

Illtud

Taken from the text of two lectures given 6th May 2000 by
Reverend Canon Dr Patrick Thomas

Preface by Vivian Kelly.

Preface

During the year 2000, St Illtud's church in Llantwit Major has been celebrating 1500 years of unbroken Christian worship since St Illtud founded his hermitage, church, school, monastery and mission centre on the banks of the Odney Brook. As a Celtic, Catholic and Anglican church, St Illtud's has been the centre of the community and the 1500th anniversary has been celebrated in music, community events, special services and education.

The school established by St Illtud attracted pupils from all over the country. It has been described as a fifth century university and Britain's oldest centre of learning and it is in this tradition that the Revd. Canon Dr. Patrick Thomas was invited to speak on St Illtud in a day school on 6th May, 2000.

We are grateful to Dr Thomas for allowing us to publish his lectures and bring them to a wider audience.

Vivian Kelly

The Historical Illtud

It is a joy and a privilege to have the opportunity of visiting one of the great centres of early Welsh Christianity for the first time. I have been asked to give two lectures on a man who is, by any standards, one of the most significant figures in the religious history of our land.

In my first talk I shall concentrate on what might be described as 'the historical St Illtud': the figure who emerges from the earliest and most reliable evidence. I shall attempt to put him in his religious and cultural context and assess some of the possible influences on him. My second address will focus on 'the legendary St Illtud' outlined in the medieval lives of the saint. I will conclude it by looking at the possible significance which both Illtuds, historical and legendary, might have for Christians in twenty first century Wales;

In the early seventh century a Breton monk was asked by a bishop named Tigernomalus to write the life of St Samson, a major figure in the church in South Wales, Cornwall and Gaul in the sixth century. The author, who seems by his own account to have been getting on in years, took his commission very seriously. He visited both Cornwall and Wales to find out about his subject, who had died some sixty years before.

In a monastery which Samson had founded in Cornwall the author met an old man who was the nephew of Samson's cousin Henoc. Henoc, who was a contemporary of Samson, had written an account of some of his cousin's exploits. The author of the 'Life of St Samson' seems to have had access to this during his visit to the old man.

This complicated but revealing background is outlined in the author's prologue to his work. It has led Professor Charles Thomas to conclude that, "It is neither a case of blind conviction nor of wishful thinking, but of a reasoned balancing of probabilities, to accept that the narrative core of the Life is a genuine seventh-century writing, one that described genuine happenings of the previous century." Thomas concedes that the author also included 'an element of imagination - what he thought might have happened or should have taken place- alongside his representation of fact - what he had been told really happened.' Nevertheless the 'Life of St Samson' does give us what is probably our most reliable window into the religious life of the 'age of saints' in Wales. And it has a particular importance for anyone interested in the historical St Illtud, because Samson was one of Illtud's pupils.

According to Samson's biographer the saint was only a few years old when his parents brought him to 'the school of the famous master of the Britons, Illtud by name.' He goes on to inform us that 'this Illtud was a disciple of St Germanus, and St Germanus himself had ordained him priest in his youth'. The author no doubt acquired this information when he himself visited Llantwit Major, because he remarks proudly "In (Illtud's) splendid monastery I have been." Thomas Taylor, in his translation of Samson's

Life notes that there are some chronological problems connected with the link between Illtud and Germanus. Germanus of Auxerre probably died in Ravenna in 448 - though some scholars suggest that he died three years before and E.A. Thompson has put the date back as far as 437. Taylor suggests that Illtud would therefore have been too young to be ordained by Germanus. In their 'Lives of The British Saints' Baring Gould and Fisher tried to get round the difficulty by suggesting that the Germanus in question was not in fact the famous bishop from Gaul. Their preferred candidate was an Irishman named MoGorman who was Bishop of the Isle of Man and died in 474. This theory has been dismissed by Bartrum and others as having nothing to support it apart from the Irish bishop's name and date.

Whether or not Illtud actually was a pupil of Germanus - which is perhaps chronologically possible - and whether or not he was actually ordained by him, there seems little doubt that both Illtud and his successors at Llantwit Major wished to be associated with the great bishop of Auxerre. It is interesting that there is a tradition that St Patrick was also taught and ordained by Germanus, though this has tended to be rejected by more recent scholars. Germanus was someone with whom British and Irish Christians wanted to establish a link. There were two reasons for this.

Germanus' Life was written around the year 480 by Constantius of Lyon. It portrays its subject as a well-born native of Auxerre in Gaul who went to Rome to study law, married and returned to Gaul as a provincial administrator. He was forcibly ordained by Amator, bishop of Auxerre. When Amator died Germanus was elected to succeed him in 418. The British church at this time was deeply divided by the Pelagian heresy, which was being championed by a theologian named Agricola. The orthodox section of the church sent messengers to Gaul asking for help. Germanus and his fellow-bishop Lupus were despatched to Britain in 429 to confute the heresy.

Their mission (according to both Constantius and the contemporary chronicler Prosper of Aquitaine) was highly successful. They preached in many churches, convincing both clergy and laity that the Pelagians were wrong. Germanus visited the tomb of St Alban, the British proto-martyr, at Verulamium. He is also credited with restoring the sight of the blind daughter of a Romano-British tribune.

Heresy wasn't the only problem facing the Britons at the time. The Roman legions had long departed withdrawing their shield of protection. As a result the Britons were having to fight off hostile incursions from the north and east. This led to the most famous incident of Germanus' visit. A British army was setting out to repel the Saxon and Pictish invaders. The two bishops decided to accompany it, converting many of the British soldiers who were not already Christians. Germanus took command of some of the British troops and set up an ambush in a valley. When the invaders appeared he and his men broke cover and leapt out shouting 'Hallelujah!' The Saxons and Picts were so shocked by this that they turned tail and ran.

