

## **Cornflakes – 5<sup>th</sup> June.....Celtic Spirituality**

This evening I want to reflect on the contribution of what has become known as “Celtic Spirituality” and how it has come increasingly to feed the spiritual lives of many people today. To do this I need to give the context of what is arguably the single most important event to have occurred in the history of the Christian era of this country....this was the Synod of Whitby in the year AD664.

Celtic spirituality can mean different things to different people. Some would argue that there is no such distinct entity that can be isolated and described as Celtic spirituality. My feeling is that there is some truth in this, that the peoples of that time had not come to rally around a unifying title or group of beliefs and practises....as, say, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists etc today. Others would insist that there was an identifiable Celtic Church that existed pre-Whitby 664; whilst still others would simply wish to use the term to describe a spirituality set apart from formal, institutional religion but borrowing from a pre-existing spiritual traditions reaching back to even before the coming of Christianity to these shores. The position I’m taking is that proposed by J Philip Newell in “Listening for the heart beat of God: A Celtic Spirituality”... this book, published first in 1997, has informed what I’m saying this evening and I do recommend it. Essentially, it’s a recognition that there is a stream of developing British spirituality that reaches back to at least the fourth century...and like all natural streams, little side tributaries combine to make a larger whole. However, it began to be pushed to the margins of the land, both physically and theologically, after Augustine’s arrival from Rome in AD597 as the emphasis moved towards greater organisation and centralising of power and authority. I’m going to look at some of those streams as represented to us by figures from long ago and much nearer to our times.

The dissonance between the form of Christianity that had begun its development pre-Augustine and the form that Augustine brought from the European mainland reached breaking point in Northumbria in the mid-seventh century when King Oswy of Northumbria convened the Synod of Whitby in AD664 to decide the matter. There were conflicts of personality between the key figures (Colman and Wilfred), there were alternative datings for Easter, and there were conflicts of style between the competing traditions....even down to the way that monks cut their hair. However, at the very heart of it all the issue boiled down to how we might perceive the presence of God.

Celtic spirituality drew its inspiration from St John, the disciple who we’re told leaned against the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper. The image was one of John listening to the heartbeat of Jesus, hearing the echo of God present with us. It was a spirituality which became noted for being incarnational, for allowing the spiritual to be perceived through the material world of people and things. In contrast, Augustine’s Roman spirituality looked to St Peter; the Rock on which the Church would be built Jesus is reported as saying. It was a spirituality which looked to the authority of the Church to decide where God might be found

and it favoured listening to the teachings of those whom the Church had authorised for this purpose.

King Oswy received representations from both points of view and his decision was that the spirituality that Augustine favoured should henceforth be the authorised religion in the land. As Newell notes in his book, the real tragedy is not so much that the pre-existing Celtic tradition was overthrown but rather that no place could be found for both....and that's still a tragedy that is repeated even to our own age.

Let's try now to unpack some of the themes that are a distinctive feature of Celtic spirituality.....

First, Celtic spirituality is **creation aware**. There is the expectation that God can be revealed through observing the different facets of creation. The corollary of this is that if God can be perceived through the created world then surely we have a duty of stewardship towards it. It might sound obvious to us with our experience of global issues today but it has not always been so. Christianity has often seemed to endorse a creation-negative point of view....or at least deeming it to be unimportant. Distinctions have been drawn from the words of scripture between the spiritual and the material. From this perspective what mattered was to ensure that a person lived in the world of the spirit and was not ensnared in the lesser, and even corrupting, concerns of the material world. Jonathan Porritt, one-time leader of the ecology movement Friends of the Earth, chided Christianity many years ago for its unwillingness to speak out against the damage being done to the natural world by the exploitative practises of mineral companies, land developers etc. It was a Christianity, typified by the Evangelical Movement, where our hope lay entirely beyond the here and now. The material world was no more than the backcloth against which we sought out our personal salvation.

How different from the earlier Celtic insight. The mid-fifth century saw the missionary work of St Patrick in Ireland and the prayers that come to us from that time reflect no essential gap between things material and spiritual, that all things reflect the presence of God. Perhaps the most famous text is the Breastplate prayer that is still included in our hymnbooks today. In all probability it dates some time after Patrick, even though it is attributed to him. Nevertheless it accurately reveals how the Celtic Church looked upon the connection between the material world and spiritual realities. For instance, verse 3 has these words.....

