

"Pulling an All Nighter"

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August 17th, 2025

Now that the jet lag has worn off and I can think whole thoughts again, I am able to talk about one of the most beautiful Christian relics we have; The Book of Kells. To see the Book of Kells, you have to go to Dublin's Trinity College. It is where the massive library is, that if you are a history or literature nerd you may dream of. If you wish to have a comparable experience I highly recommend Fisher Rare Book Library at U of T, which is not 4 time zones away.

Here you are led through the exhibit that takes you through not just the book itself, but the entire process of making it. When we think of making a book now, it may be a bit simpler. Doing your research, typing it into Microsoft Word, maybe printing it to edit it a couple of times, then sending digital copies to the editor or publisher. It can be 100% digital, where just the author, working with a digital publishing company can churn out a book onto Amazon in days.

This was definitely not the case with the Book of Kells. Historians estimate it took around 75 years from start to finish, with 3 people just writing the manuscript. The pages are on calfskin vellum, which is simply a huge number of cows to have their hides tanned and shaved down to the thin pages of the Book. The gold leaf had to be sourced from goldmines, shipped, melted, shaved, and applied. The dyes for the ink had to be found in natural materials and carefully made. The bookbinding itself would have been difficult. All of that for one copy of the 4 Gospels of the New Testament.

All of these materials took an exorbitant amount of time to gather, prepare, and apply. It would have been the lifework of many monks at the Iona Monastery, where the book was most likely crafted. I say most likely because we don't know for certain. In the 800's Vikings were raiding the area, looking for treasures and killing anyone who got in their way. The Iona Monastery was one of many raided in that time. The surviving monks fled to the Kells Monastery, which is why it is not called the Book of Iona.

No photography is allowed in the book exhibit, but it has been well documented online and we can see the pictures are exquisite. Human hands glorifying God through their artwork, and sharing with us over a millenia later how some artists interpreted life and death.

[EXAMPLES HERE]

This was not a home study Bible. This was not even the Bible used in a regular Sunday Service. This was the Bible that was used for the highest of high holidays. A showpiece of how reverent and devout the monks were towards a God that, for them, blessed them with the creative skills to make this happen. They were closer in our historical timeline, if not by much, to the early church and earliest disciples. And when they were crushing berries and sharpening implements and instruments under candlelight, I like to imagine that this scripture reading comes to mind.

Stay awake, stay alert, you never know when the Master of the house will come home and will need to be seen immediately. Our monks, even at a much slower pace, would have felt the need to exercise vigilance as well. Going to prayers multiple times throughout the day, and throughout the night, created a strict schedule for any monk. Vigilance, from the word vigil, which is what many people do the evening before a religious event. When Jesus is killed on Good Friday his friends, the ones that fell asleep the night before, keep vigil on Saturday. And so do many Christians with the Easter Saturday vigil.

The thing that is striking me about this passage, where Jesus says that the disciples must keep alert and be prepared for the arrival of the Master, is that it is not treated as a bad thing. We are not told we must stay up and be prepared to defend the house from attack. No one in Jesus' explanation is under threat. The "thief" in the end of the passage would be turned away by the owner of the house, but that is not a violent persecution.

I wonder what would happen if we looked at this passage by breaking them down into two separate characters. The owner of the house is the one with the keys and the servants and the stuff. But the Master of the house, the one that comes in and begins serving the watchful staff, that Master is the one who brings eternal love and life. The owner of the stuff, but the Master, the God, of the people, are two different beings. The owner tells us to keep watch to turn away thieves from stealing things. The Master, God, says to keep watch to see God and let God in. To know God's presence and say "wonderful, you are here, come in.". To see sparks of love and light and goodness and to usher them in the door. Where the owner is worried about keeping their stuff safe, God is ready to serve people.

For the people of Iona, then the monks of Kells, this Book was pragmatically not a smart decision. There are no defensive maneuvers here. No political power or medical knowledge. It was not a weapon you could use on Vikings, or keep you dry. But what it did, and does, is glorify a creator of life who so loves us that not even death can defeat them. That a thousand years later we can see their dedication and devotion to that God etched in pages. These are not pages of greed or despair. They are pages of hope.

We are asked to keep watch, and I won't tell you to ignore every scary thing out there. Much of what we preach about is keeping an eye on racism, sexism, facism, homophobia and transphobia, etc. It is good to watch for those. But if all we are vigilant for is threats, that is all we will see. If all we look out for is hateful things that hurt us and others, we will not be able to see beauty in God's creation, the inner beauty that glows from one's soul. To discern and name the points of love that make this world better is as much a spiritual practice as anything else. And sometimes, we make beautiful art with that inspiration. Sometimes, even in the darkest hours of night, in the quietest of monasteries, or libraries, or apartments, we awaken, and if we are very careful, we can see the glittering of the presence of the Spirit.