There have been varying views of the historical accuracy of this story. Bishop Patrick Hanson, for example, is highly sceptical about its authenticity. He writes that “the likelihood of a soldier being allowed to turn bishop in the late Roman Empire was very small. The likelihood of a bishop turning soldier was even smaller... the days when bishops would lead British armies had not yet dawned in the fifth century.” E.A. Thompson in his study of ‘Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain’ takes a more positive view. He remarks that, “the raid of 429 which Germanus helped to defeat may have been carried out by no more than a couple of hundred barbarians and, if indeed that was the case it would follow that the Britons ... will not have been numbered in thousands.” This was a small-scale action, and R.H. Hodgkin was probably right to call it a 'skirmish'.

I would tend to side with Thompson and Hodgkin. Small incidents can grow in the telling. One windy night a small bit of corrugated iron was once blown off the roof of the shed of one of my parishioners' houses in Abergorlech. By the time that the story reached me, five miles up the valley, I was solemnly informed that the entire roof of the poor man's bungalow had been swept away by a freak hurricane. A confrontation between a small party of British soldiers and a group of invading Saxons or Picts could easily be transformed into a ‘famous victory’, as the story was told around the campfire... particularly if one of those who had been involved was a visiting bishop from Gaul.

Whatever its degree of historicity, however, the story of the 'Hallelujah' victory helped to establish Germanus in the British mind as a **hero** who had helped them during a time of darkness and trouble. The connection between the battle and Easter no doubt meant that the incident was one on which preachers would draw as an edifying illustration of the power contained in the Easter gospel. Germanus represented a link with the rapidly receding Romano-British past. His refutation of the Pelagian heretics also established him as a representative figure standing for the beliefs and values of orthodox Christianity. Even if Illtud did not actually sit at his feet as a pupil or receive ordination at his hands he may have wished that he had done so - and there is a distinct possibility that, if he wasn't taught and ordained by Germanus himself Illtud might well have been taught and ordained by one of Germanus' pupils.

The reference to Germanus links Illtud's school with the tradition of Romano-British Christianity. The ‘Life of St Samson’ goes on to describe the range of Illtud's intellectual gifts. The author tells us that “Illtud was of all the Britons the most accomplished in all the Scriptures, namely of the Old and New Testaments, and in those of philosophy of every kind, of geometry namely, and of rhetoric, grammar and arithmetic, and of all the theories of philosophy. And by birth he was a most wise magician, having knowledge of the future.”

This picture is quite fascinating as an outline of the type of education which Illtud's pupils, who included not only Samson but also Gildas and Paul Aurelian, might have

received. Illtud is depicted as a scholar who is well-versed in the Bible. This seems to have been characteristic of fifth century British Christianity. Two documents written by St Patrick during the first half of the century survive: his autobiographical Confessio and his angry letter of rebuke to the brutal (but nominally Christian) Strathclyde chieftain Coroticus or Ceredig. Thomas O'Loughlin has recently compiled an index of all the Biblical references in these two comparatively brief works. It includes quotations from 28 Old Testament books, 5 books from the Apocrypha and 24 New Testament books. The total number of citations is 533, which shows just how saturated Patrick's writing is in the language of Scripture. The two books from which Patrick quotes most frequently are (not unexpectedly) The Psalms (52 references) and (perhaps more surprisingly) St Paul's Letter to the Romans (56 references).

The only significant British/Welsh Christian text to survive from the sixth century is Gildas' 'Ruin of Britain' which, it is generally agreed, was composed around the year 540. Gildas' Breton biographer tells us that his subject was one of Illtud's pupils. Gildas himself, while lambasting an errant tyrant, reminds him that "you have had as your teacher the refined master of almost all Britain" - a remark that is generally taken as referring to Illtud. Unlike the object of his scorn, Gildas had clearly learned much from his 'refined master'. His work is dotted with Biblical references, just as Patrick's had been. Gildas' many quotations show an easy familiarity with both Testaments and a readiness to cite Scriptural texts to underpin his arguments. The 'Ruin of Britain', like the remark by Samson's biographer, is evidence of the central importance of the Bible in Illtud's school at Llantwit Major.

However the 'Life of Samson' also suggests that other elements had their place in the education which was provided here. Philosophy and/or science, geometry, rhetoric, grammar and arithmetic are mentioned. **The Roman Empire may have crumbled and the Britons may have been being driven westward by their enemies and turned into the Welsh, but in the school presided over by Illtud the intellectual heritage of Romano-British society survived and was valued and cherished. Llantwit Major was a place of learning in a sea of barbarism, a surviving outpost of a civilization which many elsewhere on the British mainland must have assumed had vanished forever.**

And yet alongside the references to Scriptural learning and classical accomplishments there is something else. Illtud was not only attuned to the Christian Bible and the intellectual heritage of the Roman Empire, he was also rooted in the traditional culture of his own people. Samson's biographer remarks of 'the famous master of the Britons' that **"by birth he was a most wise magician, having knowledge of the future."** Suddenly we move from the world of Biblical reflection and classical learning, into a tribal setting, where a hereditary gift of insight and divination is passed down from generation to generation.

Prophecy was to play an extremely important role in Welsh culture. Its particular practitioners were poets. An early surviving example is 'Armes Prydein', a prophetic

poem written by a South Welsh monk around the year 930. The author of 'Armes Prydein' predicts an overwhelming victory in which the Welsh would sweep through the territory conquered by the English, marching all the way to Aber Santwic, Sandwich, in Kent. The English would then have to get in their boats and sail home to Germany, and Britain would be British (that is Welsh) once more. It's heady stuff and no doubt the mead-swilling war lords to whom it was sung got hugely over-excited when they heard it. Prophecy became a powerful political weapon in Wales throughout the Middle Ages until the day in 1485 when Henry Tudor, Mab Darogan ('The Son of Prophecy'), ascended the throne, having been assisted on his way there by the prophetic verses of poets like Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn.

