

**What can the spirituality and life of Dewi Sant, teach
us about mission and ministry in 21st Century
Wales?**

Revd Sophie Whitmarsh

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Introduction

As I sit writing this, I am bathed in sunshine in the medieval close of St Davids Cathedral, Pembrokeshire. I have written the following because, while I have been in St Davids, I have seen and experienced the appeal that this place has on people both far and wide. Welsh, English, Scottish, Irish, American, African, Canadian, Chinese, Japanese, the list is endless of the number of nationalities that not only want to see the magnificent medieval cathedral, but more importantly want to visit the shrine of St David. The following will show that this capacity to draw people to himself was always a part of who St David was, I will show that it was intrinsic to who he was and who he continues to be to this day; that his closeness to God, his relationship with people and the land, his relationship with the Holy Spirit, led to a character that could be nothing less than missional. I will show that the commandment to love God, people and all of creation was part of his spirituality. By introducing you to the context in which he ministered, looking very closely at the life of St David, by taking a closer look at his life and purpose, and I will use David Bosch's model of mission, to show that St David was at his very core a man of mission, a man who led people to God, and a man who continues to do that from beyond the grave. For simplicity, throughout I will refer to St David using the Welsh name Dewi unless part of a direct quote, and I will use St Davids to name the city.

The Historical & Geographical Context of the Life of Dewi

Historically, there have been many divisions throughout Britain, going back to prehistoric and proto historic Britain. These were largely due to the nature of the country and the influences and invasions throughout the Iron ages and later by the spread of the Western France 'La Tene' culture, into Cornwall and the South West Peninsular, including Pembrokeshire. The last century BC saw further invasions from Rome, which lead to disquieting conditions throughout Britain and Gaul. One of the main routes from Ireland to Rome would have been through South Wales and is likely to have cut through Porth Clais, only a few miles from St Davids itself. However, it is important to note that whilst much of South East Wales was influenced by these incoming cultures, South West Wales was also heavily influenced by

cultures arriving from the Irish Sea Province. From the 4th Century there was a large concentration of Irish settlers, who continued to hold onto their roots in Ireland for several centuries. This is well documented on the 'Ogham Stones'. This influence from Ireland meant that South West Wales was culturally distinct from the rest of Wales, even before the age of the saints and the time period in which Dewi was alive.¹ The period in which Dewi was believed to have lived, was a period where the Kingdom of Dyfed, (a direct successor of the Roman *civitas* or tribal grouping of the Demetae), was ruled by a dynasty of Irish origin, known as the Déisi.²

Dyfed was further divided into administrative areas known as *cantref* and again into *cwmwdau*. Many of these administrative areas were naturally demarcated by geographical boundaries such as rivers and coastal areas, upland areas, and so on. 'Usually their names are descriptive of their location or the general character of the landscape'.³ There is a possibility that these areas were small Irish Kingdoms known as *Tuatha*. Unfortunately, we can only be sure of these kingdoms having been around from about the 9th century and not before that, so whilst helpful, it is not conclusively evident of the administrative workings prior to then. However, they were adopted as ecclesiastical administrative divisions, and were also talked about in the first branch of the Mabinogi, a series of written prose dating back to the 12th century, that were written from a series of folk tales accumulated over the centuries. Whilst not conclusive, it does suggest that the *Cantrefi* may have been long established kingdoms. Of the seven *Cantrefi*, the one in which we are most interested in, is that of Pebidiog. The name Pebidiog is the only one of the seven whose name is derived from a personal name, it is not Irish and there is nothing similar in any genealogies. Historically, Pebidiog was 'under the lordship of St Davids' ⁴ The question of whether or not these administrative systems were in place with the Irish settlers back in the 6th and possibly 5th Centuries is up for debate and cannot conclusively be proven.

¹ E. G Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983). 31-50

² Elwyn Davies, Brian Howells, and Pembrokeshire Historical Society, *Pembrokeshire County History* (Haverfordwest: The Pembrokeshire Historical Society, 1987). 340

³ *Ibid.* 370

⁴ *Ibid.* 370

Much as it is today, Medieval Pembrokeshire was largely rural. Its population was around the 15,000 mark, although plagues throughout the 5th, 6th and 7th century were responsible for the deaths of many, and famine was also a constant concern.⁵

The exact extent to which the Roman Empire had control over the further West reaches of the country and especially what is now Wales and the areas that we have been discussing, has come under much discussion.

A recent examination of a list by the late Roman historian, Ammianus, of the barbarian peoples threatening the empire in the late fourth century,... has highlighted a group called the Attecotti. These may be one and the same as the Irish *aithechtuatha*, a generic term meaning low status, tribute paying tribes.⁶

It is possible that the Déisi may be one such mercenary tribe, who were allowed to 'rule' areas to negate the need for the Roman Empire to place military defences against other Irish attacks from the coast. There is question over when and why the Irish settlers arrived, but there appears to be no question that by the 5th Century there were certainly Irish settlers in Dyfed and more especially in Pebidiog.⁷

Christianity in Britain had survived the collapse of the Roman Empire and had already begun to establish a structure of Bishops and Deacons, and we have evidence of such, dating to the early 4th century. How widespread it was is questionable.⁸ However, by the 5th century there were three main facets of Christianity converging on Wales. These were refugees coming from Roman Britain who brought with them their regional episcopal traditions, Gallo-Roman Christians who were pre-disposed to ascetic and eremitical lifestyles and those from Irish descent who were inclined toward Pelagianism.⁹ We will see later how Dewi was considered responsible for the dispelling of that heresy once and for all.

The Dewisland Peninsular was a small part of a much wider story, which had its own flavour, a converging point for many different influences, and the backdrop for Dewi

⁵ Ibid. 343

⁶ Ibid. 373

⁷ Ibid. 374

⁸ Ibid. 384

⁹ Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands*. 67

and his brethren, who as we shall see became an influential and significant part of the story.

Rhygyfarch – The Life of St David

Very little is 'known' about Dewi and his life, in the sense that most of what we have was written probably 500 years after his death. Untangling what is truth and what is legend, can be difficult. Whether or not what is known or not known is significant, remains to be seen. I will seek to tease out what is reality, whilst bearing in mind that not all truths are truth. It is this position I intend to write from, a position of finding truths about the man that has become arguably one of the most well known and loved patron saints and is the heart of the people of Wales.

Most of what we 'know' of Dewi comes from Rhygyfarch's "the life of St David". Written in around 1095, the Life of St David was written in a similar style to that of many medieval accounts of saints. These documents are less biography and more stories written to motivate and inspire people. In his book *Celtic Christianity*, Ian Bradley writes 'This process of hagiography, which was inspired to a large degree by ecclesiastical power politics,... has profoundly coloured our perception of Celtic Christianity.'¹⁰ Hagiographies were also often based upon the lives of other saints, and upon the life and times of Jesus.¹¹

Rhygyfarch's life, is unlikely to be an accurate representation of accounts, and the Hagiographical style as I already mentioned is not about accuracy. However, there is some evidence that suggests that the writing may have been taken from a relatively early source, John Morris 'argued that the outline of the rule of life of David's community given... came from a genuinely early source'.¹² I would argue that much like the bible, we need to read Rhygyfarch's account carefully and interpret each section on its own merit rather than assuming the whole is one genre or other.

¹⁰ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999).

¹¹ 'The Medieval Cult of St David | St Davids Cathedral', accessed 6 December 2020, <https://www.stdavidscathedral.org.uk/discover/history/medieval-cult>.

¹² J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, eds., *St. David of Wales: Cult, Church, and Nation*, Studies in Celtic History, v. 24 (Woodbridge, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2007). 15

Born in 1057 and the son of Sulien the Wise, twice Bishop of St Davids. Rhygyfarch was well educated and one of four sons. His life overlapped with the Norman French invasion of Britain which had huge influence on and changes for the Welsh church, not least of all its integration with the province of Canterbury. Huge swathes of the country were defeated, and the political landscape changed dramatically in 1066 as William of Normandy won the battle of Hastings. All that Rhygyfarch knew was systematically and brutally removed, not least of all the church as he knew it, in fact his father Sulien, was made Bishop twice, the second time after the then Bishop was murdered by invaders. It was into this that he wrote his Life of St David.¹³ It was Rhygyfarch's attempt to record what he felt to be losing, the roots from which he grew, the church and country which he knew and loved.

