Today we celebrate the feast day of St Columba of Iona. Visiting the saints is encouraging because most of them were flawed humans just like the rest of us and yet, as they opened to God, they became conduits for ‘the mighty acts of God’.

Thanks to St Columba, Iona, a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland, quickly became an important place of spiritual pilgrimage that was famous as a missionary centre and outstanding place of learning.

St. Columba arrived on Iona in 563 CE with 12 followers, built his first Celtic church and established a monastic community. The traditional story tells of Columba’s journey to the island as a missionary pilgrimage, but there is another, more truthful story. Columba was born in 521 AD in Ireland, the grandson of the Irish King Niall. He left Ireland for Scotland not as a missionary but as an act of self-imposed penance for a bloody mess he had caused at home. He had upset the king of Ireland by refusing to hand over a copy of the Gospels he had illegally copied. This led to a pitched battle in which Columba’s warrior family prevailed. Full of remorse for his actions and the deaths he had ultimately caused he fled, finally setting on Iona as the first place he found from where he couldn’t see his native Ireland.

St. Columba, however, was not the shy retiring type and set about building Iona’s original abbey from clay and wood. In this endeavour he displayed some strange idiosyncrasies, including banishing women and cows from the island,
claiming that “where there is a cow there is a woman, and where there is a woman there is mischief”. The abbey builders had to leave their wives and daughters on the nearby Eilean nam Ban (Woman’s Island). Stranger still, he also banished frogs and snakes from Iona. How he accomplished this feat is not as well documented!!

https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/St-Columba-the-Isle-of-Iona/

Despite his idiosyncrasies, and there were many, it was under his guidance that much of Scotland and Northern England was opened to Celtic Christianity.

There is still a strong Christian connection with Iona. The contemporary Iona Community is an ecumenical Christian community of men and women from different walks of life and different traditions in the Church engaged together, and with people of goodwill across the world, in acting, reflecting and praying for justice, peace and the integrity of creation; convinced that the inclusive community we seek must be embodied in the community we practice.

Community members share a common discipline of: Daily prayer and reading the Bible, mutual accountability for their use of time and money, meeting together and action for justice and peace.


Contemporary musician and composer John Bell is a member of the Iona community.

https://youtu.be/NbZ6gGG0V-o https://youtu.be/kYsTzXby4vU