

## St Kevin

**Feastday June 3<sup>rd</sup>.**

St Kevin, revered even in his own day, founded a monastery at Glendalough, Co Wicklow that became known throughout Ireland and Europe. Kevin lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The *Vitae* or Life's of St Kevin were only written from the eleventh century onward. From this literature a picture emerges of a man who was very much in tune with the created world and who loved solitude in order to commune with God. It is said that an angel visited Kevin's mother when she was pregnant and told her that *the son to be born to her would be dear to God and people.*

As Kevin grew it became apparent that he was a gifted child so his parents sent him to the monastic settlement of Kilnamanagh to receive education. In time Kevin himself sought solitude so he left the monastery and went off towards the Wicklow Mountains. Eventually he arrived at Glendalough where he had a very simple life-style, his diet consisted of plants, herbs, berries and fish from the lakes. He developed a deep affinity with the natural world, relating very well to the animals and birds around him. It is said that an otter retrieved his book when Kevin accidentally dropped it in the lake. When he was absorbed in contemplation, birds often rested in his hands, and on his shoulders or head. The most extraordinary story of Kevin's relationship to creation is the one concerning the blackbird. The bird came and laid her egg on Kevin's outstretched hand. He is said to have held his hand out until the egg hatched. Seamus Heaney wrote a poem reflecting this experience. Heaney relates the agony Kevin must have endured to keep his hand out for all that time but concludes the poem with Kevin being so absorbed in God that he forgot his pain and even his surroundings. Imogen Stuart expressed this same story in sculpture and her beautiful carving is located near Kevin's Cell in Glendalough. In time many others were attracted to living St Kevin's way of life in Glendalough. Eventually a large monastery was established which became a place of holiness and scholarship. The monks prayed the Liturgical 'hours', Psalms, Scripture reading and prayers, throughout the day. They were also engaged in the reading, writing and illumination of manuscripts. Students and pilgrims came from all over Ireland and from Continental Europe to learn from and experience this monastic way of life.

Christianity flourished in Ireland between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was community/monastic based rather than hierarchical. There were bishops who often resided in the monasteries where the Abbot or Abbess exercised leadership. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century St Laurence O'Toole became Abbot of Glendalough. This was the century when the Diocesan system was introduced to Ireland and Laurence became the first Archbishop of Dublin.

Today, pilgrims and visitors are impressed by the natural beauty, the ruined churches and splendid round tower of Glendalough. The energy of prayer contained in this place gives a sense of the Divine. Kevin's relationship with the natural world inspires us in our struggle to care for our earth, our Common Home. Can we pray that Kevin will be with us as we try to change our world and heal our planet?

Helen Grealy