We cannot but regard the Life of St David as a protest against such high-handed proceedings. Though it proved futile for the immediate object in view, that is to say, to preserve the independence of the Church in Wales and to establish a metropolitan position for St. Davids, it has served to keep alive the remembrance that Canterbury is not the rock from which the Welsh Church was hewn or the hole of the pit from which she was digged.¹⁴

Whilst it may not be an historical record of Dewi, I believe that Rhygyfarch's intention was to write down and record the stories that had over the years been collated, and to write of what Dewi and the Welsh Church meant to him and to the people of Wales at the time. I believe carefully written, in between the lines you can hear Rhygyfarch's mourning of what had been. 'Rhygyfarch understood how little he actually knew about David',¹⁵ but was intent on ensuring that he conveyed, in bite size pieces the importance of Dewi 'a man of unblemished life and spiritual power'.¹⁶

Rhygyfarch's account of the life of Dewi is a series of smaller accounts, some are historical, some might be described as prophetic, some are accounts of miracle stories which may or may not have any reality to them. However, what is clear from this is that Dewi was an important man whose life and calling shaped the lives of others and left a lasting impression on Rhygyfarch. It should be noted that there were possible political motives that spurred Rhygyfarch to write the life, 'the synod of

¹³ A.W Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*, Lives of the Celtic Saints, Series V (SPCK, 1923). xv

¹⁴ Ibid. xviii

¹⁵ Gerald Morgan, *In Pursuit of Saint David: Patron Saint of Wales*, 2017. 48

¹⁶ Ibid. 48

Brefi, seems to have the function of affirming the orthodoxy of St David in contrast to Pelagianism... while also making the required bridge between the life of the extreme ascetic and his archiepiscopal role.¹⁷ Ian Bradley writes of Hagiography,

It would be wrong to give the impression that all this was simply contrived and manufactured by medieval spin-doctors. There is also evidence from an early stage of genuine popular affection for the Celtic saints as well as of widespread devotion to their cults. Historians are cynical creatures who are always looking for hidden agendas and dubious motives. Some at least of the early medieval love affair with Celtic Christianity we should simply take at face value.

In addition, there are also questions over the accuracy of some geographical locations and the extent to which Dewi himself had influence over those areas.¹⁸

There is no space to go into detail here, but to acknowledge that Rhygyfarch's work is by no means perfect. However, there is sufficient to glean much about Dewi and his way of life, the influence he had on the people who lived with him, and the influence he continues to have 1500 years later, 'the veneration of St David as more than a local saint is a continuum from the early middle ages into the modern period.'¹⁹ In the following we will look at Rhygyfarch's text, extracting parts of the text that may give us insight into who Dewi was perceived to be, if not who he actually was.

Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David* begins 'Here begins the Life of the Blessed David, who also is Dewi, Bishop and Confessor. March 1st'.²⁰ From the outset Rhygyfarch makes it clear of Dewi's importance. About whom he was, that his birth was foretold (not unlike the foretelling of Jesus' birth), by truth telling oracles of angels, and that he had many spiritual gifts. There is a sense of intimacy expressed about Dewi and his people, 'whom baptism calls David but the people Dewi'.²¹

The work continues with a description of Dewi's father, 'Sant by name and merits, who relied on his royal power over the people of Ceredigion'.²² I believe this to be

¹⁷ Evans and Wooding, *St. David of Wales*. 17

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 20

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 18

²⁰ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 1

²¹ *Ibid.* 1

²² *Ibid.* 1

quite important, Rhygyfarch is telling the story of the Welsh territories in which he lived, and reminds us of the various Welsh kingdoms, Ceredigion being one of them, and a part of the history Rhygyfarch is reconstructing. Sant had a dream in which he was warned that whilst out hunting he would kill a stag by a river and there will he find three gifts, a stag, a fish and a swarm of bees. He was instructed to keep a part of the fish and stag, and a honeycomb from the bees as a gift to a son who will be born to him. These gifts were symbolic of Dewi's wisdom, 'for as honey in wax, so he held a spiritual mind in a temporal body'.²³ His aquatic life 'for as a fish lives in water, so he, rejecting wine and beer and everything that can intoxicate'.²⁴ Finally, the stag was symbolic of his power over 'Old Serpent' 'the power of governing demons'.²⁵ The three gifts perhaps a parallel to those that the three kings bought to the baby Jesus after he was born in Bethlehem. See Matthew 1:24

Rhygyfarch, then turns to St Patrick, describing him as being 'polished with Roman learning and teeming with excellences.' He claims that Patrick stayed in Ceredigion before making his way to Dyfed, arriving at Vallis Rosina. It was here that Patrick intended to stay and serve God, before being told by an Angel that 'God hath not disposed this place for thee, but for a son who is not yet born, nor will he be born until thirty years are past'.²⁶ After some tumultuous arguing with God, Patrick finally gave up his home in Wales and returned to Ireland, and 'cheerfully quitted the sacred spot for Holy David'.²⁷ There is some question over the timescales of this. The earliest mention of David is in the *Annales Cambriae*, and one of the entries claims that in 458 David was born, in the thirtieth year after Patrick had left.²⁸ However, we can be more certain that Dewi died in the late 6th Century, so if this was the case, he would have been 147 when he died and actually Rhygyfarch states this age at the end of his writing.²⁹ As Gerald Morgan points out in his book 'In pursuit of Saint David' the parallels between John the Baptist and Patrick as the forerunners of Jesus and David cannot be dismissed.³⁰ Although, it could perhaps also be argued

²³ Ibid. 1

²⁴ Ibid. 2

²⁵ Ibid. 2

²⁶ Ibid. 2

²⁷ Ibid. 3

²⁸ Morgan, *In Pursuit of Saint David*. 20

²⁹ Ibid. 21

³⁰ Ibid. 49

that Patrick was symbolic of all Irish settlers in the region, and politically this could be seen as an account of the Irish leaving Wales.

Thirty years pass, and Sant who is king of Ceredigion, is sent by divine power to Dyfed where he meets a nun named Nonita. Sant raped Nonita, and so she conceived her son, Dewi. Nonita's chastity and integrity are highlighted, presumably to emphasise her purity and faithfulness. It is very rare to find a female saint who was raped in European hagiography. Many are threatened and abused, beaten, tortured and burned whilst protecting their virginity and so many female saints died virgins, protecting their perceived sanctity.³¹ Rhygyfarch does not describe the rape in any detail, but at the moment of her conception, we are told that two great stones appeared to 'preserve the modesty of the girl and foretell the importance of her offspring.'³² It is perhaps worth noting at this point that we are told that she lived a faithful life, living on bread and water alone. This relationship between living on bread and water alone and being faithful, may prove important in our understanding of how Dewi was raised, and what influences that had on his own spiritual practices. There are also possible links to biblical stories, of which I will talk more of later.

We are given further insight to Nonita and her faithfulness and some of the spiritual practices and rituals she may have taken part in. In particular we are told that she, according to custom, 'for the purpose of offering alms and oblations for childbirth'³³ enters a church to hear the preaching of the Gospel by St Gildas. What follows could be described as a miracle, but which I believe to be Rhygyfarch's affirmation of what we already know, that Nonita was a faithful, God fearing, righteous nun, who believed the child that would soon be brought into the world, to be of great importance. As Nonita enters the church, we are told that Gildas is suddenly struck dumb and unable to preach, 'I am able to speak to you in ordinary conversation but preach I cannot.'³⁴ Gildas asks everyone to leave the church so that he may attempt to preach alone, but Nonita remains hidden, wanting to demonstrate her child's importance. Gildas was frightened by his inability to preach and in anguish, says 'if

³¹ Evans and Wooding, *St. David of Wales*. 182

³² Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 4

³³ *Ibid.* 4

³⁴ *Ibid.* 4

anyone lies hid from me, that thou shouldest show thyself from thy hiding-place.'³⁵ After revealing herself, Gildas asks Nonita to leave and for the congregation to return, at which point Gildas' ability to preach is returned to him. The congregation ask him why he could not preach, he replies 'Call hither the nun, who went outside the church'.³⁶ They question Nonita, and she confesses to her pregnancy. Interestingly at this point, Rhygyfarch for the first time in the entire document, no longer calls her Nonita the nun, but Saint Nonita, and she says 'Lo, I am with you.'³⁷ Gildas then pronounces in a prophetic manner 'the Son, who is the womb of that nun, has grace and power and rank greater than I, because God has given him status and sole rule and primacy over all the saints of Britannia for ever, before and after judgment'.³⁸ Gildas, according to Rhygyfarch then gave up his role and left Britannica forever. There is a similar story in the Life of St Ailbe or Aelwyw. St Ailbe, found a priest in a church readying themselves to consecrate the bread and wine, but he could not because he was tongue tied. St. Ailbe looked around the church and found a young pregnant girl and he said to the priest 'the reason thou canst not offer is because this woman has in her womb a bishop. He is David'.³⁹ There is clearly some truth to these stories, being witnessed in both accounts, even if the details are slightly different.