*I bind unto myself today  
The virtues of the star-lit heaven,  
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,  
The whiteness of the moon at even,  
The flashing of the lightning free,  
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,  
The stable earth, the deep salt sea*

*Around the old eternal rocks.*

These are not just words that point to the beauty of creation; they also ascribe a sense of virtue to them. It's a way of saying that in noting these things, in pondering them, we might perceive something of the presence of God.

Before we leave this particular strand of thought, I want to mention another Celtic teacher, John Scotus Eriugena from the ninth century...his name is simply translated as: John the Irishman from Ireland. He wasn't a monk, nor was he a priest. This gave him a particular advantage; he wasn't subject to the restrictions that might be otherwise placed upon him. He taught that Christ walks amongst in two shoes....one shoes being creation, the other shoe being Scripture. He said that if God were to stop speaking then everything would cease to exist. For him the world was a visible manifestation of God.

He might have been free from restriction but eventually his work was condemned by the Pope in AD1225 and in AD1685 his works were placed on the Index....the official list of forbidden writings.

A second strand was its **accommodating attitude towards the pre-existing religion and its practices**. We know that the pre-Christian tradition had its sacred places....wells, crosses, trees, hills. The Celtic Church did not seek to sweep these pre-existing, and often ancient, traditions away but simply re-branded them. It recognized the strong connection that people had with these things and, rather than intimate that they were somehow profane, sought to express their Christian beliefs through them. Long-standing sacred wells might be given the name: St Mary's Well or Holy Well or some such title. It didn't diminish them but allowed them to still be revered; they were treated as fulfilling the older mythologies. Perhaps the most obvious artefacts that we see today are the numerous Celtic crosses. Whilst you have the orb at the top, most likely representing the sun, down the sides of many you find depictions of scriptural scenes. It a way of holding together the understanding that God can be found in both the natural world and the world of scripture. Newell asks the question: what was it about the incoming Augustinian tradition that was so fearful of the spirituality that was already present?

This brings me to my third stream. If creation itself was good and wholesome then **we, as part of creation, must also be essentially good and wholesome too**. A key figure in early British Christianity was Pelagius from the fourth century...three centuries before the Synod of Whitby. In the AD380s he travelled to Rome and his teachings were received with enthusiasm, at first. He affirmed the essential goodness of creation and also the goodness at the heart of every person. It wasn't that he ignored the depravity that people can descend into; rather, he was saying that despite this the image of the divine can still be found. In a letter to Demetrias, a women....more on this in a minute, he wrote: *"We do not defend the good of nature to the extent that we claim it cannot do evil; we merely try to protect it from an unjust charge, so that we may not seem to be forced to do evil through a*

*fault in our nature*". It was his conviction that every person is conceived and born in the image of God even if in later life that image becomes obscured. He took his inspiration from the words of St John's prologue: "*the Light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it*". Furthermore, it was his understanding that the sexual union itself was a God-given gift. This is in stark contrast to the teaching of Augustine of Hippo who believed that every person is sinful from conception and, in fact, that the sexual act itself involved becoming tainted by sin. The BCP Baptism rite still bears witness to this anxiety about the physicality of life.

I mentioned women.....a fourth stream is **Celtic Christianity's affirmation of women**. Again Pelagius was a key figure here. He affirmed the place of women, teaching them to read the Scriptures. His affirmation of the feminine was one of the things that initiated discontent against him by the European Church. Jerome speaks sarcastically, and probably jealously, of Pelagius interacting with women "*amongst their spindles and wickerwork*". Unlike the experience of the Church in Europe, the Church in Britain had incorporated aspects of femininity into its life from the pre-existing Celtic religious tradition. To have a woman in a position of authority over men was not prohibited....a good example would be St Hilda's position of authority in the dual male/female monastic community at Whitby.

Eventually, attempts were made on mainland Europe to have Pelagius convicted of heresy. Two charges were brought against him in AD415 but on both occasions he was vindicated by the Church in Palestine. The following year, the African Bishops sought to have him condemned but he was given the support of the Pope, who advised to the Bishops to heed Christ's words and live at peace with their brother. They then sought state intervention and Pelagius was condemned by the State under imperial edict on the charge of disturbing the peace...the outcome was that he was banished from Rome. After State condemnation, the Church was bound to follow suit and excommunicated him. He returned to Wales and kept up the good work! If we want to gauge the importance of Pelagius perhaps the best indicator is that even as late as the twentieth century, the German theologian Karl Barth, referred to the British being "incurably Pelagian" to this day.

