, saw the two messengers being sent out, but got to the saint first because he had a prearranged rendezvous with him down by the river. As for the pebble cure, it is entirely psychological.

Calum Cille’s motives for pulling that one were entirely honourable, in fact the whole episode is like something out of a Harrison Ford movie. Adomnán is careful to tell us that his desire to free the woman had to do only with humanity, and in the end nobody is hurt. Our last story of prophecy is similar but more disturbing. This time the saint is in Ireland, sitting resting with his monks where the River Boyle enters Lough Key in what is now Co. Roscommon. A poet called Crónán comes by, they speak for a while, then the poet continues on his way. The monks turn to Calum Cille in surprise and say, “Why didn’t you ask Crónán to sing and play for us before he went away, according to the rules of his profession?”

The saint replies: “How could I ask the poor man to sing a cheerful song? He has just been murdered by his enemies.”

No sooner has he said this than a man cries out from the other side of the river, “That poet who left you in safety a few minutes ago has just been met and killed by his enemies!”

The saint’s foreknowledge, if not psychic, must be explained as complicity to commit murder. What could the motive be? Well, the poets of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland were always powerful proponents of traditional values. In this case, that meant heathenism. The role of the poets of Ireland was particularly controversial in Calum Cille’s day, and he intervened to save them from mass expulsion at the Convention of Drumcett in 575. I suppose he was afraid they would come en masse to Scotland. The price of his support was acceptance of the new faith, and I have no doubt that some refused to toe the line and suffered accordingly. If so, it was surely not typical of the way Christianity was brought to Ireland and Scotland, and the gentle Adomnán concludes the story by saying: “All that were present wondered very much, and looked at one another in amazement.”

This has been a deliberately cynical interpretation of some of Calum Cille’s prophecies. It is not, of course, the only interpretation open to us. In my next article I will take the spiritual route.

— WHFP 19.7.96