The reference to Illtud's hereditary prophetic powers suggests that he was a man well versed in traditional Welsh culture. It also suggests that he may have been the sort of person whom tribal rulers would have regarded with respect and possibly even a degree of fear. Patrick's newly-baptized Irish converts fell victim to a nominally Christian Brythonic chieftain from Strathclyde named Ceredig. He slaughtered the men folk without batting an eyelid and kidnapped the women and children to sell off as slaves. South Wales had its own Ceredigs. They were unlikely to be moved by a well-chosen scriptural text or a display of geometrical or rhetorical dexterity. However some words of prophecy from a 'most wise magician' would soon have had them shaking in their shoes. The description in the 'Life of Samson' of the range of Illtud's intellectual gifts probably also reflects the breadth of the curriculum in his school here at Llantwit Major. As far as the materials used in the school go, Professor Charles Thomas has noted that the sixth century Springmount tablets, found preserved in a bog near Ballymena in County Antrim, are probably of the same type as those on which Illtud's pupils would have copied down their lessons and exercises in the late fifth century. The wooden tablets are roughly 3 by 8 ½ inches and have edges which are pierced so that they can be bound together. One face of each tablet is recessed and filled with wax, so that the tablets can be erased and re-used.

The pattern of education at Illtud's school emerges quite clearly from the 'Life of St Samson' (the subject of the story being, not surprisingly, presented as a star pupil who quickly progressed far beyond his fellow pupils). The initial stage was to learn 'the twenty letters (of the alphabet) and all the signs' - a task which young Samson apparently managed on his very first day at the school. Then the way that the letters formed words had to be mastered. Again Samson had no difficulty with this. We are told that: "within seven days he was able, by God's revealing, to understand the meanings of these letters in the co-ordination of words; for in reading indeed, so exact was his mind that, as far as the human reason is capable of it, he quite completely mastered the psalms". From this we can gather that the psalter provided the basic textbook for those learning to read at Illtud's monastic school. The Springmount Tablets, which I mentioned a moment ago, would seem to confirm this. Scratched onto their wax surface are psalms 30 to 32 in Latin - somebody's writing and reading lesson from a class held a millennium and a half ago.

From this beginning the pupils would go on both to develop the devotional side of their life and to examine the meaning of the Scriptures. Samson threw himself into both activities with great fervour. At the age of fifteen he fasted strictly and took part in the long prayer vigils of the older monks, sometimes even trying 'to maintain the appointed posture' for two whole days. This 'appointed posture' was presumably to stand with both arms stretched out as though he was being crucified. Illtud, as a wise and humane spiritual director, swiftly put an end to this outburst of adolescent over-enthusiasm, telling Samson that, "It is not meet, little son, that the tender body of a youth, up till now in the flowering stage, should be broken by too many and ill-regulated fasts."

When it came to interpreting the Scriptures, it appears that Samson was not merely content to accept what Illtud told him, but wanted to look deeper. At one point, his biographer tells us, both pupil and master got completely bogged down in some abstruse and difficult question. Even though they searched diligently through both the Old Testament and the New they couldn't find a satisfactory answer. Samson decided to fast and pray until the solution was made clear to him. On the third night of his vigil he heard a voice which told him that he would be given the answer to that particular problem, and that whatever else he asked for through prayer and fasting he would also receive if it was right for him. The voice addressed the earnest young monk as 'elect of God', presumably to stop him from drifting into Pelagianism - and indeed the story itself hints that the problematic question may have had something to do with that tempting heresy. The author of the Life informs us that Samson gently reported back to Illtud everything that he had seen and heard.

Religious communities have glorious ideals, but they are composed of human beings with all the usual vices and failings. Envy, jealousy and other types of awfulness seem to have been as evident in Illtud's monastery as in any other institution where a lot of men (or women for that matter) are thrown together. The 'Life of Samson' tells us that the position of abbot of Llantwit Major was hereditary. Illtud had a nephew who was a priest of the community and was therefore likely to succeed him. The nephew's brother was a lay member of the monastery. These two developed an intense dislike of Samson, suspecting that Illtud might decide to set aside his relative and appoint his star pupil to be his successor. They did everything they could to find a way of blackening Samson's character, but his behaviour was so exemplary that they couldn't pin a scrap of scandal on him.

Then they had a stroke of luck. The lay brother became cellarer of the monastery, one of the jobs to which members of the community were appointed by rotation. The cellarer's task was to prepare the various drinks that were given to the monks. If you wanted to poison one of your fellow monks it was a post which gave you every opportunity. This was especially true in Illtud's community, because one of its customs was that after the early morning prayers every day each monk should be given a special health drink, made from an infusion of herbs. Prompted by the jealous nephew, the

cellarer laced Samson's drink with poison, trying the concoction out on the monastery cat, which immediately jumped up in the air and then fell down dead - much to the delight of the would be poisoner.

But, Samson's biographer tells us, while the saint was at prayer the Holy Spirit had revealed to him what was going on. Trusting in God's protection Samson came into the refectory. He himself was the steward at the time, and one of his duties was to bless the brothers' drinks, making the sign of the cross over them. When he reached his own bowl he blessed it like the others and drained it straight down. And nothing happened. Indeed later that day, at breakfast, he thanked the cellarer for preparing him such a delightful drink, and prayed that God would heal him of any sickness that he was suffering from.

The cellarer immediately felt sorry for what he had done. His brother, the would-be abbot, however, felt no such remorse. The next Sunday Samson was the celebrant at the Eucharist. The jealous priest came up to receive communion from him – and having received the bread, suddenly went completely berserk, shivering, belching, running about, rolling on the ground, ripping his clothes off, and loudly denouncing his fellow monks as idle wasters. Fortunately 'a very wise old monk' (either Illtud or another of the senior brethren) took control and ordered two large lay brothers to grab the man, tie him up and take him out. At which the ambitious priest fell to the ground and confessed what he had done. Samson forgave him and cured him - but Illtud's nephew never became abbot of Llantwit Major.

It's a good story and historians have seized on some of its detail - especially the herbal health drink- as giving some unexpected insights into the pattern of life in Illtud's monastery. The story has no doubt been wildly embellished by Samson's biographer but there is probably a kernel of fact at its heart. Tensions, jealousies and fallings-out are all inevitable (if regrettable) aspects of life in any Christian community, however exalted its ideals. How those tensions are eased and resolved, how those at odds with one another are reconciled and how any wounds and bruises are healed, are the true tests of the community's integrity.

