

SPREADING THE WORD

The Celtic, pilgrim, sailor saints set out to find the promised land
in open boats of skins stretched out on wood:
the Cross and just themselves was all they carried.
Carrying within their hearts the God they sought;
exiles for the love of Christ, they hoped to reach their true home.
Mystics, no longer longing for an earthly homeland but for
that unattainable other world, mythical island, Land of Promise,
hidden beyond the vastness of the sea.

Written by David Hodges a monk at the Cistercian Abbey on Caldey Island, off the south coast of Wales (2003).

Just before his Ascension Jesus told his followers 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'... and they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere. The news would seem to have spread rapidly. When Paul, in his own inimitable fashion, wrote to the Galatians, who were Celts, ticking them off for back-sliding, it was around 70AD. It made me wonder if perhaps Encyclopædia Britannica was right and the Celts were 'incapable of prolonged concerted action.'

There is no definitive date for the arrival of Christianity in Britain or indisputable proof of who introduced it there. There is no doubt that the religion had taken root in Britain long before the fall of the Roman Empire. The early Christian author Tertullian of Carthage who was called the founder of Western theology and who died around 220 AD reported that even in 'regions of the Britons beyond the sway of Rome the name of Christ now reigns'. Three bishops from Britain attended the Council of Arles in 324 and a larger but unspecified number that of Rimini in 359.

Early Celtic Christianity was monastic in nature, stemming from the Egyptian character of submission, simplicity and humility as taught by the Fathers of Egypt's deserts and came to 'the world's edge' via Asia Minor and Europe. The term Celtic Church has been used to define the Christianity practiced by the Insular Celts but there was never a structured religious institution detached from the rest of Christendom. In religious and cultural life, the Celtic churches experienced a large measure of unity, but they never sought a mutual coordination in structure that could have made their various parts one externally visible church. Although unwilling to submit to the inept demands of papal representatives, they did not reject the claims of the Popes and were consistently orthodox.

Four customs have been identified that were common to the Insular Celtic churches but were not used anywhere else in the Christian world. The first was the dating of Easter (*computus*) which was originally dated according to the Hebrew calendar which placed Passover on the first full moon following the spring equinox. The First Council of Nicaea (325) decided that all Christians should observe a common date for Easter separate from the

Jewish calculation. Calculating the proper date of Easter then became a complicated process with many changes being made by Roman and French churches over the next 300 years. One by one the Celtic churches accepted the Roman Easter. Southern Ireland, which had close contacts with Gaul, did so in 630. Northumbria followed in 664 as a result of the Synod of Whitby, then Northern Ireland in 697, the Ionian Church of the Scots and the Picts in 716 and it was not until 768 that the Roman Easter was celebrated in Wales.

The second was the monastic tonsure, or method of cutting one's hair, to distinguish their social identity as men of the cloth. The Roman custom was to shave a circle at the top of the head, leaving a halo of hair: this was associated with Christ's Crown of Thorns. Though the exact shape of the Celtic tonsure is unclear it is agreed that it was shorn over the head from ear to ear. The tonsure is mentioned in a passage written in the 7th century which comments that 'Britons are contrary to the whole world, enemies of Roman customs, not only in the Mass but also in regard to the tonsure'.

The third was the use of Penitentials. In antiquity, penance had been a public ritual. In the Celtic Church a distinctive form of penitence developed, where confession was made privately to a priest, under the seal of secrecy, and where penance was given privately and ordinarily performed privately as well.

The final distinctive custom, common across Britain and Ireland was the popularity of *peregrinatio pro Christo* (exile for Christ). St Augustine of Hippo wrote that Christians should live a life of *peregrinatio* in the present world while awaiting the Kingdom of God. Augustine's version of *peregrinatio* spread widely throughout the Christian church, but it took an additional unique meaning in Celtic countries. There was a tradition of undertaking a voluntary *peregrinatio pro Christo*, in which individuals permanently left their homes and put themselves entirely in God's hands.

In south-east Wales the monastery of Illtud at Llantwit Major can be considered the axis of early Celtic Christianity, for it had contacts, not only within Wales and with Cornwall and Brittany, but also with the world of the Gaelic-speaking Christians and is seen as the cradle of the Celtic Church. Illtud was an abbot rather than a bishop, proof that the monastic tradition established by Anthony in Egypt and upheld in Gaul by Martin of Tours had struck roots among the Celts. Illtud's monastery was the 'university of the saints' of the early Celtic Church, many of its students went out to found monasteries in other areas of Britain and in Europe and it was mainly from Wales that Celtic Christianity was reintroduced to Brittany after its suppression there by Caesar's army. David, Wales's patron saint (died c. 589) was said to have studied at Illtud's monastery and was renowned for his asceticism: his vegetarianism, teetotalism and emphasis on hard physical labour.

