

## Writing Straight with Crooked Lines

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Mark 12:28-34

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The ruins of Craigmillar Castle are about three miles south and east from the center city of Edinburgh, Scotland. The castle grounds are surrounded by beautiful grassy hills and parkland providing leisurely grounds and a green perimeter surrounding the castle ruins right in the middle of suburban homes and neighborhoods in the southeast quadrant of the city. There is nothing special about Craigmillar Castle except that it is maintained by Historic Scotland National Park service and guests are welcome to walk, tour, and explore the entire castle and ruins, including a section of the castle ruins that briefly housed Mary Queen of Scots and her royal court at some point about 500 years ago. Though the roof is gone, you can walk into the room where the queen stayed and it has been pretty well preserved with thick rock walls and several corridors connecting to other parts of the castle. You can tour around the empty room and try and imagine Mary Queen of Scots and her royal entourage encamped in the castle and what their lives might have been like. In the corner of the Mary Queen of Scots bedroom is a small closet looking space with a hole in back that overlooks the moat and pond that would have been in the backside of the castle. Thanks to the good signage from Historic Scotland, one is informed that this space was the privy for the bedroom or medieval version of an outhouse. Walking through the castle ruins as the wind whips through the open castle windows and as one imagines the dark, damp, and cold nights trying to stay warm in these rather meager accommodations that at the time were probably the best of the best in the Scottish royal pecking order. I remember standing in those castle ruins and thinking that in spite of having no title or position in British society, in spite of my love of history and interest in the past, at that moment standing at the top floor of Craigmillar Castle, I was immensely grateful to be living a fairly modest student living in University housing with central heat rather than a posh royal at the top of the social pecking order in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. In fact, as one toured medieval dwellings and gained more insights into sanitation practices and the day to day life and climate of the time, I am not sure I would have made it 100 years ago, much less 500 years ago.

That is always the temptation we face in looking back into the past isn't it? Looking back with tartan colored glasses at a golden age and a time we imagine life to be easier, more perfect, and more pleasant. Speaking of thin spaces and places where the distance between eternity and reality just feel closer, there sits on the other side of Scotland off the west coast two ferry rides away from the mainland, the isle of Iona. In 574 an Irish monk named Columba settled there and founded a monastery that would be credited for bringing Christianity to Scotland. The monks of Iona, under Columba's leadership, were committed to the written word, copying and preserving important texts, and in the Iona

monastery's scriptorium, the monks there produced the Book of Kells. This artistic masterpiece, now housed at Trinity College in Dublin, comprises the gospels, 'together with a handful of other texts,' and the unsurpassed artwork therein includes according to historian Neil Oliver, 'people, animals, and mythical beasts; knotwork and swirling patterns of the most intense intricacy; 10,000 dots of red ink around a single capital letter.' Oliver reminds us that the beauty and intricacy of this artistic achievement by the creator/creators of this manuscript is unsurpassed.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps what is equally fascinating is that this beautiful and matchless book, came to be in what I would call rather treacherous circumstances. Prior to coming to Iona, after all, Columba was a monk in a monastery in Ireland, a monastery also committed to transcribing and illuminating texts. The abbot at the monastery did not get the bright idea to send Columba to Scotland as a Christian missionary, but rather forced him to leave Ireland and settle somewhere else. Columba was a gifted scribe but in this monastic community committed to a communal lifestyle, Columba was a bit of a capitalist and wanted some ownership of the texts he was copying, illuminating, and working on. The Abbot of the monastery responded to Columba's notions with a hard no, and in the midst of this community of Christian monks a serious dispute and all-out brawl occurred. At this point the details are hazy, but what we know is several monks involved in this altercation over the books were killed and Columba was not so much commissioned to become a missionary to the Scots, but was asked to leave in disgrace. Whether or not he was directly responsible for these deaths, he had blood on his hands, and was kicked out of the monastic community and left for Iona in search of a second chance. So the beautiful one of a kind Book of Kells would never have come to be except for this fight between monks that turned deadly. And Columba, far from being a conquering hero, was most likely a guilty man, arriving on Iona wearing a scarlet letter.

