

1<sup>st</sup> March

Memory Verse:

Gather my saints together unto me;  
those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.

Psalm 50:5

There are some key words that help us to understand this text. First, we must understand that God is speaking. Who are the saints that God speaks of? All Christians are saints! This verse describes all God's people. What is a covenant? It is an agreement or promise with conditions. This covenant is God's promise to save his saints who believe on Christ. By what sacrifice is this covenant promise made? By the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus who died for his people – his saints. We can see that the word “saints” in the first part of the verse is defined by the words in the second half of the verse. In other words, the verse explains to us that “saints” are “those that have a covenant with me [God] by sacrifice.”

Something to read from history

St David's Day is celebrated in Wales on March 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>1</sup> All Christians are saints as we see from today's text. So we should not make the mistake of thinking that only some very specially holy people are saints. However David of Wales *was* a saint – just like all other Christians.

It can be very difficult to find out about the lives and achievements of people who lived a long time ago. David lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. He probably died on 1<sup>st</sup> March 589AD. We know less for certain about him than we do about some people who lived much longer ago than he did, such as Julius Caesar or Socrates. Why is this?

The reason why we know more about some earlier people than we do about David is that in order to find out about someone from the past we have to be able to trust what people long ago wrote about them. We know much about Abraham, Daniel, and the Apostle Paul for instance, because the Bible tells us about their lives. We can trust what is written in the Bible. However, Rhygyfarch of Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth was the first biographer of David of Wales and he lived a whole five hundred years after David. That is rather as if someone today were to write the first ever biography of Henry VIII! There would be no one living from the time to ask about him and no one whose fathers or grandfathers knew him either. Written evidence would have become scarce too. There would be only vague traditions or stories left and they would probably be distorted with the passing of time. Perhaps there might be writings about other people that mentioned him. But now consider that Rhygyfarch himself lived over 900 years ago. Any written sources that he might have used have disappeared long ago so we cannot compare them with what he wrote. Not only that but Rhygyfarch had reasons for not being very truthful.

Rhygyfarch was a hagiographer, that is, a writer about the lives of the saints. Rhygyfarch did *not* understand that all Christians are saints. In his *Vita Sancti David*, The Life of Saint David, he made up all sorts of silly stories about David, thinking that this would make him sound more important! For instance he says that as David preached a persuasive sermon against the heresy of Pelagius, the ground rose up under him, forming a little hill. In fact it was an earlier Welsh Christian preacher whose preaching banished Pelagius' ideas from Wales, Saint Germanus or Garmon (378-448), well before David came on the scene. A modern historian says that he can't imagine “any miracle more superfluous” in that part of Wales than



1 Basic information from Gerald Morgan, *In Pursuit of Saint David: Patron Saint of Wales*, (Talybont, 2017)

the creation of a new hill!<sup>2</sup> Why did Rhygyfarch want to emphasise just how very important David of Wales was? It was nothing to do with what happened in David's lifetime and everything to do with what was going on in Rhygyfarch's. Much of Wales was occupied by the Normans who had conquered England. Rhygyfarch wanted to prove that the British "Saint" David had been Archbishop of **St David's** because in Rhygyfarch's day the Normans were taking control of the church in England and in the parts of Wales that they ruled.

Rhygyfarch's biography of David actually makes it harder to know the truth about him. Historians think that we can know with some certainty that David of Wales actually existed – which is more than can be said for some of the other muddles and inventions of the hagiographers! He almost certainly was born, lived and died in South West Wales in **Pembrokeshire** and **Ceredigion**. This is why he is called *Dewi Sant* in Welsh, not *Dafydd* which is the more general word for David in Welsh. The *wi* ending in place of *dd* is a feature of the Welsh dialect of this area. His name, David, comes from the Bible so those who named him must have known something of Christianity – in other words he did not come from a pagan background. Christianity first came to Wales probably with the Romans. The remains of Roman forts have been found in Pembrokeshire and in the Ystwyth Valley in Ceredigion. It is most likely that he was born in Ceredigion and possibly spent much of his life there. The tradition related by Rhygyfarch that he was known as *aquaticus*, the water drinker, is likely to be true and also that he and his followers lived lives of severe simplicity. Historians think this is true because Gildas the Wise, (500-570AD) who did live at the time of David wrote a strongly worded criticism of Christians who lived together and practised such harsh discipline. He does not mention David by name but Rhygyfarch copies his words very closely.