Ireland's patron saint, Patrick, was born in south west Scotland c. 387 into a Christian family, though he confessed that he was not drawn to religion. He was kidnapped and sold into slavery, under a heathen master, in Ireland during which time he was converted to

Christianity. It was common for missionaries to 'lead' the pagans to Christ by grafting the ancient animist cults of water and woods on to Christian purposes, and Patrick targeted traditional pagan sites at which to do his preaching. It made sense to co-opt sacred springs as sites of baptism, venerated, spirit-inhabited groves of trees as temples of the living cross, and traditional hillforts and burial mounds as places of preaching. Revered alongside Patrick was Brigit (c. 452-524), the daughter of a slave, who through her piety converted her master to Christianity and was freed. She went on to found a simple monastery at Kildare, which after her day was to become one of the great Irish monastic institutions. St Brigit is accepted in Ireland as the protector of newly sown crops and an Earth Mother and would appear to be a Christianised version of the powerful triple Celtic goddess of the same name.

We know that Christianity was well established in southern Scotland by the 4th century and that Ninian's influence had spread well beyond the Candida Casa. In 563 two celebrated missionaries from Ireland, Columba and Moluag, arrived in what was then Dalriada, at exactly the same time, and each chose to set up a community of monks on a small island with strong traditions of pre-Christian religions. Moluag established his monastery on Lismore from where he evangelized northern Pictland, setting up daughter churches at Rosemarkie in Easter Ross and Mortlach in Moray, and it is claimed that he even travelled to Iceland. Columba pursued an active missionary outreach from his base on Iona, throughout the Western Isles and up into the north eastern parts of the country. His monastery became known as a centre of learning, healing and hospitality. It is reported that in life Columba and Moluag were bitter enemies, but they seem to have resolved their differences because they now stand side by side in the stained glass windows of Lismore Parish Church! At the request of the King of Northumbria Aiden left Iona in 634 on *peregrinatio* to establish the monastery at Lindisfarne which followed the teachings of the Celtic Church despite being in an Anglican kingdom.

The history of Christianity in Cornwall is more obscure, but the native church seems to have been greatly strengthened by Welsh and Irish missionaries such as Petroc, Piran and Breaca. Extreme weather around 535 and the attendant famines and disease, particularly the arrival of the Plague of Justinian in Wales around 547 and in Ireland around 548, may have contributed to these missionary efforts.

The eastern monastic tradition delighted in the association between the saints and the natural world and this was also a major theme in Celtic monasticism. As one writer put it, 'To seek out and love nature was given to no people so early and so fully as to the Celts'. St Brigit hung her mantle to dry on a sunbeam, St Brynach's tame wolf herded his cows, while he was praying a blackbird laid her eggs on the hands of St Kevin who remained on his knees until the eggs had hatched, St Ninian encircled and blessed his sheep each night and in the ninth century an Irish monk near Lake Constance, seeking relief from copying notes on Greek declensions, wrote of his delight in the companionship of his little cat, Pangur Ban.

I and Pangur Ban my cat, 'tis a like task we are at:

Hunting mice is his delight, hunting words I sit all night.
Better far than praise of men 'tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill will, he too plies his simple skill
'Tis a merry thing to see at our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find entertainment to our mind.
Oftentimes a mouse will stray in the hero Pangur's way;
Oftentimes my keen thought set takes a meaning in its net.
'Gainst the wall he set his eye full and fierce and sharp and sly;
Gainst the wall of knowledge I all my little wisdom try.
When a mouse darts from its den O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove when I solve the doubts I love!
So in peace our tasks we ply, Pangur Ban my cat and I;
In our arts we find our bliss, I have mine and he has his.
Practice every day has made Pangur perfect in his trade;
I get wisdom day and night turning darkness into light.

St Francis of Assisi's love of the natural world was an ever-present feature of the Celtic Church six hundred years before the establishment of the Franciscan Order. One scholar has written that had the Celtic Church survived, 'it is possible that the fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of western man's attitude to the universe'.

The early Celts saw God's presence in all things: they brought with them a strong enthusiasm for life, a love of the world, a spirit of adventure and they were very much aware of the living presence of Jesus Christ in their everyday lives. They also emphasised the threefold nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit which gave a threefold pattern to many of their prayers of dedication.

Some of the features of the Celtic Church appear to have been derived from eastern prototypes as did some elements of the greatest achievement of Celtic monasticism – the superb illuminated manuscripts. But in *The Book of Durrow*, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* and *The Book of Kells*, known as 'the chief treasure of the western world', the closely wound spirals and the fantastical animal forms hark back to the traditions of La Tène art.

While the Celtic churches would eventually be absorbed into the hierarchical system centered upon the papacy, these churches had, from the fifth to the eighth century, an unrestrained energy which, according to one Celtic scholar, expressed 'the Christian ideal with a sanctity and a sweetness which have never been surpassed'. Although there was never a Celtic Church as such, there is no doubt that the Celtic peoples added a great richness to the Christian Church.

Ann Munro - 1 November 2020