In the end Samson decided that Llantwit Major was not sufficiently austere. We are told that he meditated deeply on the way in which 'that monastery was regarded, through all the land as turbulent and indeed wasteful.' He decided that he would leave the lush pastures of Glamorgan for the rather more demanding island monasticism of Caldey off the coast of Pembrokeshire. Naturally he was worried about how his old teacher would react to this apparent desertion. Illtud however was forewarned in a dream and gave the departing monk his blessing. Incidentally Caldey, also fell rather short of Samson's ideals, Piro or Pyr the abbot there, went out for a stroll one dark night when he was very drunk and fell down a well and broke his neck. Samson took over as abbot and tightened things up a bit, but in the end his ascetic inclinations proved too strong for him and he returned to the mainland to become a hermit in a cave.

Perhaps the most fascinating reference to Illtud in the 'Life of St Samson' is a digression in which the author gives an account of Illtud's death, based on what had been told him when he visited the community at Llantwit Major. In his study of Illtud the Cornish scholar Canon G.H. Doble commented that this passage "is much more original and convincing than any of the other stories about the saint." He went to say that, "It bears every mark of antiquity and may be a genuine glimpse into the Age of Saints in Wales. We seem to see the figure of a real saint and prophet, and to feel the veneration inspired by his personal holiness in the monastery that he had founded, and remembered long after his death."

Canon Doble was a great and learned man and I personally have no difficulty in agreeing with his assessment of the section of the 'Life of St Samson' that describes Illtud's death. Certainly nothing else has survived that can bring us so close to the founder of Llantwit Major. I therefore hope that you'll forgive me if I end this lecture on the historical St Illtud by quoting Canon Doble's translation of the account of Illtud's final hours:

"...when (Illtud) was fallen sick and was about to die, he sent for two other abbots to come and visit him, of whom one was called Iscanus and the other Atoclius. And when he saw them, he saluted each in his accustomed way, and said to them: "I rejoice, dearest brethren, that you have come, because the time is at hand that I should depart and fall asleep in Christ, and you shall duly honour me (at my obsequies). But be of good cheer, for your own departure shall in each case swiftly follow mine, though not with equal happiness for you both. I indeed shall be received tonight by the hands of angels, about midnight, in the presence of you all, and my brother Iscanus shall see my soul carried away under the appearance of an eagle having twogolden wings, and he shall also see, under the appearance of another eagle, but flying heavily with a pair of leaden wings, the soul of that other brother (Atoclius). And after forty days brother Iscanus shall himself also happily come to Christ, as he saw me come in the vision I have described. But thou, brother Atoclius, hast greatly loved the things of this world, and so, though thou shalt appear in the likeness of a pure and winged creature, thy wings shall not have the pureness of gold. Thou art, indeed, pure and hast preserved thine innocence from thy youth until thisday, but thou art heavy in thy wings under the leaden weight of avarice. May God Almighty deign to pluck those wings from thee."

He continued speaking after this fashion throughout that day and the night following. At about midnight, as he had said, after bidding farewell to the brethren, he departed happily from the flesh, amid the chants of hymns and the customary rites, and the blessed Iscanus saw his soul in a vision, exactly as he had said, and he likewise saw the soul of the other brother, as the old man had foretold, and with difficulty was it, through his efforts, redeemed, by the prayers of saints and many masses sung, but finally Iscanus saw it purified and absolved from the worst of its offences. He told all

these things (which he alone saw) to the brethren, and they all marvelled and held him in great honour, and he himself came happily to Christ on the day predicted, according as the old man had promised.”

And so we say farewell to the historical St Illtud. I hope that this first lecture has given you at least some idea of the sort of person that he probably was- certainly it is always difficult when you're dealing with fifth and sixth century Welsh Christianity. In the next chapter I'll be talking about the unhistorical St Illtud – the sort of person that he almost certainly wasn't - but the sort of person that his medieval biographer would have liked him to be!

The Unhistorical St Illtud

My first lecture was based largely on material from the 'Life of St Samson', which you will remember was produced in the early seventh century by a Breton monk who combined a fairly vivid imagination with a commendable enthusiasm for historical research. This second talk will be based largely, though not exclusively, on the writings of the twelfth century biographer of St Illtud. He was a Norman and was **one of the clerics of the collegiate church of Llantwit Major which had replaced Illtud's ancient monastery** after the Norman conquest of Glamorgan.

If most people in Wales were asked to name the most influential Welsh writer of all time those who were Welsh-speaking would probably mention Dafydd ap Gwilym or Bishop William Morgan and those who were not Welsh-speaking might well say Dylan Thomas. In my opinion they would all be wrong. The one Welsh writer who has had a major and quite remarkable influence on the culture not just of Wales and England but of most of Europe lived in the twelfth century. His name was Geoffrey of Monmouth, at least one of his parents may have been of Breton origin and he wrote in Latin. His most famous book was 'The History of the Kings of Britain', starting from the occupation of the Island of Albion by the Trojan Brutus and ending with the death of King Cadwallader and the crowning of the Saxon Adelstan, and taking in such figures as King Leir, Vortigern, Merlin and Arthur along the way.

Geoffrey drew some of his material from old chronicles, usually treated in a fairly cavalier fashion, but his work is chiefly marked by an exuberant and extravagant imagination. Illtud's Norman biographer was a contemporary of Geoffrey's and his life of the saint was written in the same period as 'The History of the Kings of Britain'. There is not enough evidence to be certain whether or not the Llantwit Major author knew Geoffrey's work, but the two writers came from a similar milieu in which a desire to establish reliable facts was not the primary concern of the historian or the writer of saints' lives. When examining hagiographies - saints' lives written by authors of this kind - the important question to ask is why a particular story is being told and what the author's motive is in telling it.

To illustrate this it's worth turning to a life of Illtud's most famous neighbour and contemporary, which also contains an extremely important reference to Llantwit Major's saint. Around the year 1090, several decades before Geoffrey's book and the 'Life of Saint Illtud' were written, Lifris, Archdeacon of Glamorgan, wrote a biography of St Cadog of Llancarfan, the founder of the monastic school which had traditionally been Llantwit Major's rival. Lifris' work contains a dramatic description of Illtud's conversion.