Although the Celtic tradition in any formal sense had been suppressed since the thirteenth century, its tradition of prayer and spirituality lived on almost like a resistance movement, particularly in the islands. The religious revivals of the 18/19<sup>th</sup> centuries across the country emphasised the doctrine of original sin and further demonised the religious traditions of the Celtic ancestors. The ministers of the established Church gathered and burned the fiddles and pipes in an attempt to eradicate their spirituality. There are stories of schoolchildren being beaten for using the Gaelic language and singing the old songs. Worse was to follow in the first half of the nineteenth century when the Highland Clearances took place and the people were scattered from their ancestral lands.

It is very likely that much of their spirituality would have been lost but for the work of a man called Alexander Carmichael. The songs and prayers of the Celtic people had been passed

on orally and were in danger of being lost forever. In the mid-nineteenth century Carmichael undertook to gather these ancient songs and prayers and the result was the *Carmina Gaedlica*, or Songs of the Gaels. His six-volume work conveys the distinct way of seeing expressed by the people of the islands in their prayers at the rising of the sun and at its setting, or at the kindling of the morning fire and covering at night. These people lived in harsh conditions, life was uncertain, crops were unpredictable and fishing dangerous....all these things feature in their prayers. The ethos of these songs and prayers is that the world and its affairs are what comprise God's temple.

The island of Iona has long been an important site in the history of Celtic spirituality; it is where the sixth century St Columba had based his mission. In 1938 George MacLeod took the decision to rebuild the ancient abbey on Iona. It was partly a commitment to rediscovering the spirituality of the Celtic Church; it was also a commitment to social justice and peace in a world on the brink of war. J Philip Newell, himself, eventually became a Warden of the Iona Community (late 1980's). He writes of the *Carmina Gaedlica*: *"this stream of spirituality is like a rich treasure trove from which we can draw today. I saw that these ancient prayers could be adapted for use in the Iona Community's weekly cycle of prayer. Christ is seen as being with and for the poor; healing is regarded as a grace that releases the essential well-being of nature; creation is viewed sacramentally; Christ is portrayed as liberator of the image of God at the core of our being; the life of heaven and the life of earth are viewed as bound together inextricably; and the delights and demands of welcome and hospitality – expecting to meet Christ in the stranger's guise – are accentuated"*. Through the witness and writings of the Iona Community, and similar communities including the Northumbria Community, of which Linda and I are Companions, the voice of the Celtic spiritual tradition continues to be heard and lived out today.

I mentioned at the start of this talk that what is now called Celtic spirituality can mean different things to different people....sometimes it is portrayed as being little more than a genre of music or art; but that is to completely misunderstand both its depth and context. We've seen how the ancient prayers and songs have been given a fresh lease of life....but it isn't just in the realm of worship that the effect is felt. I hinted at something of this with the Iona Community's commitment to peace and social justice. Around the same time as Alexander Carmichael, two others, Alexander John Scott and George MacDonald, were inspired by the Celtic spiritual tradition to bring influence to bear on current issues. Scott was one of the founders of Christian Socialism which set about, among other things, bringing education to working people. MacDonald was part of a project to transform city dwellings from slums to something more wholesome. MacDonald was also a writer who used imaginative stories to portray spiritual truths. As we saw earlier, one of the Celtic streams was the affirmation of the feminine. Scott lived out this truth in becoming a co-founder of Bedford College, London...the first centre for higher education for women in Britain based on the principles of religious freedom. Tellingly, neither man had the support of the established Church of Scotland.

I'll finish with these words from the latter part of Newell's book: *"The Church was the poorer for forcing Celtic spirituality underground....among people unsupported by clergy. Would not the Church and the world have been better prepared to meet the challenges of the modern world – including ecological crises – if they had learned from Celtic spirituality instead of rejecting it? Would they not have been enriched by the awareness that God's light is within creation as well as transcending it? Why was the Church so frightened when in the nineteenth century, men like Scott and MacDonald taught that we are a reflection of God's image, the divine being inextricably interwoven with the human? Would it not have been enlarged in its spirit by affirming that our creativity, sexuality and passion for life can be expression of the life of God"*