We next hear of a tyrant, who having heard of the child that is to be born, sets about trying to kill him. Rhygyfarch no longer addresses her as 'the nun' or 'Saint Nonita' but instead 'the mother'. This could I suppose be completely innocuous and have just been a slip of Rhygyfarch's hand. However, it is more likely that Rhygyfarch deliberately used these different descriptors for a reason. This could be as simple as marking the different parts of Nonitas life, or perhaps bears some relation to the different calls that God may have had on her life at different times, we can only guess perhaps. There are of course parallels with the Gospel account of Mary, mother of Jesus and Herod, the king so set on killing Jesus, that he has all male children under two murdered, See Matthew 2:16-18. Rhygyfarch continues to describe in detail the events of the day of Dewi's birth. The 'mother' goes along that

³⁵ Ibid. 4

³⁶ Ibid. 5

³⁷ Ibid. 5

³⁸ Ibid. 5

³⁹ Ibid. 39

path 'where the place of child-bearing was, which the tyrant was watching in accordance with the druids' prognostic'.⁴⁰ Rhygyfarch describes the situation, that 'bringing forth was urgent'⁴¹ and so she sought the 'aforesaid spot'.⁴² Rhygyfarch describes a storm so ferocious that none would leave their homes. The only exception being the spot where she gave birth, which 'shone with so serene a light that it glistened as though the sun was visible, and God had brought it in front of the clouds.'⁴³ A stone that Nonita used to lean on was marked with the prints of her hands. In this place a church is situated we are told, and this stone lies covered in the foundation of its altar. Interestingly, no more is said about the 'tyrant' who had planned to kill presumably Non and the child. We might assume that the storm overwhelmed him.

You can probably see by now, that there are many parallels with the Gospel stories themselves, and in particular the holiness and righteousness of Non, that we might compare with Mary, the mother of Jesus, or as I later describe there are similarities with the story of Hagar. Genesis 16

Dewi was baptised by Bishop Aelwyw, the bishop of the people of Mynyw. As he was baptised, we are told that a 'fountain of clearest water'⁴⁴ appeared. The water cured the eyes of a monk born without nostril and eyes, after perceiving that the child he was holding was full of grace, took the water where Dewi had been dipped, and sprinkled it upon his own face, his sight was restored. 'All who were present glorified the Lord and holy David on that day.'⁴⁵ The baptism of Dewi itself tells us something of the church and culture into which he was baptised, not least of all we are told that he was an infant at the time, and having been baptised by a bishop, tells us that the structures of the organised church were already an influence in this part of Wales. Water and wells are numerous in Rhygyfarch's telling of the life, they were of significance both spiritually and physically for Dewi and his brethren, and for those who travelled and continue to travel to the Dewisland Peninsular. Today there are

⁴⁰ Ibid. 6

⁴¹ Ibid. 6

⁴² Ibid. 6

⁴³ Ibid. 6

⁴⁴ Ibid. 6

⁴⁵ Ibid. 6

many Holy Wells, and just a few miles from St Davids itself is the village of Nine Wells. St Nons well, is reputed to have healing properties, and even today I have heard stories of healing after a visit to the well and touching the water there. Whilst many would dismiss this, we should not be so quick to cast aside stories of healings, for they are important in our understanding of God.

Dewi was well educated, we are told he learned many things including the psalms, masses, and lessons for the whole year, 'and there his fellow disciples saw a pigeon with a gold beak playing at his lips, and teaching him, and singing hymns of God.'⁴⁶ I have been unable to find similar symbolism to this, although it is possible that it signifies direct teaching from God or the Holy Spirit himself. He was educated in a place called *Vetus Rubus*, Hen Vynyw, Gerald of Wales later identified this as Henfynyw – Old Menevia, a church south west of Aberaeron.⁴⁷ Later we see a white pigeon land on Dewi's shoulder as he preaches at the Synod at Brefi, this is perhaps symbolic of the Holy Spirit, mimicking the white dove that was present at Jesus' baptism. See Matthew 3:16

After some time, after having 'preserved his flesh pure from the embraces of a wife'⁴⁸ Dewi was made a priest and 'raised to sacerdotal dignity'.⁴⁹ Rhygyfarch, continues to place emphasis on Dewi's virtuous nature, and draws attention to his priestly ministry, particularly the sacramental and sacrificial element of that calling.

After having been made a priest, Dewi finds himself under the tutelage of Paulinus the scribe, a disciple of St Germanus the bishop. 'And Saint David tarried there many years reading and fulfilling what he read'⁵⁰ Interestingly, in parallel to the observation I made earlier about Rhygyfarch's descriptions of St Non, this is the first time that Rhygyfarch calls Dewi, Saint David. Up until this point he has been called holy David.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 7

⁴⁷ Morgan, *In Pursuit of Saint David*. 25

⁴⁸ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 7

⁴⁹ Ibid. 7

⁵⁰ Ibid. 7

Whilst Dewi continued his education, Paulinus we are told lost his sight due to an intense pain. After having no relief from any of his other disciples, he calls upon Dewi to bless his eyes. Dewi answers 'My father, bid me not to look on thy countenance, for these ten years I have laboured at scripture with thee, and so far I have not glanced at thy face.'⁵¹ It seems a little odd that Dewi has not looked at his tutors face over the course of 10 years, and whilst it is possible that there is some truth to this, I suspect this is more symbolic of Dewi's progress in learning and parallels perhaps similarly stories of restored sight that we see in the Gospels, such as that seen in Mark 8:22-26. The narrative continues, after admiring Dewi's excessive modesty, Paulinus says 'as it is so, it will suffice that thou bless my eyes with a touch and I shall be well'. Paulinus, has complete faith that Dewi will restore his sight, in similar gospel accounts this might be seen as an acknowledgement of Jesus' authority, his divine power and presence and his closeness to God. Whilst no one is entertaining the possibility that Dewi is divine, the story tells us of Dewi's supernatural power perhaps, or further expounds his sacerdotal capacity, and that Dewi had authority and closeness to God. Paulinus we are told is healed and thanks is given to God, before finally Paulinus blesses Dewi 'with all the blessings which are written in the Old Testament and in the New.'⁵²

The next section is overtly Rhygyfarch linking the story of the farmer and his talents see Matthew 25: 14-30, and the Parable of the sower see Mark 4, with that of Dewi, and his ministry. Paulinus is told by an angel that it is time for Dewi to double his talents, 'and consign the talent of wisdom entrusted to him' not to earthly things, but he should expand that which he has received from God, 'by amassing bundles of souls for the heavenly barns of eternal blessedness, bring them into the joy of the Lord.'⁵³ It continues with how with exhortation and sowing the seed of wheat, Dewi obtained 'the fruit of good harvest'⁵⁴ some were confined with barriers to the monastic cloister and others he weaned to follow a broader life 'whom he exhorted with divers instructions, from the deceitful lusts of worldly pleasures, he became all things to all men'.⁵⁵ Dewi then was called to increase the flock, through exhortation,

⁵¹ Ibid. 7

⁵² Ibid. 8

⁵³ Ibid. 8

⁵⁴ Ibid. 8

⁵⁵ Ibid. 8

through a monastic lifestyle and through engaging with a broader community, teaching them to avoid the temptations and idols of this world.

Rhygyfarch claims that Dewi founded no less than twelve monasteries, in Glastonbury, Bath, where it is claimed he caused the 'deadly water to become salutary with a blessing, he endowed it with perpetual heat, rendering it fit for people to bathe',⁵⁶ Croyland, Repton, Colva and Glascwm, Leominster, Raglan, Llan Gyvelach near Gower. Rhygyfarch also claims that Dewi cured Peibio, a blind king, by restoring light to his eyes, and two other saints *Boducat* and *Maitrum* submitted to him. There is no description of the healing, or the reasons behind these Saints submitting to Dewi.

After he founded these places, 'in the usual way'⁵⁷ Dewi we are told returned to Hen Vynyw. Whilst there he tells his cousin bishop Guistilianus that he had heard from an angel of the Lord who gave him insight into the place in which he would serve and how many would follow Christ as a result, 'he hath shown me a place whence few shall go to hell, for everyone who shall have been buried in the cemetery of that place in sound faith shall obtain mercy.'⁵⁸ It is here, after a word from the Angel, that Dewi makes his way to *Vallis Rosina* believed to be what we now know as St Davids, with many of his fellow disciples, where they made a fire in the name of the Lord, the smoke of which was seen for miles around and filled the skies.