He tells us that one day St Cadog was sitting in his chair teaching the people when he was rudely interrupted by a gang of fifty warriors from the army of a local chieftain called Pawl of Penychen. The soldiers, who had been out hunting with hawks, demanded food from the saint. Cadog handed over twenty loaves, a barrel of beer and a fat sow, and the soldiers went away from Llancarfan to a field where they butchered the pigs and prepared a meal. The captain of the soldiers, Lifris says, was named Illtud. He hadn't been with them when they raided Cadog's monastery, and they didn't start eating until he rode up to join them.

But before Illtud even had time to dismount from his horse, the ground suddenly opened up beneath the fifty warriors and they vanished into a deep abyss, Illtud was unscathed - as were the food and beer, which Cadog later arranged to be given to the poor. Shocked by the unexpected earthquake, Illtud immediately rode over to Cadog's monastery, told the holy man what had happened, and asked him to accept him as one of his monks. Cadog duly did so and Lifris emphasises the way in which Illtud, who had been a successful soldier with many victories to his credit, now committed himself to a far superior calling.

There is no reason to believe that this dramatic story has any particular historical basis. Lifris did, however, have two good reasons for telling it. The imaginative Archdeacon was also Master of St Cadog's foundation at Llancarfan. There couldn't be a better way of asserting Llancarfan's superiority over Llantwit Major, its ancient rival, than by telling a story which made Illtud a convert and pupil of Cadog. At the time that Lifris was writing the Normans had just swept into South Wales. The new rulers had as their leaders warrior barons like the famous Robert Fitzhamon, who had become Lord of Glamorgan. By making Illtud a soldier who had experienced a conversion and become a monk, Lifris was reminding the new ruling class that there was a higher calling than that of being a soldier. He was also attempting to assert the primacy of the church over the secular power. The incident of the earthquake may well have been intended to deter any greedy Norman soldiers who might have fancied despoiling Llancarfan.

There was an interesting spin-off from that particular story. In both poetic and popular tradition Illtud was transformed into Illtud Farchog, 'Illtud the Knight' - a soldier saint. This made him an appealing figure both to Norman barons and their retinues and the warlike Welsh - something which Lifris may not have originally intended. Thus the sixteenth century Llantwit Major poet Llywelyn ap Rhisiart, otherwise known as Lewys Morgannwg, would praise the young Illtud's chain-mail-coated military prowess and describe him as:-

'Milwr Duw yn malu'r durarchog

mawr wrthiog Arthur'

'God's soldier shattering steel,
Arthur's great virtuous knight'

- we'll come to the attempt to connect Illtud with King Arthur in a moment.

The fifteenth century North Welsh bard Tudur Penllyn similarly saw Illtud as a mounted warrior. If his patron would only give him a horse, Tudur says, he would respond with an appropriate offering to the knightly saint:

'Llun march i Illtud Farchog,
O gwyr a rown myn y grog!

'I would give a wax image of a horse
to Illtud the Knight, by the Cross!'

When the great scholar Edward Lhuyd was collecting information about Welsh parishes in the 1690s he noted that the people of Llanelltud, sometimes referred to as Llanilltud, near Dolgellau knew nothing about their patron saint except that he was 'Elldyd Farchog' - Illtud the Knight. By 1991 the emphasis had changed. In the opening chapter of a book entitled *Heddychiaeth Gristnogol yng Nghymru* (Christian Pacifism in Wales) the former Plaid Cymru leader Gwynfor Evans stressed that Illtud Farchog had turned his back on soldiering after his conversion, and put him alongside the early Christian ex-soldiers Martin of Tours and Vitricius as a model for pacifists.

Lifris' picture of Illtud the soldier was well established by the time that the anonymous cleric of Llantwit Major began to compose his biography of the saint. But, as I mentioned earlier, this later work was composed at a time when the King Arthur whom Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing about had taken hold of the South Welsh imagination. It is thus hardly surprising that Illtud should suddenly be described as King Arthur's cousin, which would immediately boost his status among Arthurian romantics. The medieval Illtud is also now a married man, with a loving wife named Trynihid. The Llantwit cleric describes the raid on Cadog's monastery, the earthquake that swallowed the soldiers and Illtud's conversion very much as Lifris had done - though there is a not unexpected shift of emphasis. Instead of becoming one of Cadog's disciples, Illtud gives up his post as head of the military retinue of Poulentus, king of Glamorgan, dons clerical dress and goes off with his wife and servants to spend the night by a river called Nadawan.

And then the Llantwit author introduces one of the central themes of his version of Illtud's life: a slant to the story which, I would imagine most modern readers find repellent in the extreme. Trynihid, Illtud's wife, is a good, faithful and virtuous woman. She is quite content to give up the comfortable lifestyle of Pouventus' court and to follow her husband to a rough riverside shelter made out of reeds. But on their first night there Illtud has a dream. In it an angel appears and tells him that from now on he should devote himself to pious study and prayer. If he is to do that he must turn his back on carnal love. His wife may be beautiful, but chastity is better and will lead him to eternal life. The angel orders Illtud to reject his wife and gives him directions to a suitable spot in the valley of Hodnant where he can settle as a hermit.

Illtud wakes up and tells his wife to go and check the horses immediately, He doesn't allow her time either to dress or to brush her tresses. She has to go out into the sunlight stark naked with her hair all over the place. When she comes back Illtud looks at her and decides that he doesn't fancy her any more. His vow to abandon her is couched in four unpleasant hexameters which encapsulate his loathing and rejection of the woman whom he had once loved.

Poor Trynihid, having seen to the horses, quite naturally wants to go back to bed. Illtud however tells her that she is now like snake's poison to him and that he never wants to live with her again. He does, however, hand her her clothes, and having dressed she sits down and says that she doesn't mind starving, if only she can stay with him. But Illtud is having none of that. He firmly turns his back on her and goes off to find the spot which the angel had recommended for his hermitage, and which turns out to be a very beautiful place indeed.

