

Sermon for 30th June 2024, Year B, Proper 8 (St Serf Patronal Feast)

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

Sermon

Today we are of course celebrating the patron saint of this church building – St Serf – though his feast day is actually tomorrow, on the 1st of July. And 2024 is the 90th year since this building was consecrated, so this is a 90th birthday of sorts, which is why there will be cake a-plenty after the service!

I should perhaps point out that if you believe Wikipedia – and why wouldn't you – this church was actually consecrated on the 22nd of December in 1934, so strictly speaking it won't reach its anniversary for another six months. But I can't wait that long for cake which is why we're enjoying it today and not three days before Christmas!

Relying on Wikipedia once again, I've learned that the Episcopal Church in Shettleston was originally founded in 1899 by the Revd George Crane who was at that time the rector of another church called St John's Baillieston which you may have heard of. By 1914 the congregation was using Eastmuir School for worship services, until 1917 when a corrugated iron building was built to serve as a mission church. It's possible a corrugated iron building may have been freezing cold in winter! I think I'm hardy because I come from Yorkshire, but that takes it to a whole other level!

This present building was then constructed in the early 1930s before being consecrated, as we know, in 1934. The mission was transferred to the care of Christ Church in Bridgeton in 1941, and later transferred again to St Mary's cathedral in 1948. It returned as part of St John's in 1970, until in 1996, St Serf's Shettleston united with St John's Baillieston and St Kentigern's Dennistoun to

become the East End Team Ministry – the immediate forerunner to our current East End Episcopal Churches.

It's certainly been an extraordinary journey over many years, and many of you will have shared a significant part of it. But what of the saint – Saint Serf – for whom this church is dedicated?

According to legend, Serf – also known as Serban – was born around 500AD, the second son of Obeth, King of Canaan, and his wife Alphaia, daughter of a King of Arabia. As a small boy he was baptised in Alexandria in Egypt where he was given the name Servanus, because it was hoped he would serve God and do good works. While in Alexandria he became a monk before being ordained as a priest. He then returned to Canaan where the people chose him to be their bishop. He travelled to Jerusalem, Egypt and Constantinople before visiting Rome, where it's said his holiness was so clear that he was apparently elected Pope and served there for seven years.

At some point he began to travel north through the alps accompanied by many clerics and followers. We've no record of why he made this journey, but he didn't stop heading north until he reached Scotland and the river Forth. Seeing the island of Inch Keith in the Firth of Forth he secured passage on a boat and landed on the island where he spent time with the abbot Adamnan.

He was clearly eager for a more solitary life as he apparently begged the abbot to tell him how he might rid himself of his many companions. The abbot told him to take them to the Ochil hills. So, he headed north again with a hundred followers in tow, and founded his first church at Culross.

From there he began to travel around and visited Tillicoultry where his first miracle took place. A local woman's sons had suddenly died and legend states that St Serf raised them both from the dead.

During his time in Tillicoultry, St Serf was famously accompanied by a pet ram or goat, but at some point, the animal was stolen by a local man who cut it up and ate it. Eventually the man was arrested on suspicion of theft but when he swore to St Serf that he hadn't taken the animal, a suspicious bleating was heard from his stomach, and so, having been found out, he begged St Serf for mercy, which the saint of course granted.

St Serf was also said to have casually slain a dragon in Dunning in Perthshire – as you do – and was visited by the devil himself while at a cave near Kirkcaldy in Fife. Fortunately, he overcame the temptations put before him and the cave is still regarded as a sacred place to this day.

St Serf continued his journeys in Scotland and ended up at Loch Leven where he fell in love with the beauty and serenity of its small island which is now known as St Serf's Inch in his honour.

St Serf stayed on the island in solitude in a primitively built house for seven years, spending his time in prayer and watching the seasons change around him.

Eventually he returned to the church in Culross where he lived out the rest of his life, dying around 583AD and being buried there.

So, what is St Serf's connection to Glasgow and the reason for this church's dedication to him? Well, of course, as you all know, it is because St Serf was believed to have been the foster father to St Kentigern – otherwise known as St Mungo – Glasgow's founder and patron saint.

Mungo's mother Tenue was believed to have been raped and made pregnant by the pagan prince Owain mab Urien, or they may possibly have been lovers who could not be together because Owain was married, or possibly Tenue rejected him because she had become a Christian and he was a pagan. Whatever the story, her father King Lleuddun sentenced her to death, and she was hurled from the cliffs of Traprain Law. Miraculously she survived but when discovered alive

at the foot of the cliffs she was then set adrift in a coracle, which carried her across the Firth of Forth to Culross, where St Serf gave her shelter and refuge.

When she gave birth to her son, Kentigern, it was Serf who nicknamed him Mungo, meaning, 'very dear one', and he effectively became Mungo's foster father. It's this connection which spreads the legend of St Serf eastwards into Glasgow and why we are honouring his patronage of this place today.

It must be admitted that many of the tales of St Serf owe more to legend than fact, and even the dates for his birth and death are assumptions, based on the least flimsy thing we think we know about him, which was that he was in charge of the religious community at Culross in 528. This would still have made St Serf very young indeed if he were born in 500AD and indeed had already spent seven years as Pope!

There are even legends that St Serf met Adomnan, Abbot of Iona, when Adomnan first arrived in Scotland, but Adomnan wasn't born until 628AD, some 40 years after St Serf supposedly died, and 100 years after he was known to be at Culross. But that's legends for you; time is all over the place.

So, there you have it! What an amazing saint to be named for! A middle eastern man from Canaan who becomes a priest in Alexandria, bishop in Canaan, Pope in Rome, monk and community priest in Culross, hermit on Loch Leven, raiser of the dead, dragonslayer, giver of sanctuary to a rape victim, and foster father to St Kentigern, the patron saint of Glasgow and one of our own three episcopal congregations in the East End.

St Serf, pray for us. Amen.