A gentleman named Bwya, an Irishman, is overcome by the sight, and says to his wife that the kindler of this fire shall 'excel in power and renown in every part that the smoke of this sacrifice has encircled even to the end of the world, for that smoke as by token predicts his fame'.⁵⁹ The narrative continues with the wife becoming enraged that Dewi should have kindled a fire on land that she considered to be her husband's, and so sends Bwya and his troops to kill Dewi. However, as they arrive, they are overcome by an illness giving them no choice but to return home. As they went, they were uttering evils against God and Dewi. They arrive home to find all

⁵⁶ Ibid. 8

⁵⁷ Ibid. 9

⁵⁸ Ibid. 9

⁵⁹ Ibid. 10

their livestock, dead. Bwya, his wife and their household lament before realising their mistake and returning to seek Dewi's mercy. 'And Bwya gave that day to holy David the whole of Vallis Rosina for a perpetual possession.'⁶⁰ Dewi, this time described as 'the servant of God' restored to life Bwya's livestock. This whole episode links Dewi and his monastery to the land at Vallis Rosina and again points to Dewi's closeness with God.

The next two stories in the unfolding Life of Dewi are peculiar at best. Bwya's wife we are told is 'inflamed by malicious envy'⁶¹ and sends her female slaves to flaunt their naked selves and 'indulge in lewd talk'⁶² whilst in the sight of the saint and his disciples in the river Alun. The disciples are unable to endure this 'intolerable affront'⁶³ and so asked Dewi if they might leave. Dewi talks to them of Israel, and entering the promised land, exhorting them to stay strong, and with his words their hearts were strengthened, and he and his disciples fasted until morning. Whilst peculiar, this story tells us something of Dewi's chastity, his resolve and his commitment to Christ, and the sort of lifestyle and commitment he expected of his disciples. Rhygyfarch has not mentioned yet that a monastery was founded at Vallis Rosina, but we can perhaps make assumptions that by this stage they were certainly living a simple life committed to Christ alone.

Having failed at her attempts to tempt Dewi and his disciples, Bwya's wife takes her stepdaughter to the valley of the Alun, under the pretence of searching for *cucumeri*. She tricks the girl named Dunod, who Rhygyfarch tells us was guileless, a virgin and had lived a pious and chaste life, into laying her head on her stepmother's lap. She, Bwya's wife, quickly takes out a knife and cuts off the girl's head. The girl's blood flowed out onto the earth, and a clear spring of water, with healing properties sprang up. Bwya's wife disappears, Bwya himself wept bitterly, and David and his disciples sang praises to God. There seems to be some sacrificial element to this act, we have an unblemished, not unlike the unblemished sacrificial lambs we see in the Old Testament scripture, and of course in the person of Jesus; here is a pure young girl

⁶⁰ Ibid. 10

⁶¹ Ibid. 10

⁶² Ibid. 11

⁶³ Ibid. 11

who unknowingly lays down to her death. Equally, the women dancing and flaunting themselves in the river, could be seen as a parallel to the daughter of Herodias, Salome and her request to have John the Baptist's head bought to her mother on a platter in Matthew 14: 1-12. This is synonymous with the story of Bwya, who in his grief resolved to kill David, has his own head cut off by an enemy. Rhygyfarch makes it very clear that this was the Lord's doing, to protect David.

The malice of enemies having thus been expelled by the good God, the monastic community in the Lord built a notable monastery in the place, which the angel had foreshown.⁶⁴

In this first half, Rhygyfarch has told us about the reaches of Dewi's ministry, about his authority and power over living things, that the land known as Vallis Rosina would be forever Dewi's and above all that he is a servant of God. We know that Rhygyfarch was convinced of God's love of Dewi and the power and authority he bestowed upon him, and much like the bible we see that there is an important relationship between Dewi, God, the people and the land. This is further explored in the next half of the life of St David, which looks more closely at the community life and the exploits of Dewi himself.

According to Rhygyfarch after completing the monastery, Dewi expected a rigorous communal life from his monks. They were all to work daily, spending their life together, working with their hands, 'he subjected the shoulders of the monks to divine fatigues'⁶⁵ so that they were not tempted, for according to Rhygyfarch those who spend time in leisurely pursuits have an unstable spirit that is likely to lead to lust. The work was hard labour, digging the ground, cutting, ploughing it would seem, was also done by the monks, providing all the community needed with their own hands. They had no possessions that they called their own and rejected gifting from the 'unjust'. This was done without complaint, and with very little talking, except that which was necessary. All work was done communally and in prayer and meditation.

When the day's work was done, they all returned to their own cells, and spent the rest of the day until evening studying or praying. As the bell was heard tolling in the evening the monks would leave their study and make their way to church. Here we

⁶⁴ Ibid. 12

⁶⁵ Ibid. 13

are told they would chant the psalms, worshipping until they saw the stars in the sky, signalling the day had ended, although it had not actually ended for the monks as we shall see later. Dewi, who Rhygyfarch is now calling father, would after all had left, say a prayer to God about the state of the Church.

Some relief would come as supper was enjoyed communally, although not to excess 'for too much, though it be bread only produces wantonness.'⁶⁶ Food was distributed according to age and health, and to others they provided for the sick, those advanced in age and those who had been on long journeys, 'some refreshments of a more appetising sort, for one must not weigh out to all in equal measure.'⁶⁷ After supper and the giving of thanks, they return to church where they continue in their prayers and genuflections, making themselves ready for sleep. In the morning at the cockcrows, they began their day with prayer. The Sabbath was also spent in prayer.

Rhygyfarch tells us that the monks 'open out their thoughts to the father'⁶⁸ perhaps taking the form of spiritual direction or confession, they asked him for permission to do things 'even the requirements of nature'⁶⁹ we are told. Spiritual direction or *anamchara* was commonplace 'the practice of *anamchairdeas*, spiritual direction, literally 'soul-friendship', ... was a great help towards fervour of life and the promotion of private penance and confession.'⁷⁰ Nothing belonged to anyone, and penance was undertaken if anyone claimed an object. They were obedient to Dewi's orders, they persevered in all their work, and Rhygyfarch describes them as upright.

It was no easy task becoming a member of Dewi's community. If you wanted to enter the community you would first have to stay for ten days at the doors of the monastery, being rejected and subjected to critical and judgemental words. But if they managed to endure such a thing, at the tenth day the elder who had authority over the entrance would let him in and serve him. However, that was not the end, for only after having laboured for some time, he was finally considered worthy enough to become a full member. Poverty was a thing to be sought after, and any worldly

⁶⁶ Ibid. 14

⁶⁷ Ibid. 14

⁶⁸ Ibid. 14

⁶⁹ Ibid. 14

⁷⁰ Cheslyn Jones, ed., *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986). 222

goods a person bought with them should be renounced, Dewi would not accept anything into the monastery in case it was used to gain rank among the others, equality was key to the community working well.

Rhygyfarch's focus now turns to Dewi himself, and his practices. Dewi spent much time in prayer and meditation, he consecrated and partook of Communion, and spent time in 'angelic discourse.'⁷¹ After which he would be found lingering in cold water, in which 'he subdued every heat of the flesh.'⁷² He would spend his day teaching, praying, caring for his brethren, and feeding the pilgrims and those who were most in need. We are told that he continued from beginning to end, and whilst there is little space to tell of the rest of his severe living, only that he led a life similar to the Egyptian monks.

The name and reputation of Dewi led many kings and princes to abandon their kingdoms and seek the monastery. Rhygyfarch tells us that Constantine, king of the Cornishmen abandoned his kingdom to follow Dewi, and that when he had followed that way of life for a long time, he too founded a monastery. This type of model is not dissimilar to our own 21st century concept of church planting, whereby churches grow, resource and disciple people, so that they too might do the same.

Rhygyfarch returns to Dewi and the miracles he performed, there is little space to look at all of them, and so I have chosen a few of significance.

Similar to the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, the first story is about Dewi's response to his monks who are concerned that through winter, they will have plenty of water, but in the summer clear water was scarce. Dewi takes himself to a place nearby, and after praying long and hard for the water they needed, a 'fountain of clearest water'⁷³ appeared and because the country was not fruitful in vines, the water was turned to wine. There was another miracle concerning water, on both occasions, there was a need for water on the part of Dewi's brothers or neighbours, in response Dewi came before God in humility and prayed, and the land

⁷¹ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 15

⁷² Ibid. 15

⁷³ Ibid. 16

provided in the shape of clear fountains bursting forth from the earth. Dewi is in the mind of Rhygyfarch and by extension those who have passed these stories down, a very significant and holy man, and whilst our 21st Century brain tries to find natural reasons for the miracles, in the minds of those who were concerned about where water might come from, Dewi having found a well would have been seen as miraculous. We should perhaps not so quickly dismiss miracles, these brothers and Dewi himself were open to the possibility that God would provide for them, and indeed God did provide.

There is a miracle concerning Saint Aeddán, in which the relationship with the Gospel becomes more overt, as Rhygyfarch tells us of the next miracle which happens on Easter Eve. An angel appears to Aeddán, and he is warned that someone, one of the monks will try to poison Dewi on Easter Day at mealtime. The angel instructs Aeddán to send a servant to tell Dewi. By this point Aeddán is in Ireland, and so to get a message to Dewi in time would require a miracle. The angel obliges and aids Aeddán's disciple Scutinus, across the sea, with the help of a sea monster.