Later in the Llantwit 'Life' Trynihid reappears. After Illtud had abandoned her we are told that she decided to devote herself to a celibate life of prayer and good works, helping widows and poor nuns. Trynihid is described as having a particularly deep personal devotion to the Holy Trinity (this is no doubt something to do with her name). She became a hermit, as her ex-husband had done, and built herself a cell and an oratory in a lonely place in the mountains. One day she decided to visit Illtud, who by this time had become the abbot of a monastery. It was a very unwise move.

As she approached the monastery Trynihid saw a grubbily dressed man with a gaunt and dirty face who was busy digging. It was Illtud but she no longer recognised him, as he had changed so much from the smart soldier who had once been her husband. She went up to him and tried to strike up a conversation with him. Illtud refused to talk to her. And then, as a punishment for daring to visit him, Trynihid suddenly went blind. Illtud then relented and prayed that Trynihid sight might be restored. It was, but

afterwards her face remained strangely pale as though she was suffering from kind of illness. She went back to her hermitage in the hills and, perhaps not surprisingly, never visited Illtud again.

It's a relief to be able to say that there is no historical basis for these cruel stories about Illtud and his wife. Once again we have to look at the motive behind them. Why would the Llantwit Major cleric want to turn his saintly hero into such a brutal woman hater? The answer lies in the struggle over clerical celibacy that was going on in the twelfth century church in Wales.

The pre-Norman Welsh church had had a fairly laid back attitude to married clergy. This is illustrated by the background of the two most important writers of saints' lives in the late eleventh century. Rhygyfarch of Llanbadarn Fawr, the author of the 'Life of St David', was the eldest of the four sons of Bishop Sulien of St David's, all of whom are believed to have become priests. Rhygyfarch's brother Daniel, who died in 1127, was Archdeacon of Powys and Daniel's son Cydifor, who died in 1163, became Archdeacon of Cardigan. Lifris of Llancarfan, the Archdeacon of Glamorgan whom we've already met as the biographer of St Cadog, was also a bishop's son. His father, Herewald, a Welshman, was Bishop of Llandaff between 1056 and 1104 and was suspended by Anselm the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, for his part in the attempt to bring the Welsh Church under Norman control.

However the Second Lateran Council of 1139 passed a canon which made clerical marriages both unlawful and invalid. This ruling from Rome was presumably welcomed by Norman churchmen as giving them a powerful weapon with which they could break up the clerical dynasties that had previously played such an important part in the Welsh Church. But for the new decree to be taken seriously it had to be rooted firmly in the Welsh ecclesiastical past. One way of doing this was to portray Illtud, the great scholar and teacher of the pre-Norman Church, as a married man who had firmly and forcefully repudiated his wife on taking holy orders. In other words the story of the savage treatment of the loving and faithful Trynihad by her callous husband has nothing to do with the historical Illtud, and everything to do with the state of Welsh church politics in the middle of the twelfth century.

There is however one strand in the medieval Llantwit author's 'Life of St Illtud' which may have some historic basis. In his account, as we have seen, Illtud spends the earlier part of his religious life as a hermit in the Hodnant valley, which later becomes the site of his monastery. Later in the Life we are told that Illtud had a second period as a solitary, living in a cave above the banks of the river Ewenni, while hiding from an irate King of Glamorgan. The king was angry because when his steward had forced Illtud and

his monks to pay tribute to the royal castle, the saint had responded by making the officious oppressor melt like wax in the fire. On a third occasion Illtud disappears to a cave at a place called Lingarth or Llwynarth so that he can devote himself wholly to prayer without any interference or interruptions. He spends three years in this cave, which is on the Gower peninsula.

What is fascinating about the description of the third period of solitude is that the author is drawing on an independent source from before the Norman Conquest. 'The History of the British' is the work of a cleric named Nennius from the diocese of Bangor, writing at the beginning of the ninth century. It was a volume that had a profound effect on the imagination and writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Nennius' book contains a section on 'The Wonders of Britain'. One of them is described in the following passage, which was obviously known to Illtud's medieval biographer:

"There is another wonder in Gower, the altar in the place called Llwynarth, that is suspended by the will of God. It seems to me," Nennius writes, "better to tell the story than to suppress it. For it came to pass that when saint Illtud was praying in a cave by the sea that washes the land at this place, for the mouth of the cave is on the sea, a ship sailed to him from the sea, and two men sailed it, and the body of a holy man was with them in the ship, and an altar was above his face, hanging there by the will of God. The man of God went to meet them, and saw the body of the holy man, and the altar stayed inseparably above the face of the holy body. They said to saint Illtud, 'This man of God told us to bring him to you and to bury him with you, and you shall not reveal his name to any man, so that men should not swear by him.' So they buried him, and after the burial the two men went back to the ship and sailed away. But saint Illtud built a church about the body of the holy man and about the altar, and the altar remains to this day suspended by the will of God."

Which on the face of it seems a rather odd and confusing story. Fortunately, as Canon Doble pointed out, it can be easily explained. Llantwit monastery owned a good deal of land on the Gower peninsula. Doble identifies the church in the story as the one dedicated to Illtud at Oxwich. A bishop or priest was buried there whose name had been forgotten by Nennius' time. His portable altar was probably a part of his shrine, apparently suspended above his body in a very remarkable manner. The portable altars of Celtic saints were often preserved as relics. What is perhaps most significant as far as the life of St Illtud goes is Nennius' description of him 'praying in a cave by the sea'. This indicates that the story that Illtud spent at least some of his life as a hermit may have a historical foundation. As Canon Doble notes in his study of the saint, "we remark how frequently in tradition Illtud appears as a hermit."

Perhaps the most famous story which Illtud's Llantwit biographer tells about the saint as hermit concerns the early stage of his career when he was at Hodnant. Merchiaun

the Mad, King of Glamorgan (the cantankerous villain of several incidents in the Llantwit account) is out hunting. His hounds chase a stag which seeks refuge in Illtud's cell. The dogs stop barking and remain silently outside the cell. The King arrives and is furious to see that someone has built a hermitage without asking his permission. He orders Illtud to hand over the stag. Illtud politely refuses to do so. Eventually the two men come to an agreement. The King gives Illtud the land around his cell, which becomes the site of the monastery of Llantwit Major. The stag is tamed by Illtud, who trains it to draw wagonloads of timber while the monastery is being built.