So we can know that David was a Christian leader who lived a severely simple life that inspired people to remember at least his name for many generations.

What was it like to live in Wales at the time of David? In David's day there was really no such thing as Wales. The area was part of a "chain of realms which stretched from the rivers **Clyde** and the **Forth** all the way down to **Cornwall** and eventually **Brittany**, with the people speaking mutually comprehensible British dialects."<sup>3</sup> The Romans had been gone for a hundred years but their monuments lingered. They had built forts, roads, towns and villas and they had also brought Christianity. In David's time the Angles and the Saxons were settling and farming in the south east of England, bringing with them their own languages and a new wave of paganism. Settlers from **Ireland** were arriving in Wales too bringing the Irish language with them. It was a time of changes and movement. By the time of David's birth, Christianity in some form or other had spread throughout what we now think of as Wales. This period of Welsh history is sometimes called the "Age of the Saints" and whatever we do or don't know about this time, it is certain that there was vigorous preaching and church planting and paganism declined away. The remains of the church buildings where these Christians worshipped no longer exist because they were wooden rather than stone buildings. The people themselves who preached the Gospel are known to us only through distorted accounts like that of Rhygyfarch but most of them, like David, were real men and women who advanced the Kingdom of God – saints!

### Map work

You can follow the story of St David better if you look at the places highlighted in **green** on a map. More from Wales tomorrow!

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2 John Davies, *A History of Wales*. (London, 1993) p. 74.

3 Gerald Morgan, *In Pursuit of Saint David: Patron Saint of Wales*, (Talybont, 2017) p.33.

## Maths

I am sure you know what this sign  $\div$  means in maths but I wonder if you know about the man who is responsible for its common use – and perhaps even invented it?

John Pell (1611-1685) was born in Sussex on 1<sup>st</sup> March and he lived a colourful life for a mathematician. During the English Civil War he was appointed by Frederick Henry Prince of Orange to be a professor at the Orange College in Breda, in the Netherlands. He remained there until 1652 when he realised that, war between England and the Dutch being imminent, he was in an awkward position. He returned to England and Oliver Cromwell found him a post as a teacher of Mathematics in London. But Cromwell must have noticed that John Pell had other talents because in 1654 he appointed him as his political agent in Zurich in Switzerland.

In Switzerland he met the Swiss mathematician Johann Rahn who became his pupil. It is not clear whether it was Rahn who had the idea of using the sign  $\div$  to mean “divided by” or whether Pell suggested it to Rahn but Rahn used it in this way in his book *Teutsche Algebra* (1569). Certainly when the book was translated into English it had additions by Pell, introducing the sign into use in England. So next time you do some division sums, remember John Pell!

## A game to play

Here is a new way of playing games that will work with snakes and ladders and similar board games that depend on simple dice throws. Simple games like these become more interesting with this method. You need to use three dice and each player throws all three at once when it is their turn. Add up the total on the dice and *divide* the result by the lowest number thrown. If there is a remainder, this must be subtracted from the score. The resulting number gives the number of squares to be moved. If you end up with a negative number move backwards. If you made a game for yourself as part of the lesson for September 14<sup>th</sup> you might like to get it out and play it again now with this new three dice method.

## A story to read and some questions

Frank Bullen (1857-1915) was a remarkable author whose biography, *With Christ at Sea*, is well worth reading. He grew up in abject poverty and joined the merchant navy as a boy. He died on 1<sup>st</sup> March, a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and a successful novelist. His success as a writer came in part from his use of his own knowledge and experience of life at sea. In today's optional resources is an extract<sup>4</sup> from *With Christ at Sea* with some questions to answer at the end. I hope it whets your appetite to find a copy of the book to read for yourself!<sup>5</sup>

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4 This extract is taken from Volume 8 of *The Mothers' Companion* flashdrive available from <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>

5 Or you can read it here: <https://archive.org/details/withchristatsear00bullrich>