Dewi had finished the Easter services, and was making his way with the other monks to the refectory for food. On his way he meets his former disciple Scutinus who tells him of the plot to poison him. Just briefly, it is worth recognising here the reaches of Dewi's ministry. Scutinus is a former disciple of Dewi's who now finds himself a disciple of Aeddán's in Ireland. As they all gave thanks to God for the food which they were about to receive, the deacon who intended to do the deed, stood and went to prepare the bread with poison. Scutinus, intercepts the deacon and offers to serve Dewi instead. The deacon withdrew to the table, astonished and confused. Dewi takes the bread and splits it into three parts. He gave one part to the dog, who we are told in great detail died a horrible death. He gave the second part to a raven which was nesting between the refectory and the river, the raven also died. Finally, Dewi held the third part in his hand, he blessed it, and he ate it giving thanks. All of the brethren looked at him in amazement for about three hours. 'He dauntless preserved his life intact, no sign of the deadly poison appearing'.⁷⁴ This narrative,

⁷⁴ Ibid. 19

which has some parallels with the story of the last supper and Jesus' betrayal see Matt 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-20; John 13:1-30, tells us of Dewi's closeness and absolute trust that God will let nothing bad come of him. Even his fellow monks were amazed at what had happened. Someone, has tried to kill Dewi, proven by the two unfortunate animals dying in such horrific ways, and yet, Dewi survives, the bread is eaten. As far as miracles go it sounds a pretty audacious claim. However, and we must be careful not to read too much or too little into this, it is perfectly plausible that someone did try and kill Dewi. It is also plausible that knowing that someone was trying to poison him, he gave some to the dog, some to the raven and ate the final part himself. Whatever poison that was used having been split between three beings, the dosage may have been enough to kill a dog and a raven but not a full-grown human. This is just supposition on my part, there is no idea of the type or amount of poison used, but to dismiss as a story or myth without considering that it may actually have happened, could leave us dismissing parts of Dewi's story that may be important. Whether or not the story is true, or based in truth, Rhygyfarch is highlighting that God has gone to great lengths to ensure that Dewi is not harmed, including sending angels. Dewi is favoured by God, of that Rhygyfarch leaves us in no doubt. Unlike many other hagiographical accounts, such as that of Thomas Beckett, Dewi was not martyred, like many other saints it is perhaps significant that he lived a long and fruitful life.

After following the directions of an angel, Dewi makes his way to Jerusalem with two other saints, Teilo and Padarn. Whilst there, Dewi is made Bishop and given a series of gifts, including a bell, an altar stone, a Bachall which is a shepherds crook or crozier, and a tunic woven with gold. This story seems innocuous enough, but in actual fact it is probably written to assert Dewi over and above the other two Welsh Saints, remembering that Rhygyfarch was trying to establish St Davids as the heart of the Welsh Church, over and above Canterbury.

On his return to Wales, at the Synod of Brefi, Dewi is asked to speak out against the Pelagian heresy, after several people had already attempted to persuade those listening to no avail, because their voices were inaudible. Paulinus describes Dewi to the gathering as 'an eloquent man, full of grace, approved in religion, who has an angel as comrade, a loveable man, pleasing in feature, distinguished in form, upright

in stature of four cubits.⁷⁵ As a result, messengers are sent on a few occasions, but Dewi refuses to attend. Finally, two holy men, Daniel and Dubricius are sent. Dewi we are told has foreseen this and tells his monks to receive them with joy and procure fishes with bread and water. The two men refuse to eat, until Dewi agrees to go with them, and so he does.

As they make their way to the Synod, Dewi hears a woman crying close by and so goes to her aid, finding that she is mourning the death of her child Magnus. Dewi comforted her but having heard of Dewi's fame she begged him that he should have pity on her. Dewi went to the body of her son, prayed to the Lord asking him to restore the boy to life, he put water on the boy's face, and threw himself on the dead boy's body. The boy's life was restored, and returning the boy to his mother, Dewi laid a Gospel on Magnus' shoulder. The boy went to the Synod with Dewi, and lived a holy life for many years, and all who knew about the miracle praised the Lord and Dewi. This story has similar parallels in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 4: 18 – 37 the story of Elisha raising the Shunammite's son from the dead. The stories are very similar, and in the Old Testament, the woman calls Elisha 'the man of God', Rhygyfarch describes Dewi in this particular section as the 'man of God'. We are not told how long the boy had been dead for, was he in fact dead or perhaps overcome with exhaustion, maybe he had a seizure of sorts. There are any number of factors that could have left the mother believing her boy to be dead. It may be, that he was dead, and that Dewi inadvertently resuscitated him as a result of throwing himself across the boy's body. Either way, it would have appeared miraculous to both the mother and to those watching Dewi. Again, regardless of the truth, what we are being told here is that Dewi had faith that God would heal the boy if he asked. Similarly, the woman had faith enough in Dewi that he was close enough to God to ask such a thing. Most importantly with all of these miracles is the absolute reliance on God. In each case, Dewi asks the impossible from God and God provides.

We are told that when he enters the Synod, the company of bishops rejoice, the people are glad and the whole army exults, such is the fame of Dewi. He is asked to preach and is offered a pile of garments to stand upon. Dewi instead asks the boy he

⁷⁵ Ibid. 25

has just raised from the dead to lay out a handkerchief. Dewi stands on the handkerchief, and he is able to expound the gospel and the law loudly and audibly 'as a trumpet.'⁷⁶ A snow white pigeon, presumably a dove lands on Dewi's shoulder and remains there throughout his exposition and as he is speaking the ground beneath him erupts upwards into a hill, allowing him to be seen by all. Dewi convinces them that Pelagianism is a heresy, and all are in agreement.

As a result of his teachings, we are told that in full agreement with all bishops, kings, princes and nobles, that he is 'made archbishop, and his monastery too is declared the metropolis of the whole country, so that whoever ruled it should be accounted archbishop.'⁷⁷ Further, we are told that throughout the country Dewi's brethren built monasteries throughout the country and his influence was great -

He was the standard for all, he was consecration, he was benediction, he was absolution and correction, learning to readers, life to the needy, nourishment to orphans, support to widows, head to the country, rule to the monks, a way to seculars, all things to all men.⁷⁸

Further, we are told that all bishops surrendered to him, agreeing to his right of sanctuary, 'because he is head and leader and primate over all the Britons.'⁷⁹ Rhygyfarch goes so far as to describe him as head of all the Britannic race, and tells us that he lived to age 147. This was an attempt by Rhygyfarch to ensure that St Davids became the home of the Archbishop, remembering that we are talking at this time of the Archbishop for the whole of the catholic church in Britain. Rhygyfarch was set on ensuring the centre of the church was in Wales, and that everyone knew about it.

Eight days before the first of March, Dewi is visited by an angel, a voice he recognises well, bringing him the news, 'prepare and gird thyself. On the first of March the Lord Jesus Christ, accompanied by a great host of angels, will come to meet thee.'⁸⁰ With great courage, as his brethren were lamenting and the monastery was overflowing with tears, Dewi sustained and comforted his brothers continuing to

⁷⁶ Ibid. 26

⁷⁷ Ibid. 27

⁷⁸ Ibid. 28

⁷⁹ Ibid. 28

⁸⁰ Ibid. 29

preach. The news that Dewi was about to 'migrate from this light to the Lord,'⁸¹ made its way to other monasteries and many made their way at pace to see Holy Dewi before his death. After preaching, consecrating and partaking of the Lord's Body and Blood, Dewi we are told is seized with pain and becomes unwell, and on the 3rd day of the week, as the cock crowed, Dewi is met by Jesus, "take me" said he, "after thee." With these words he gave back his life to God, Christ being his companion, and accompanied by the angelic host he went to the abodes of Heaven.'⁸² This is particularly emotive, and what is very telling is that even when he knew that his time was coming to an end, he was the one to comfort and sustain his brethren. That is real faith, real devotion, and real trust in a God who was so faithful to Dewi throughout.

The Life finishes with a section about Rhygyfarch himself, followed by prayers and post communion prayers that were written and continue to be used on St Davids day. Rhygyfarchs work, I hope I have established as a piece of writing that tells some of the truth, whilst pointing us to the truths of who Dewi was to the people of Wales, what he represented as a figure for the church in wales throughout many centuries, and that he continues to have significance for the church and people of Wales now. I have shown that his significance is not restrained by historical accuracy or inaccuracy, but that it is in the stories and memories of people that Dewi stays alive and influences the people and the church.