Another rather more peculiar tradition connecting Illtud and a stag was recorded by Giraldus Cambrensis, Archdeacon of Brecon, in his account of his journey through Wales in 1188. It concerns a local belief that Illtud had been a hermit at Llanhamlach near Brecon - possibly having moved there from the Gower. Giraldus tells us that at that time Illtud had a mare which used to carry provisions to his hermitage. A passing stag took a fancy to this animal and impregnated her. The result was she gave birth to a hybrid creature with front parts like a horse and haunches like a deer, which could run extremely fast.

Giraldus had a good ear for an improbable tale. The Llantwit tradition about Illtud rescuing the stag from a king out hunting belongs, however, to a type of story commonly told about hermit saints. The Welsh example that immediately springs to mind is the story of Melangell, who rejected a marriage which her father had arranged for her in Ireland, and fled across the sea, ending up in a remote valley in Montgomeryshire where she devoted her life to solitary prayer. Brochwel Ysgithrog, prince of Powys was out hunting in this out-of-way corner of his dominions when his hounds started a hare which took refuge in the folds of Melangell's cloak. There was a confrontation between the prince and the woman hermit, which ended with him granting the valley to Melangell as a place of prayer and sanctuary.

Traditions connecting hermits, deer and hunters come from a variety of places. There is the well-known story of St Giles, a hermit who lived in Provence in the sixth century. King Wamba was hunting a hind, which took refuge with the hermit. The King drew his bow and loosed an arrow into the undergrowth, which hit the hermit instead of the animal, and Giles was left crippled as a result. A not dissimilar tale is told of the twelfth century English hermit Godric of Finchale. A stag took refuge in Godric's hermitage. When the Bishop of Durham's huntsmen, who had been chasing it, asked where the animal had gone he replied calmly, "God knows where it is." Godric's serene radiance made such an impression on the huntsmen that they apologized for having troubled him, and rode away.

It may, of course, be that the Llantwit writer based the story of Illtud and the stag on the hugely popular St Giles tradition. The cult of St Giles was blooming in twelfth century England and had also just hit Wales, with some major churches being dedicated to him in the north east. It is possible that the author simply thought that every saintly hermit worth his salt should have saved some sort of deer from a hunter. However the last bit of the story, with the tamed stag drawing cartloads of timber reflects a motif that is present in the traditions of many Welsh saints. Cadog's disciples, Finian and Macmoil, are assisted in their timber-drawing activities by helpful stags who emerge from the woods, as are Teilo and Madog. There are stags that obey St David's commands and others that pull St Brynach's cartload of possessions when he moves from place to place. Stags also help Deiniol, Cadog and Tydecho with ploughing. And then there is the wonderful fifteenth century Breton stained glass window which shows St Teilo in cope and mitre with a crosier in his hand, riding on a stag.

All of which may seem a bit surreal. Behind it, however, lies a reality of a sort. The ninth century Irish poem in which the hermit Marban persuades King Guaire to give up his crown and embrace a solitary life of prayer depicts the hermit as being very much a part of the natural world which surrounds his cell:

My hut is small and yet
Encircled by well-known paths.
And look who is singing sweet on my gable
in blackbird-coloured shift!
Tame pigs and goats
and baby pigs
at home all around it
and wild pigs also,
tall deer and their does,
badgers and their brood.

Admittedly the poem deliberately represents an idealised view of the hermit life, but it does also suggest that the traditions of friendship between hermits and wild animals may have some basis in fact. A large area of my parishes consists of the Brechfa Forest and one of the rangers who lived in a hut in the woods for some years told me that the wild animals, once they realised that he didn't represent any sort of threat to them, soon accepted him as just another creature of the forest.

A couple of years ago I was invited to give a lecture at St John's Benedictine Abbey in Minnesota and lead a retreat in the Episcopal House of Prayer in the Abbey grounds. The Abbey stands amidst several thousand acres of deciduous woodland in which no

hunting is allowed and deer roam freely. The monks often go out into the woods to walk and pray, and my host told me that occasionally one of the deer will decide to adopt a monk and start following him everywhere he goes. Which again suggests that a real experience may lie somewhere behind all these stories.

Perhaps this is a suitable point to bring our day with both the historical and the unhistorical St Illtud to a close, by thinking for a few moments about the possible significance that Illtud may have for us as we embark on this new millennium. There are certain things which we can thankfully ignore - most notably the horrendous and wholly untrue description of Illtud's brutal treatment of his wife. That can be written off as the product of the sexual hang-ups and ecclesiastical predilections of his twelfth century clerical biographer.

Other elements however do seem to speak to our present condition. The passage about Illtud in the 'Life of Samson' which seems to me to have a particular contemporary importance is the author's description of Illtud's gifts and qualities: "In truth Illtud was of all the Britons the most accomplished in all the Scriptures: namely of the Old and New Testaments, and in those of philosophy of every, kind of geometry namely, and of rhetoric, grammar and arithmetic, and all the theories of philosophy. And by birth he was a most wise magician, having knowledge of the future".

The picture presented is of someone who can span a variety of cultural worlds. Someone who is deeply rooted in the Scriptures and yet who is equally at home in various fields of secular learning and well-versed in the traditional culture of his people. Illtud manages to be a Christian theologian, a Classical scholar, philosopher and scientist and a traditional Welsh holy man all at the same time. That is what makes him such a fascinating figure. It also means that he can provide inspiration for contemporary Christians in our own increasingly fragmented culture. Illtud's example suggests that we should not put up the barriers and retreat into an ever-diminishing and ever more introspective ghetto. Instead we should have enough confidence in our Christian faith to take the risk of engaging with the world around us in all its diversity.