That's often how it is though, isn't it? We may wish for a more pristine and whitewashed version of our history and even our faith, but it is often borne out of the mess of heartrending and unfortunate circumstances. At one point or another, Columba was made a saint of the church for his efforts and for the very real gains his monastic community made, not only in producing and preserving texts, but also in shaping the faith of the Scots, Picts, and other tribes of North Britain. But as they say, every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future, and Columba's past included murder, or at least manslaughter, as well as removal from his monastic community, and insubordination to his Abbot and spiritual leader. Not exactly the recipe we think of for sainthood. But what is.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Oliver, *A History of Scotland*, 50-51.

Much of the Protestant Reformation came about, not necessarily about sainthood and who qualifies, but about what it means to be righteous, what it means to be reconciled with God, what it means to be in God's good graces. Passages such as this one from Mark reoriented the Christian community to a faith that was less concerned about the eternal state of one's soul and more concerned about using that soul to love God and to love neighbor. Less concerned with making humanity into something divine and more concerned with liberating humanity to love God with heart, soul, and mind, and to love neighbor. Less concerned with how to prod ourselves to attain a level of righteousness and more concerned with trying to live and embody in our own lives, the reality that we are already fully reconciled and set free in Jesus Christ. I think there is always a danger of turning the legacy of the Reformation and the legacy of Scottish heritage, to paraphrase church historian Jaroslav Pelikan, into 'the dead faith of the living people,' rather than 'the living faith of dead people.' To celebrate a division or a kind of tribal identity that has unleashed some of our worst demons rather than our better angels. Whether we are looking out at the ruins of Craigmillar Castle or we are looking at the significant legacy of St. Columba, we can't paper over the cracks with a spool of tartan or forget that before he was a saint Columba was a monastic outlaw, running from his past, and trying to redeem his future.

The term 'God writes straight with a crooked stick' is attributed to Martin Luther but it seems to have also been used under similar circumstances by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. One of Luther's other famous terms that encapsulates our paradoxical humanity was the Latin term: 'simul iustus et peccator,' which roughly translates that we are at the same time righteous and sinner, we are at the same time justified and a sinner, we are at the same time reconciled to God and sinning against God. We are at the same time, Columba from Ireland running from a past we cannot undo, and we are Columba from Iona living into a future where we are free to become the human being God has intended us to be in Christ. We embrace the fullness of our past not because all of it is pretty or because it should be whitewashed or forgotten, we embrace our past not as an end in itself, but as a means to thrusting us more confidently and faithfully into the future. As much as our history and heritage are of interest to me and to you, I am not sure the Protestant movement really helped solve the challenges and problems of human responsibility before God. In some cases, it may have exacerbated it. At our best, reformed Protestants like us, saw our lives not so much as needing to achieve certain marks to be righteous before God, but instead challenged us to live lives of gratitude and thankfulness in response to God's grace. And still, in our darker moments, lurked that nagging question, am I worthy enough, am I really called, elect, righteous before God. Some modern economists attribute what has been called the Protestant work ethic to this inner angst of trying to prove our electedness to others and to God as a central driver of the modern economy. Perhaps it is aptly paraphrased in the saying 'pray like it's up to God, but work like it's up to me.' In his own dark nights of the soul and perhaps

his own struggles as *simul iustus et peccator*, Martin Luther would take a little water and pat himself on the head, and remind himself, 'remember you are baptized and be grateful.' Not remember you have been baptized so you are never going to encounter struggles. Not remember you are baptized so you are secure. Not remember you are baptized so you have all God's blessings to hoard for yourself. Not remember you are baptized so you can use that to prove you are God's chosen. No, he says, remember your baptism and be grateful. Trust that God's goodness will prevail, try to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and love this world with all the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love with which God has gifted you. That is even better than a heritage we struggle to preserve, that is a heritage that we trust God will use, to the extent it brings glory to God and exalts our neighbors, to the extent that try as we our dead-level best to write straight with our lives, we can rest assured that God will write straight with all of our crooked lines, until his kingdom comes.