Dewi's Spirituality: Relationship with God, People & Land

As Rhygyfarch pointed out, much of monasticism had its roots in the far reaches of the Eastern church. Particularly in Egypt, where it had been growing and evolving for a long time before it reached the West. However, the Eastern Monastics were more solitary, in contrast to the Western Monasteries who were very much communal.

Dewi's community, like many monasteries of the time were established not because of a need to evangelise, or be missional to people, but rather to remain strong in the faith and to stay away from the temptations of the world, 'they regarded society as

⁸¹ Ibid. 29

⁸² Ibid. 30

corrupt...'⁸³ They were not in any way founded to be missional communities and yet, 'for upward of seven hundred years, from the fifth century to the twelfth, the monastery was not only the centre of culture and civilisation, but also of mission.'⁸⁴

However, Rhygyfarch tells us that Dewi was given a mandate to be 'missional' although given what we know of monasticism, it is more likely that Rhygyfarch wrote what he did in light of Dewi's success. Dewi's monastery drew significant amounts of pilgrims, and even today some 250,000 visitors come to see the shrine of Dewi Sant in the Cathedral every year. The mid sections of Rhygyfarch's Life, that which we can rely on to give us a relatively accurate description of what life was like for Dewi and his brethren, describes the community's way of life and 'David's asceticism is a fact consistent with what we know of the Wales of his time.'⁸⁵ Within the description Rhygyfarch mentioned that the form of ascetism was similar to that of the Egyptian monks, who followed an extreme form of ascetism. It cannot be ignored that this was how Dewi and his brethren lived. However, it is unlikely that Dewi's extreme ascetism alone would have been enough to draw these people to him. There must have been something about the lifestyle, the culture, the way of being that he expressed; that meant people were willing to leave their homes and make their way to him from the farthest reaches of the globe to be a part of his community.

Dewi expected much from his brethren and those who visited the monastery. It was not an easy life, but it was genuine. Dewi and his brethren genuinely tried to live a life that was Christ like, they humbled themselves and served the needs of others, which at the time was completely contrary to the secular world around them. 'In an age of insecurity, disorder, and barbarism, the monastery embodied the ideal of spiritual order...'⁸⁶ This was a way of life where speed was replaced with thought and process, where the desires of the world were forgotten and replaced with desiring Jesus, and where community, equality, poverty of material goods, yet richness of spiritual being were at the forefront of all they did. They modelled to the world around them a different way, a way that appealed to many, both rich and poor.

⁸³ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth anniversary ed, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011). 236

⁸⁴ Ibid. 235

⁸⁵ Evans and Wooding, *St. David of Wales*. 16

⁸⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. 237

People were spiritually starving, and needed to be fed, they found that food, in the person and place of Dewi and St Davids.

Rhygyfarch drew a convincing picture of Dewi's relationship with God, with people and with the land, and this was underpinned by study and teaching of the scriptures, prayer and fasting, celebration of the Eucharist, and the prophetic imagination of Dewi and his brethren. I believe it is in these areas of relationship that we can build an understanding of Dewi's spirituality. What follows is my own reflections upon Dewi's relationship with God, people and the land, based upon what I know of Dewi from Rhygyfarch's life.

Dewi and God

Rhygyfarch makes it clear that Dewi is favoured by God, and that he has a close relationship with God throughout his life. Dewi we are told is born as a result of rape, to a woman believed to be of an upright, and faithful nature herself. Without wanting to put words in the mouth of Rhygyfarch, Dewi or anyone else, that type of event, being born as a result of rape has an effect on a person. Whether the 6th Century or 21st Century, it makes a difference to your life, and leaves scars. However, God promises that no matter what he will make all things right. In Genesis 16: 1- 16 we hear the story of Sarai, Hagar and Abram. Sarai cannot have children, and so tells her husband Abram to go to the slave girl Hagar and she will bear him a son. Now the bible does not describe this as an act of rape, but essentially the girl is raped, she had no choice in the matter, as a slave girl and hand maid to Sarai. From then on, the relationship she has with her mistress is different, she looks at Sarai in lower esteem,⁸⁷ causing a tension Sarai cannot abide, and so Sarai makes life unbearable for Hagar and the girl leaves, pregnant with Abrams son Ishmael. The Lord finds Hagar by a spring of water and asks her 'where have you come from and where are you going?' Hagar tells the Lord that she has run away, the Lord asks her to return to Sarai, but he also makes Hagar a promise that he will greatly multiply her offspring, and therefore she will be saved through her son. Hagar, being faithful does as the Lord asks of her and returns to Sarai. Later, God promises a son to Sarah, the child

⁸⁷ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). 12

Isaac is born and this leads to more trouble for Hagar, as Isaac and Ishmael play together, Sarah becomes jealous, and so she asks Abraham to get rid of Hagar, described now as Hagar the Egyptian and their son Ishmael. Abraham is very distressed about this on account of his Son Ishmael, but God reassures him, instructing Abraham to do as Sarah has asked. So, Abraham took bread and water to Hagar putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. When the water had run out, Hagar became distressed, fearing her child would die, so she placed him at a distance, not wanting to see his death. The Lord hears her crying, and told her to lift up the boy, reminding her that he promised to make a great nation of him. God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water, and she gave the boy a drink. See Genesis 21:20-21

I have used this story because of its many parallels and similarities to the story of Non and Dewi her son, but also as a reminder that God promises to redeem even the most difficult of situations. It is not too much of an assumption to make that St Non would have brought Dewi up in the faith, and in ways that were typical of that time. Dewi was baptised, and was studious in his study of the scriptures, paying particular attention to the psalms. Throughout, we are told that he is not only revealed to others by means of angelic discourse, but that he too is constantly aware of angelic messengers. Dewi is very aware of his Heavenly Father, he expects to hear from him, he goes to quiet and remote places on the Dewisland peninsular to commune with God and is open to all that God might reveal to him. Much like Ishmael, God is with Dewi and Non always, he redeems the situation. Non would have been shunned, she would have been ostracized by those who should have known better, and yet her story which in my opinion is as important as Dewi's, is one where God makes right all those wrongs, comes alongside Dewi and is his constant companion throughout life. Much like Hagar, we hear very little about Non, except through the stories written about Dewi.

Dewi and People

Community and people are of huge importance for Dewi, which seems like I am stating the obvious. However, in a time of great political upheaval, when the divide between the rich and the poor was great, and when Christianity was at a pivot point in its history, when a person's mortality and the state of their soul was at the forefront

of their thinking as several plagues made their way across the British Isles. It is hardly surprising that there was a need for people to feel loved, to feel part of something, to try and understand life and death, and to work towards eternal life. Dewi and his brethren were in community together, they lived as family, as equals, they worked together, eating together, holding all things in common. They exhibited a life that appealed to people in their darkest times. Whilst this lifestyle was not one that all could follow explicitly, we are told that Dewi

...not ploughing equally, with much force in the case of an ox and with less in the case of an ass, administering the strong meat of life to some and the milk of pious exhortation to others, confining some within the barriers of a monastic cloister and weaning others, who followed a broader life and whom he exhorted with divers instructions, from the deceitful lusts of worldly pleasures, he became all things to all men.⁸⁸

Dewi knew how to handle people, how to teach them, how to be with them, both those within the monastery and those outside of it. His discernment, how he should address or teach a person, how he should be with them, or comfort them in their time of need, and how he steered them away from the temptations of the world should not be underestimated. There is something very significant about not ploughing equally, and yet all being equal, and particularly when it comes to bringing people into the fold. So often we teach the basics to those who need a deeper level of understanding, and dive into things far too deeply for those who are the beginning of their journey. It is important, that we do not change the content of our teaching, but perhaps the order in which we teach, the way that it is taught and the words that we use.

Dewi and the land

Returning to the story of Hagar, on two occasions Hagar found herself exiled from the safety of Abrahams encampment, first on her own accord, and secondly when Abraham had to ask her to leave. Wandering into the desert, into the wilderness, she found herself in communion with God. Eventually, she and Ishmael may have found their way back to Egypt, where we are told she came from and where she found a wife for Ishmael. Dewi also on his own accord left his home, and if we believe the

⁸⁸ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 8

turn of events in Rhygyfarch's writing, find that Dewi wanders around a large portion of Britain, establishing monasteries as he went, before finally returning to his home. Many brothers of the monastic traditions would find themselves on pilgrimages of some form or other and Dewi was no different. 'The height of asceticism among the Celts was considered to be exile and perpetual pilgrimage for the sake of Christ.'⁸⁹ These were times of exile, or wilderness, a time for communing with God. Equally, and perhaps in contrast was the monastic culture's sense of place, and their relationship with the land. Whilst this should not be romanticised or seen through 21st century lenses with climate change filters, Dewi's monastery clearly respected, worked with and enjoyed the fruits of the land on which they worked. The monastery too was in a place of some isolation, surrounded by sea on pretty much three sides. The Dewisland Peninsular is and always has been a place that feels far from anywhere and is perhaps not dissimilar in many ways to the wilderness that Hagar experienced. Standing by the chapel that marks where Non gave birth to Dewi, you can look out and feel surrounded by nothingness, as though you are on the edge of the world, or perhaps nearer to God.

