Year B Proper 33 – St Margaret of Scotland

Proverbs 31: 10-31, 2 Timothy 1: 1-7, Luke 11: 33-36

St Margaret of Scotland

Today we celebrate and remember the life of Margaret, Queen of Scotland. She is one of the four Scottish saints who are commemorated in the stained glass windows behind the choir stalls on your left. Can you name the other three? Clearly our forebears in this church decided she was influential enough to be commemorated alongside these other saints.

Margaret was the grand-daughter of the English Anglo-Saxon King, Edmund Ironside, from the line of Wessex kings[1]. Margaret was born in Hungary about the year 1045. She grew up in a religious culture, and was well-versed in the Bible and acts of pious duty by the rich.

Margaret's exiled father, Edward, was recalled to England in 1057, when Margaret was about 13 years old[2]. Unfortunately, Edward died on his journey to England. Margaret stayed on in England, with her mother, Agatha, and brother Edgar, and sister Cristina.

Edward the Confessor died in 1066, childless. King Harold II became King, possibly because Margaret's brother, Edgar, was too young. Harold was the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, and as we all know, died on 14th October 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. Margaret's brother Edgar was proclaimed King in London, but the King's Council handed him and his family over to William the Conqueror who sent the family off into exile to Normandy. They were returned to England in 1068 but managed to escape north out of the reaches of the Normans, to Northumbria.

Tradition has it that Agatha wanted to return to the continent with her family but their ship was blown off course and they landed in Scotland. There are some ideas that Malcolm Canmore, King Malcolm III of Scotland, a widower, was looking for a wife, and a descendant of the Anglo-Saxon royal family would

[1] Edmund Ironside was only king from 23rd April until his death on 30th November 1016; king for just 222 days. Edmund's son, called Edward the Exile for obvious reasons, and his wife Agatha, were sent in to exile by Cnut, initially to the Swedish Royal Court. They subsequently moved to Kyiv and then on to Hungary.

[2] Edward was considered a likely successor to his great-uncle, King Edward the Confessor.

suit his needs and give him claims to land in England. It would have also suited Margaret, an Anglo-Saxon princess, in need of a protective husband.

Malcolm III and Margaret married in 1070.

Margaret's biographer, Turgot of Durham, the Bishop of St. Andrew's, states that Margaret had a civilizing influence on her husband Malcolm by reading him various stories from the Bible.

Margaret was not a submissive and docile consort to the King. From her knowledge and experiences as a girl in Hungary she set out making major changes to the organisation of the church in Scotland. She introduced changes to worship and practices to be similar to the emerging and modern practices of the continental Roman Catholic church[3]. She had support and guidance from the Benedictine Abbot Lanfranc from Normandy, who went on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Margaret's work to reform the liturgy and organise the church, including the proper observance of Lent (to start on Ash Wednesday, not the following Monday), and changing the Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday. She also started to re-organise the structure of the church, and her sons Alexander I and David I completed her work by creating the dioceses in Scotland and the parish system.

Margaret is credited with not only taming the wilder excesses of her husband but with instilling the notion of being a just and holy ruler on her children – 6 boys and 2 girls. Her youngest son, in particular, was heavily influenced by his mother, and became King David I (1124-1153).

She attended to charitable works, serving orphans and the poor every day before she ate and washing the feet of the poor in imitation of Christ. She rose at midnight every night to attend the liturgy. With her strong affection for the Benedictine Order she helped it create a monastery in Dunfermline (in 1072). She also used the royal wealth to sponsor the creation of ferries to help pilgrims travelling to St Andrew's. Hence, we have the towns of South and North Queensferry.

She used a cave on the banks of the Tower Burn in Dunfermline as a place of devotion and prayer. Sadly, St. Margaret's Cave is now covered beneath a municipal car park, but it is – the cave I mean - open to the public. Margaret

[3] That King Stephen 1st of Hungary had implemented there.

was aware of the abandonment of the monastery on Iona after Viking raids, and again asked the Benedictine Order to go to Iona and create a monastery there. Margaret helped fund the building of the monastery.

Margaret was as pious privately as she was publicly. She spent much of her time in prayer, devotional reading, and ecclesiastical embroidery. This apparently had considerable effect on Malcolm.

Margaret died in 1093, just three days after learning of the death of her husband, Macolm III and her eldest son, Edward, in the Battle of Alnwick on 13th November. She was 48 years old and had been in good health. So, it is speculated that she died of a broken heart[4].

I wonder if Margaret ever considered the enduring impact she would have on the life of the people of Scotland? Here we are 933 years after her death, with towns, a bridge, a University, and many other churches, buildings and streets names after her. Her influence over her husband and children was significant, in an age when women were seldom heard. Our church structures are directly descended from her reforms and, despite the Scottish Reformation, we can see the links in our structures back to the ones she instigated.

I don't think Margaret was thinking of her legacy to future generations, beyond hoping that whichever of her sons would become King of Scotland, they would be a just and holy ruler.[5] There are many stories of Margaret's kindness to and care of the starving and destitute around Dunfermline, especially to women who would otherwise fall prey to the 'oldest profession'.

What can we learn from her life story? Alright she was a princess and had many advantages in life. But, she was a woman in a man's world. Many women in her position would have produced male heirs and spent the rest of their time in pursuits around their home and family. But clearly not Margaret. Her religious upbringing clearly gave her a calling to act for the better of all people, for the encouragement of worship and good management of the church.

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[4] She was buried in Dunfermline Abbey, but Mary Queen of Scots had her head brought to Edinburgh Castle as a relic to assist her in childbirth! King Philip of Spain had some of Malcom III and Margaret's remains taken to the Escorial Palace in Madrid, although no one now knows quite where they are in the palace! Margaret's head was taken to the Scots College in Douai in France, but it was lost during the French Revolution.

[5] Margaret's daughter, Edith, but renamed Mathilda, went on to marry King Henry 1 of England, and her grandson, became King Henry II of England in 1154. So the English line of royalty descends from Margaret, a Scottish queen.

Margaret chose to bring glimpses of God's kingdom down to earth in whatever ways she could. In works of piety and in influencing others to live holy and just lives, she must have been a radical presence in the land, and an example to many others.

In our reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy that he is to fan into flame the gift of God, and to remember that the Spirit does not make us timid but gives us power, love and self-discipline. Our gospel reading ends with those wonderful words, "But if your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays".

These readings say much to us about Margaret's faith and character. She had power, love and self-discipline. Her faith shone out and impacted on so many, it seems to me that her life was full of light which shone out and was beneficial to so many.

I encourage you, when you come up for communion, to look to your left at the stained glass windows behind the choir, and look at the image of St Margaret of Scotland. I wonder what she wants to say to you, about living a faithful life today?

What part of Margaret's character you would wish to have? You may not be a queen, but with God's spirit at work in you, you too can be a body full of light, a force for good. You each have the light of Christ within you. Margaret challenges each of us to let it shine brightly, perhaps even fiercely. Are you up for the challenge?