Another telling image that strikes me is being of importance comes from Nennius' odd little story about Illtud in Gower. "For it came to pass that when Saint Illtud was praying in a cave by the sea that washes the land at this place..." Illtud is shown as a man of prayer, following the pattern that Jesus had taught his followers by going apart to a lonely place to be with his heavenly Father. **Prayer - turning the heart and mind towards God - is at the core of our Christian existence.** Without it the rest of our religious activity becomes hollow, superficial or even illusory and dangerous. Both Illtud, and his enthusiastic disciple Samson, regard prayer as being central to the rest of their life and work. Without a firm foundation of prayer that bridging of cultures, which

I've just described as the first lesson that Illtud teaches us, will quickly become a self-indulgent and futile exercise.

I was trained to preach by Archbishop George Noakes in Cardiganshire, in the days when I was his curate, and he taught me that all good sermons have to have three headings: a triple message to leave the congregation with. It's an idea that may well have its origins in the trioedd or triads used by medieval Welsh story tellers. I'm not in Cardiganshire now and this is not a sermon, but I'd still better leave you with a third lesson from St Illtud!

Perhaps it should come from that incident in the medieval Llantwit of Illtud which, although it may not necessarily reflect historical fact, is related to a large number of parallel stories that must have had a deep significance for those who told them. And that is the tradition of the friendship between Illtud and the stag, the wild creature which he rescued. I have lived and worked most of my life in the countryside so I'm a bit wary about over-sentimentality about wildlife. Nature can often be red in tooth and claw, as anyone who has seen a hen-house that has been visited by a polecat will readily admit. Nevertheless there is a crucially important need for balance in our relationship with the natural world. The recognition that we are a part of God's creation and have a responsibility towards the rest of that creation with which we are inevitably inter-related is, I think, a lesson worth learning. This is particularly true at a time when some scientists are experimenting with the most basic building blocks of life, and when the impact of large scale ecological change is also beginning to become apparent.

Those, then, are the three areas which I believe that Illtud points us to: **a Christian approach to cultural diversity, a spirituality based on an ever-deepening commitment to prayer, and the development of a way of life which reflects our human responsibilities as a part of God's creation.**

They are concerns which have a message for twenty first century Llantwit Major and twentieth first century Wales just as they had for fifth century Llantwit Major and fifth century Wales.

Afterward by Vivian Kelly

THE LEGACY OF ST. ILLTUD

At Llantwit Major, Llanilltud Fawr, about the year 500, St. Illtud created a church, monastery, school and mission centre of national and wider importance in the "Age of the Saints". This religious foundation has been central to the life of the town since that time. As Patrick Thomas has explained, our knowledge of our Patron Saint comes largely from the "Life of St. Samson".

The author, probably a monk at Dôl, says, "I have been in his magnificent monastery". It must, by then, have become a large establishment. Celtic monasteries were not the large buildings of medieval times, but a group of small, separate buildings - church, school and houses - the monks could be married and have children. The monastery was a community where life consisted of prayer, study and work. The monks worked in the fields, or as craftsmen. They also tended the sick and gave hospitality to visitors. Some were scribes who compiled manuscripts. The number of carved Celtic stones in the church and its surroundings suggest that there was a school of masons here.

But the main activities of the monks were prayer and worship. Llantwit Major was one of only three monasteries, with Old Sarum and Glastonbury, which offered "perpetual praise" - prayer and praise twenty four hours of every day in the year.

Llantwit Major was an important mission centre. Illtud himself, or his disciples, travelled throughout South Wales establishing churches which were dedicated to Illtud. There is also one in North Wales and seven in Brittany.

The status and prestige of St. Illtud's Church is shown by the Celtic crosses and stones in the west church, one of the finest collections in the country. Two of the stones have names which have been identified as kings of Glywysing (which extended in the early medieval period from the Tawe to the Usk) and Gwent.

With the coming of the Normans, the status of Llantwit Major declined as the invaders introduced dioceses and parishes into the church, and built up the importance of the cathedral at Llandaff. St. Illtud's continued as a community of priests, a clas (mother) church.

The Lord of Glamorgan, Robert Fitzhamon retained the manor of Llantwit for his own use, and gave the church to the Abbey at Tewkesbury which he had endowed. The land between Llantwit and St. Donat's was given to Tewkesbury, and it was farmed from a grange on the hill overlooking the church. The gatehouse still stands, though the other farm buildings have disappeared.

Nothing remains of the Celtic settlement, but around 1100 the Normans rebuilt the old church, erecting what is now the West Church. As the manor increased in size and prosperity, the East Church was added in the thirteenth century, and the south porch was built. In the fifteenth century the West Church was re-built. The West Church became the parish church and the East Church was used by the 'clas'. In the fifteenth century also, the Raglan family came here. They endowed a chantry in the chapel at the western end of the church (the Galilee) and built a house in the churchyard for the chantry priest.

The onset of the Reformation had important consequences for Llantwit Major. The Tewkesbury lands were sold off to the Stradlings of St. Donat's. Chantries were abolished, and the Puritans removed altars, effigies and statues from the church and painted over the murals - but introduced pews for the long sermons they preached!

Gradually the strict Puritanism of the 17th century was transformed into the Nonconformist sects of the 18th, though the causes did not take root immediately. On 25th July, 1777, John Wesley preached in St. Illtud's and wrote in his journal, "About eleven, I read prayers and preached in Llantwit Major church to a very numerous congregation. I have not seen either so large or so handsome a church since I left England. It was sixty yards long, but one end of it is now in ruins. I suppose it has been abundantly the most beautiful as well as the most spacious church in Wales".

There were Methodists in Llanmaes and Llantwit Major before this time, but the first Nonconformist meeting house to be erected was Bethesda'r Fro in 1807. Then came Tabernacle erected for Calvinistic Methodists in 1822. Bethel Baptist Chapel was erected for "Particular Baptists" in 1830, and the Wesleyan Chapel was opened in 1847. The Independents met between 1815 and 1829, but became established in Ebenezer in 1855.

Catholics had no local meeting place until 1920, when Lewis Turnbull opened the chapel in the Ham for worship, and later mass was celebrated at R.A.F. St. Athan. The Church of Our Lady and St. Illtyd was opened in 1950 and rebuilt in 1965.

Thus the tradition of worship established by St. Illtud has been continued to the present day. The celebration of 1500 years of worship has reminded the town of the importance of Christianity in its history, and the continuing significance of worship in the life of the town.

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