I believe that Dewi's spirituality, was probably much the same as other monastic traditions of the time, deeply rooted in the study of scripture, prayer, fasting and the manual labour in which they partook.⁹⁰ However, my understanding of Dewi's spirituality is also deeply incarnational. Everything that he did, everything he was, was his spirituality. 'Nature was a kind of second sacred book, parallel to the scriptures that revealed the divine'.⁹¹ I understand spirituality to be the way in which we seek the divine, and the way in which God is revealed to us. There is no doubt that this was done through, prayer, fasting, study of the scripture, partaking of communion and extreme ascetic practices, but it is also clear to me that God was revealed to Dewi through the land in which he roamed and unusually settled, the people to whom he ministered and loved and through direct relationship with Christ himself.

⁸⁹ Jones, *The Study of Spirituality*. 220

⁹⁰ Ibid. 219

⁹¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Living between World: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995). 73

Mission: Impossible

It is impossible to define mission, because it is beyond our understanding and capacity to define what is of God. Bosch describes it as a 'multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting...'⁹² Mission is and has always been the work of God, who is our creator, our redeemer and our sanctifier. It is through him that we, the church, partakes in mission and only through him. 'Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.'⁹³ Mission is contextual, it is at its best when the church involves itself in the mission of God in a specific place, paying attention, and joining in with what God is already doing. It is incarnational; we cannot be missional from a distance, we have to immerse ourselves in the societies, places, cultures in which we find ourselves called, and open ourselves to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and joining in with the *Missio Dei*.⁹⁴ It is important that we hold this in mind as we consider what Dewi can teach us for mission and ministry today. The following will look briefly at how the Anglican communion defines how we might recognise mission, and whether or not Dewi was missional by 21st century standards, and then I will return to Bosch and his multidimensional facets of mission. Please note, that whilst Bosch's work was actually written in the 20th Century it continues to be of significance and relevance today. It is for this reason that I will use Bosch's model to help us understand further, Dewi's missional approach.

The Five Marks of Mission taken from the Anglican Communion website are as follows – To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; to teach, baptise and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.⁹⁵

⁹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

⁹³ Ibid. 402

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Anglican Communion Office, 'Anglican Communion: Marks of Mission', *Anglican Communion Website*, accessed 16 March 2020, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

Whilst these are helpful markers for us, they cannot be used fully to assess the quality of Dewi's efforts as a missionary or evangelist. They are written with our current context in mind, language such as the safeguarding of creation would not even have been considered in the 6th Century. However, as a marker for us it is helpful to look back and see how Dewi's lifestyle, his practices and his way of being were meeting those markers, even if unintentionally.

Dewi without a doubt was proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, in fact as we have read, on the morning he became ill, shortly before his death he was preaching to his congregation, he was well known for his ability to teach and preach the gospel and was believed to be responsible for the dispelling of the Pelegian heresy. He eagerly taught and nurtured people in many different ways fitting to them, and we can assume that he either baptised those in his care or encouraged them to be baptised by the relevant priest or bishop at the time. We know that he fed the sick, needy and oppressed, that he cared for them and encouraged his brethren to do the same, serving each other and those who came to the monastery. One of the reasons people established monasteries was to remove themselves from a secular society that was prone to temptation. Whilst it could be argued that in establishing such a community, he was removing himself and his brethren from the society in which the community was settled, we can also argue that in doing such a thing he was representing another way, modelling a structure that was not unjust. As a result, people were leaving the unjust structures behind and choosing another way. I mentioned earlier that we cannot look at Dewi and his community through the filters and lenses of the climate extinction crisis and safeguarding creation is not something that would have been on the agenda of Dewi and his brethren. However, this was a time when people relied heavily on growing their own produce, the land was an important part of being able to survive in a time when mass production was not even thought of. By its very nature the monastery was safeguarding creation by being sustainable in its practices and processes. Based upon our 21st century five marks of mission, Dewi and his brethren were very much part of a missional community.

I return to Bosch and what he terms as the 'faces of the church in mission.'⁹⁶ Bosch lays out a profile of mission, based upon the six salvific events we see in the New

⁹⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. 524

Testament. These are the Incarnation, the Cross, The Resurrection, The Ascension, Pentecost and the Parousia. He says that none of these can be held on their own, but instead the church needs to 'proclaim the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ, present among us in the Spirit and taking us into the future'.⁹⁷

The Incarnation – Bosch argues that the church needs to recognise that Jesus was human, 'who wearily trod the dusty roads of Palestine where he took compassion on those who were marginalised.'⁹⁸ He goes on to say that too often, the church will offer a home to all but has no understanding or empathy with those who are marginalised. He says that the church that refuses to practice solidarity with victims 'has lost its relevance'.⁹⁹ He continues to say that the person and practice of Jesus has much to say about mission today. Dewi I have argued was incarnational in all he did, he did all he could to live a life that was simple, he reached out to those who were marginalised and oppressed. He comforted those who were in need, he understood the needs of his fellow brethren, tormented by sexual desires "Let us fly from this place because we cannot dwell here owing to the molestation of these spiteful sluts."¹⁰⁰ Yet Dewi did not succumb to temptation, instead teaching them and standing alongside them as they wrestled with every human frailty and desire. 'for he who seeks the promise of the heavenly country, must needs be wearied with adversities and yet not overcome, but at the last with Christ as comrade conquer the unclean stain of vices.'¹⁰¹ Later we are told that Dewi poured 'forth fountains of tears daily, irradiating with censured holocausts of prayers, and blazing with a double flame of charity... after this he immediately used to seek cold water, in which by lingering a whole while wet he subdued every heat of the flesh...'¹⁰² In all we do in 21st century Wales and the church, we must do with the sincerity and with genuine understanding of the world in which we live. We must walk with compassion and be prepared to walk alongside those who are broken in so many ways. We must not stand from a position of grace but remember as Jesus did that all are broken and need that grace. We cannot stand in ivory towers looking down upon the world, inviting people to join us in the tower, but instead we must walk through the swamp with them. To a certain

⁹⁷ Ibid. 530

⁹⁸ Ibid. 524

⁹⁹ Ibid. 525

¹⁰⁰ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*. 11

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 11

¹⁰² Ibid. 15

extent Dewi removed himself from society and so the parallel that we draw must take into account that Dewi whilst open to all, had removed himself and his brethren from a society full of temptation. However, he also had been a part of that society and continued to be a part of that society. In the story of the transfiguration see Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36, Jesus and his disciples made their way up the mountain, and Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, his appearance changed in some way, described as his clothes becoming dazzling white. They were removed if only for a time, to reflect upon the glory of God. Peter, who insisted on pitching a tent, for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, missed the point. Whilst it was important to spend time on the mountain, to see Jesus in his true glory, to pray, to spend time with the prophets of the past, all would be wasted, if they had not returned to normality, to the society in which they belonged. The monastery was a haven, a mountain, a place of transformation, a place for refuge, renewal and refreshment, brought about by prayer, sacrament and teaching, but it was not a place shut off from the rest of society, it still engaged and walked alongside people from far and wide, the brethren still came off the mountain top to walk alongside those in society. As ministers both lay and ordained, we need to ensure that we are incarnational in not just our ministry, but in all we do, every facet of our being needs to be embedded in society, connecting with all of creation. However, like Dewi we need also to find times upon the mountain top. We need to be deeply embedded in scripture, in creation, in prayer in all those places in which God is revealed to us. This is not something which should be taken lightly, whilst the asceticism of the monastic communities may have been extreme, it did ground them. We need to ensure that we are grounded, most firmly in God.

