

Reflections on Saint Margaret of Scotland

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Nearly a thousand years ago, a girl was born in Hungary. Margaret was the daughter of a Hungarian mother and an English father. Her mother's father was, perhaps, Saint Stephen, the first king of Hungary. Her paternal grandfather was Edmund Ironside, the short-lived English king. Edmund Ironside was half-brother to yet another saint, King Edward the Confessor.

Margaret's family moved from Hungary to England when Margaret was a teenager. But just over a decade later, Margaret and her brother Edgar Ætheling came to Scotland as exiles after the Norman Conquest.

Before long, Margaret was married to Malcolm III, the king of the Scots. Margaret and Malcolm had eight children together. Three of Margaret's sons became kings of the Scots—Edgar, Alexander I, and David I—and one of her daughters, Edith (also known as Matilda), became a queen of England.

Margaret died on 16 November 1093, still only in her 40s, stricken with grief at the news of her husband's death. Malcolm had died on military campaign in northern England.

After her death, Margaret was quickly recognised as a person of special holiness. And Margaret is presented to us tonight, in the words of the Introit, as a good and gentle queen, one who shone with the light of truth, as one who possessed wisdom.

And so it is that the first reading this evening came from the Book of Wisdom. In Judaic theology, Wisdom comes from God's spirit and penetrates all things by her purity and truth. Wisdom is the breath and the power of God and the source of all that is true.

In this evening's passage we find an exhortation to *seek* wisdom, and a warning to those who refuse to do so, especially rulers. Greater gifts bring greater responsibilities, greater judgment.

Margaret was recognised as the kind of wise and righteous monarch envisaged by the author of the Book of Wisdom. Margaret's authority was based on persuasive love, living out the imperatives of God's kingdom: caring for the hungry, the stranger, the naked, those in captivity, and freeing those in slavery.

The *Life* of Saint Margaret tells how the holy queen always kept twenty-four poor people with her: she fed and clothed them. As well as these twenty-four poor people, there were another three hundred whom she fed daily, serving them with her own hands, with King Malcolm helping her. In the words of her *Life*, 'The king on the one side and the queen on the other waited upon Christ in the person of His poor'.

Margaret could recognise her own humility as a child of God, and for this reason she was able to be with other people in their humility. For Christ himself lives in our humility, our poverty; and it is Christ in us who recognises the Christ who lives in other people's humility. When we seek to avoid any kind of poverty—whether it is hunger and homelessness, or brokenness, helplessness, neediness in others—we are avoiding Christ. For it is through the poor, the meek, the lowly that Christ shows himself to us. But when we have discovered our own poverty, our own ultimate helplessness, we will lose our fear of others who are poor, and will go to them to meet our Saviour, Jesus Christ. For when Christ said, 'Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping; the hated and the persecuted', he was describing his own disciples: those who have set out to follow him and to become his family.

And this family, the pilgrim People of God, the family which we call the Church, includes 'every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Rev. 7.9).

And this brings me to one final theme. We have thought about Margaret as wise and righteous monarch. We have considered Margaret as a lover of the poor. Let us now think of Margaret as sojourner in a foreign land—but a sojourner who, in the words of the Introit, ‘kindled learning’s spark’. This theme provides us with an opportunity to rejoice in the blessing of the growing number of students in our university who come from all parts of the globe.

This international community that we are fostering here builds cultural and economic bridges between countries. All this is part of a greater purpose: the forming of one human family. Belonging to a university community means standing at the crossroads of cultures—the cultures that have formed and continue to shape the world. Universities like our own shape the culture of the upcoming generations. The very ability and capacity of new generations to see humankind as a family—a family called to be united in diversity—largely depends on institutions like this university.

And if we are to take this responsibility seriously, if we really think we are—or are in the business of making—‘World Changers’, then we have to take to heart the Book of Wisdom’s warning that ‘severe judgement falls on those in high places’. (And in this respect, it is good to see the work of the University in making reparations for its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade represented in an exhibition in this chapel.)

We may not be kings and queens—and we may not be rulers (at least not yet)—but those who delight in thrones and sceptres, those who seek to influence and change the world, are called to desire instruction and to learn wisdom, so that truth will be revealed. And in Saint Margaret, long venerated as one of the patron saints of Scotland, we learn that this means humility, love for the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the stranger in the land—and the enslaved,

In Saint Margaret, we find a burning light of wisdom and truth that points to Jesus Christ. And it is in Jesus Christ that we are loved; and through Jesus Christ that we are given the grace and strength to do all this. For he is the ‘Lamb at the

centre of the throne’ who will ‘be our shepherd’, and will guide us ‘to springs of the water of life’ (Rev. 7:17).

For he is indeed *Via, Veritas, Vita*—the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Choral Evensong
University of Glasgow Memorial Chapel
Tuesday 5 November 2019

Readings

Wisdom 6.1–21

Revelation 7.9–17