

## St Brendan

### Feastday May 16<sup>th</sup>

St Brendan, known as 'the Navigator' is a much loved and revered saint of early Irish Christianity. We learn about his life from the various versions of 'Vita Brendani' and especially from the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, the 'Voyage of St Brendan the Abbot'. While these books were written from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Brendan himself lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Brendan was born near Tralee, Co Kerry. His childhood years were influenced by St Ita who gave him instruction in the Christian faith. In time, Brendan founded many monasteries, the best known were in Ardfert, Co Kerry and Clonfert, Co Galway.

St Brendan is chiefly renowned, according to tradition for his Transatlantic voyage. The account of this journey was read throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and is said to have influenced Spanish and Portuguese explorers especially Christopher Columbus. In the 1970s Tim Severin and his crew risked their lives in following the exact methods used by the early sea-faring monks in constructing their boat and undertaking a treacherous sea voyage across the Atlantic.

In the midst of the account of their sea adventures, negotiating storms, encountering icebergs ('crystals') and meeting sea beasts, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* gives another dimension to their journey. Brendan's journey was not just about a voyage of discovery on the high seas but can also be read as an interpretation of the spiritual journey. The voyage was not straightforward but was a spiralling experience visiting the same islands on the major Liturgical feasts. In this account we read that they visited the 'Island of Sheep' from Holy Thursday to Holy Saturday, 'Jasconius' the whale for Easter and the 'Island of Birds' from Easter to Pentecost. This happened seven times and the implication is that each time the monks entered more deeply into the heart of the Christian mystery. Having completed all this and negotiating a very thick fog they entered the Land of Promise, their destination.

The story of St Brendan can be an inspiration to us on our spiritual journey. Storms of life and other challenges can be negotiated with the strength of God's Spirit working in us. Can we risk allowing life to be an adventure with God?

Helen Grealy