

## St David - by Dave Griffiths 1.3.22

March 1st is St. David's Day and has been celebrated as the National Day of Wales since his canonization by Pope Callixtus II in 1120. Although his titular Cathedral is located at one of the oldest holy sites in Britain, most contemporary St. David's Day celebrations only date back to the 18th Century. Schools are the most common place to find those celebratory traditions being upheld today, which typically begin with a religious service in the morning followed by the acclaimed Eisteddfod format of performing traditional Welsh dances, folk songs, and poetry recitals followed by a rousing choral competition. Children dress in traditional costumes with girls wearing a petticoat and overcoat made of Welsh flannel, and a tall, stovepipe hat worn over a frilled bonnet, and boys wearing white shirts, Welsh flannel waistcoats, black trousers, long wool socks and black shoes.

Some Welsh people may choose to celebrate St. David's Day by eating food like Bara Brith (fruited bread) and Teisen Bach (Welsh Cakes), although many more will wear a leek or a daffodil—which are both Welsh national symbols—on their clothing. The leek is reported to be associated with David because he was said to have advised soldiers to wear leeks in their hats when attempting to repel the invading Saxons so they could more easily distinguish friends from foes. Even more ancient than the adorning of large vegetables however is the Welsh flag, Y Ddraig Goch (the Red Dragon), which has its origins in Roman Britain and is notably flown on a lot more buildings than usual on St. David's Day.

But what about St. David himself? The earliest recorded 'life' we have for him was written around 1095, which was over 500 years after his death, by a man called Rhygyfarch whose father was the Bishop of St. David's at the time. Like other 'histories' of that era, Rhygyfarch's work was a typical mixture of legend and fact. In the beginning, 30 years prior to David's birth, an angel was purported to have informed St. Patrick of his forthcoming life and works. When David eventually arrived, it was from a line of Welsh royalty, with his father being Sandde, a Prince of Powys, and his mother St. Non, the daughter of a chieftain of Mynyw (or Menevia as it became known in Latin). St. Non gave birth to David on the rocks overlooking the sea of the Pembrokeshire coast during a fierce storm, during which lightning struck one of the stones, splitting it in two. Such was the intensity of her labour that Non left her finger-marks on the rocks from grasping them so hard. The site where this was said to have occurred is still marked by the ruins of a tiny ancient chapel close to a holy well and a more recent 18th century chapel named Capel Non in honour of David's mother.

A little later, David was baptised by St. Elvis of Munster and a blind man was said to have been cured by the water used for his baptism. This person may or may not have been St. Paulinus, David's instructor at the monastery of Hen Fynyw, who had been blind until David miraculously restored his sight. Seeing the calibre of his student, Paulinus sent David on an evangelisation mission around Britain to convert the pagan Celtic tribes. In his journeys, he established 12 monasteries, including the original one at Glastonbury, and when he returned to Mynyw, at the site where St. David's Cathedral now stands, he became first Abbot and then Bishop before being made Archbishop of Wales in the year 550.

Life at David's monasteries was notoriously austere and was based on the rule of the Eastern Fathers. His monks worked hard, cultivating the land by pulling the plough by hand as the use of beasts of burden was seen as too luxurious. They lived under a strict rule of silence, only being allowed to speak at all if in prayer or if there was an emergency, and their diet consisted of bread, herbs, vegetables, and water. This diet led to David becoming known as Aquaticus in Latin or Dewi Ddyfrwr (the water drinker) in Welsh. Also consistent with his association with water, from his stormy, coastal birth, through to his watery nickname, was one his own self-imposed penances which saw him standing up to his neck in a lake of cold water while reciting Scripture. It was also noted that, at key moments of his life, sudden springs of water would appear where he passed.

Such was the unpopularity of his austere rule that some of his monks plotted to poison him. Luckily, he received a tip off from the Irish monk St. Scuthyn; so, at just the right moment, David blessed the poisoned bread he was about to eat and came to no harm. The most famous of his miracles however was that which took place while he was preaching to a large crowd in Llanddewi Brefi. When people at the back complained that they couldn't hear him, the ground beneath his feet rose to form a hill. Then a white dove came down from the sky and landed on him. It's for this reason that St. David is often depicted with a dove on his shoulder, which symbolises the Holy Spirit being with him and his gift of eloquent speech.

St. David died on 1 March, 589 and was said to be over 100 years old at the time of his death. He was buried at the site of St David's Cathedral, where his shrine was a popular place of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages. After his death, his influence spread first through Britain and then by sea to Brittany and beyond. By the time of his canonisation in the 12th Century, such was his repute as a man of great holiness that the Pope decreed that two pilgrimages to St. David's equalled one to Rome while three were worth one to Jerusalem.

His last words to his followers came from a sermon he gave them on the previous Sunday: 'Be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things that you have heard and seen me do.' In Welsh, the phrase 'Gwnewch y pethau bychain mewn bywyd' – 'Do the little things in life' –

is still in contemporary use, and is one that former Archbishop of Canterbury and fellow Welshman Rowan Williams believes still resonates with people because:

"It reminds us that the primary things for us are the relationships around us, the need to work at what's under our hands, what's within our reach. We can transform our domestic, our family relationships, our national life to some extent, if we do that with focus and concentration in the presence of God."