The Cross – Christ died for our sins, of that there is no doubt. Bosch takes this further and says that this cannot be separated from the life of Jesus, that his self-emptying, his giving of himself began at his birth. That it was his very incarnation, his relationships with those marginalised by society, his refusal to follow unjust rules and norms that led to his crucifixion. The cross is a means by which all, the oppressed and oppressor are reconciled, and commit to a new way, based on justice and peace. It means loving even those who are our enemies. In the crucifixion, scars were left, and a model was revealed,¹⁰³ Bosch continues that our mission is a

¹⁰³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. 526

mission of self-emptying and humble service, it is sacrificial, and 'it tells us that mission cannot be realised when we are powerful and confident but only when we are weak and at a loss.'¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, and quite rightly, Bosch points out that even righteousness comes under judgement, as those things perceived to be just today, may be unjust tomorrow. Slavery at one point in our history was considered 'just' and therefore we need to be aware that whilst our actions may be righteous in our eyes, they may not be what God had planned. Looking back at Dewi and his community I am sure that Dewi certainly felt as though he was self-emptying, giving all he could to humble himself and become Christ like in his endeavours. He certainly loved his brethren and those who came to him. As I re-read the story of the attempt on Dewi's life, it became apparent to me how difficult it is to distance myself from my own culture and societal ideals, as well as my own theology. As I read that the brethren 'all stood up and lamented aloud and cursed those treacherous men... and damned them and their successors, declaring with one voice that they should never have a part in the heavenly kingdom throughout eternity,'¹⁰⁵ I was more than a little disappointed in Dewi and his brethren that they were so quick to judge. However, perhaps we should be reminded that each generation has produced different theologies, understandings of atonement, the wrath of God, and of salvation. As we look at Dewi we should be reminded that only Jesus was perfect, that when we empty ourselves, humble ourselves and sacrifice for others, we do so only in the bounds of our understanding of the world, but nevertheless, as we are all transformed by God's grace, we surely must continue to strive to be more like Christ as a missional church and as individuals. We must remain humble in our activities, always pointing towards the cross and the saving actions of Jesus.

Resurrection – Without the resurrection there is no hope, no victory over death, no power over evil, no joy. However, it cannot be without death, there is no rising to new life unless death occurs, and so the cross and the resurrection are inextricably linked. The resurrection leaves us on 'two planes' of existence, holding in one hand the hope and excitement of the resurrection, the promise of eternal life, and the ever present now.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 527

¹⁰⁵ Wade-Evans, *Life of St David*.

Bosch tells us that it is part of our mission to hold these two sides of the coin in the here and now. He says:

The central theme of our missionary message is that Christ is risen, and that, secondly and consequently, the church is called to live the resurrection life in the here and now and to be a sign of contradiction against the forces of death and destruction-that it is called to unmask modern idols and false absolutes.¹⁰⁶

We must preach, teach and be the resurrection, the victory over the cross. We must inhabit a different way. Standing up to those 'forces of death and destruction' that were just as present in the 6th Century as they are now. Those forces of death and destruction may well have looked slightly different in the 6th century, but they were definitely there. Dewi made his way around the country setting up monasteries, he reached many thousands of people, in many different geographical locations, preaching the hope of the resurrection, the victory over death on the cross. Plagues, political upheaval, and power struggles between kings, politicians and so forth led to a society that was uncertain for many. Dewi established many communities, he wandered Britain, teaching and preaching the resurrection, but he modelled a different way, he modelled a way of life that was of itself life giving, where all were equal and no one went hungry, by who he was and what he did he was showing a life that led to human flourishing and joy, rather than one of death and destruction. Now, we know more and more about what it takes for a person to flourish, but our priorities in the west particularly, are geared toward gross domestic product and the next piece of technology that will increase our productivity. Our governments and leaders focus on academia and success rates, rather than the mental health and well-being of the individual. We have a consumer mentality, we each need to have the newest and best phone, car, television and so forth, and yet none of this gives us life, none of this leads to the joy of the resurrection, but instead it leads to momentary happiness, that fades away until we can buy the next best thing. Like Dewi, we need to not only teach and preach the resurrection, the victory over the cross, but we need to live it. We need to model it to others. As priests in training, we are told by those teaching us to ensure that we fit time in our schedules, for rest, for prayer, for quiet. This should not be an aside, this should be a part of our modelling Christ likeness to others. The church needs to pull back the veil of consumerism and reveal the sacred once again. We cannot preach one thing and do another. I called Dewi's community 'genuine'

¹⁰⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. 527

earlier, it is in our being 'genuine' that people will be drawn to us and the resurrection life that we proclaim.

Ascension – Put simply, the ascension is the 'enthronement of the crucified and risen Christ'.¹⁰⁷ Christ, has been crucified, has been resurrected, and now he reigns as King in the heavenly places. All of creation is therefore under the rule of Christ, not only the church, which Bosch describes as the 'present embodiment of God's reign',¹⁰⁸ but all of society, past, present and future. We cannot be church, unless we are embedded in the society in which we find ourselves. God's reign is here and yet it is not yet complete. It is our mission to make that reign more discernible, obvious and tangible in a world that increasingly denies the existence of God. If we are making God known and showing the world what those of us with faith know, then God cannot be denied. Dewi and his brethren met need in the places in which they found themselves, and whilst they remained set apart, they simultaneously involved themselves in their communities. They lived for the kingdom, Dewi himself believed in and used the power God gave him to show the world. Miracles were commonplace, healing and prayer, feeding the poverty stricken, and loving all, was part of all he did. Bosch writes, 'we are called to be a community of those committed to the values of God's reign, concern ourselves with the victims of society and proclaim God's judgement on those who continue to worship the gods of power and self-love.'¹⁰⁹ There cannot be one size fits all as to how we achieve this, we must discern how is the best way to reveal Christ's reign in the specific places we find ourselves in. We should not assume that miracles no longer happen, but instead be open to the possibility that God does reign and does act in the world. We need to be pointing people to Christ, making God visible to the world.

Pentecost – there is no church, there is no mission without the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Dewi constantly relied upon his relationship with God, through prayer, through fasting, and more overtly we see symbolism of the Holy Spirit coming upon Dewi at the Synod of Brefi and at other times throughout Rhygyfarch's life of St David. Icons are written depicting Dewi, with a dove sitting on his shoulder, symbolic of Dewi being with the Holy Spirit. Bosch describes the church present with the Holy

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 527

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 527

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 528

Spirit as a 'distinct community, but not a club, not a ghetto society.'¹¹⁰ It cannot contain and restrain the Holy Spirit, it is not something over which the church has ownership or control. The church is part of the wider 'human community' and as soon as it tries to understand its own being and meaning as separate from that human community, its purpose is lost. The Holy Spirit then is woven into all of creation, teaching, moulding, comforting and guiding the church. Acts 1:8 says

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

The Holy Spirit is given to all, 'it is this universal knowledge of God through Christ by the Spirit which is the foundation of the universal commission to witness. Because we know him, we must make him known.'¹¹¹ Dewi intimately knew God, intimately knew the Holy Spirit, because of this relationship he could be nothing but missional in all he did. It was his very being. His closeness to God meant that all he did was interwoven with the Holy Spirit. Every action, every deed, every time he fed the sick, the lonely, the oppressed, he did so in the power of the spirit. Because he knew him, he had no choice but to make him known. It is the Holy Spirit that holds all of these strands of Bosch's model together, none are possible without the other.

Parousia – The term can be understood in different ways but is linked to the second coming of Christ. In some models, God's reign is considered a future reality, and the Parousia will be the inauguration of that reign. However, Bosch also recognises that whilst we must look to the coming of Christ, because without that hope we are stuck in despair, we must also recognise our place in the story. God's reign is already present, and so we, the church, must be missional, expectantly awaiting the coming of Jesus, 'aware of its (the churches) provisional character, it lives and ministers as that force within humanity through which the renewal and community of all people is served.'¹¹² The church is merely a temporary source of missional activity until Jesus returns. It is the Parousia that I believe holds Dewi, his community and us together. Time is merely a construct, and God and his reign are outside of that time. As we

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 529

¹¹¹ John R. W Stott and Graham Benzie, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 2005). 74

¹¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. 530

await Jesus' coming again, we must understand that we are a part of a greater cloud of witnesses.

Conclusion

Dewi and his brethren were probably considered pioneering during their time and almost certainly faced challenges as we do today. However, it would be futile to try and transplant Dewi's sometimes extreme way of being into a 21st century context. What has become obvious though is a pattern, a model that can be translated into a 21st Century Welsh context or wherever you are in the world. It is a model of a deep-seated spirituality, that is rooted in scripture, prayer, creation, and a relational, humble service and self-emptying. I have shown, by looking closely at Dewi's life, that he was at the very core, missional in all he did. I have painted a picture of a man who found himself loved and cherished by God, and as a result found himself loving others. In John 15:12-17 Jesus tells his disciples "this is my commandment, that you love one another as I love you" and he continues "... You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." It is obvious to me that Jesus chose Dewi, that through the trauma of being born in the most difficult of circumstances, Dewi found himself redeemed and chosen, he knew God's love, and in return shared that love with all around him, bearing much fruit, for many generations. We should take heart from Dewi and his missional community, that all they did, was to accept the love God gave them sharing that love with others. We all need to know that we are chosen and know that we have been appointed to go and bear fruit. Finally, Dewi's last words to his brethren and to the people of Wales, was "be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things". What better way to sum up all that his life meant and continues to mean to the people of Wales today.

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