

## Celtic Christian expressions of faith

Neil Millar

Last week Ann gave a very helpful introduction to the Celts and their culture prior to the advent of Christianity, and next week she'll share another chapter in this unfolding story. In my reflections, I hope to expand a little on aspects of Celtic Christian spirituality.

In taking this approach, I'm mindful that the term 'Celtic Christianity' is a bit slippery. What is meant by it? In reality, there was no Celtic Church, as there is a Church of England or Scotland; it wasn't a denomination. And nor was it a unified entity entirely distinct from the Roman church. And whereas last week Ann described how the Celts lived in much of Europe, 'Celtic Christianity' relates really only to those known as 'insular Celts'. It's best understood geographically, linguistically and temporally, as the expression and practice of the Christian faith among the indigenous Celtic-speaking inhabitants of the British Isles in the period between the departure of the Romans (c.410) and the arrival of the Normans in 1066. Within this 600-year period, there is a 'golden age' between the mid-fifth and mid-seventh centuries, during which most of the great monasteries were founded. This era, sometimes described as the 'age of saints' combined missionary zeal, spiritual energy, and simple faith in exceptional measure. In the features I discuss, this era is my focus.

So, as far as we've discovered, how did these people express their faith and life? In recent years, there's been a resurgence of interest in Celtic spirituality and much of what's written is quite romanticised. Even so, there are features that can be identified as distinctive, and that offer resources for renewal for us today. First and foremost, Celtic faith was soaked in **prayer**. '*Pray without ceasing*', Paul urged in 1 Thessalonians (5.17). Celtic monks took

this admonition very seriously, spending their day, and a significant part of the night, in prayer. And, as Esther de Waal notes in her book *Every Earthly Blessing*, prayer was integral to the lives of ordinary folk as well. ‘A woman kneels on the earth floor in her small hut in the Outer Hebrides and lights her fire’, de Waal writes:

*I will kindle my fire this morning [she says]  
in the presence of the holy angels of heaven...’  
God kindle thou in my heart within  
a flame of love to my neighbour,  
to my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all...*

As de Waal describes it, this woman would have started her day by rising and splashing water on her face:

*The palmful of God of Life  
The palmful of the Christ of Love  
The palmful of the Spirit of Peace  
Triune  
Of grace.*

She would have made her bed with another recitation:

*I make this bed  
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,  
in the name of the night we were conceived,  
in the name of the day we were baptised,  
in the name of each night, each day,  
each angel that is in the heavens.*

‘Prayers such as these come from people for whom an active living faith was a positive factor in their daily life’, de Waal writes. From dawn to dusk, they worked hard; there was scant time for long formal prayers. Instead, each task, no matter how mundane, was performed *as* prayer; with the help of the God, the saints, and the angels. ‘This was unselfconscious’, she claims. ‘It was entirely natural to assume God’s presence and partnership from the start of

the day until its close. Each of the three persons of the Trinity was acclaimed, for each had an appropriate role to play – quite apart from the fact that saying and doing something three times over fitted well with many of their chores. For these people, ‘living and praying’ were of a piece; from start to finish their days were imbued with a sense of God’s presence and partnership.

A second feature of Celtic Christianity is that it drew heavily on the **Psalms**. ‘Chanted, recited, copied, studied and prayed, the psalms were central to the spiritual and devotional life of Irish monasteries,’ Ian Bradley writes (45). Some of the earliest surviving artifacts from the golden age of Celtic Christianity are transcriptions of the psalms and they clearly impacted on the spirituality and theology of these people, indeed, ‘their imagery of rocks, mountains, trees and other natural features helped to form and colour the intense physicality of Celtic Christianity’ (47). The *Old Irish Life*, portrays Columba going down to the shore on Iona in the early hours, after sleeping briefly on the stone floor of his cell, and chanting all 150 psalms before daybreak. And, in a moving description, Abbot Adomnán of Iona (c. 624-704) describes Columba copying out the Psalter in the final hours of his life. When he reached Psalm 34, verse 10: ‘*but those who wait on the Lord will not want for anything that is good,*’ he stopped, knowing that his time had come. A few hours later in the Abbey, surrounded by his brother monks, he waved his hand in an act of farewell blessing and breathed his last. The Psalms soaked the days and years of these Celtic Christians, their living and their dying.

And this emphasis on the psalms leads on to another feature of Celtic Christianity, namely the **poetic** quality of their prayers, hymns, liturgies and writing. All of which, ‘suggests a faith conceived and expressed as much through imagination as intellect’, Bradley writes (48). Generally short, rhythmic, and packed with vivid images, their prayers are different from the

more leaden, lengthy prayers of much Catholic and Protestant worship. Drawing on a cultural tradition with a high regard for poets and bards, Celtic Christianity is marked by an approach to expressing and explaining the mysteries of the faith through story, symbol, lyric and verse rather than proposition and logical argument. Hence, for example, Patrick is depicted as explaining the doctrine of Trinity by picking up a three leafed clover rather than with recourse to a lengthy theological treatise. In Celtic Christianity poets often had a ‘priest-like role of blessing in its original meaning of speaking good things,’ Bradley writes, of ‘declaring the goodness that is latent in the world and offering up a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God’ (51).

At the same time, there was a strain of **puritanical perfectionism** in Celtic Christianity (especially in the monasteries); a belief that truly following Christ involved a life of rigour and austerity. This emphasis on rigour and self-control reflects the influence of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Syria. In Celtic annals of this time, stories of excessive feats of asceticism abound – of monks surviving on meagre rations and standing for long stretches in freezing water after minimal sleep on stone beds, for example. These tales may be exaggerated, but they make the point. At the heart of this theology of mortification was a deep desire to conform and witness to Christ; and resist evil.

Coupled with this, was an acute consciousness of the **physical elements** reflected in numerous references to sea, storm, wind, mountain, rain and fire. These Celtic Christians on the craggy margins of the world lived close to nature and they did it without most of the comforts that we take for granted. Building homes, walling and ploughing fields, growing food, cooking, cleaning, travelling... it was all physically demanding, especially in their

climate. Little wonder then that they expressed their faith and discipleship in physical, bodily ways. I've already spoken about the connection between work and prayer in their world. The monks also prayed in other physical ways – genuflecting hundreds of times a day, and holding out their arms in a cross vigil for extended periods. In one famous tale, Kevin of Glendalough was praying like this and a bird laid its eggs in his outstretched hand. Rather than disturb the bird, Kevin waited three weeks until the chicks hatched.

So, prayerfulness in daily life, drawing heavily on the psalms, poetic sensitivity, a tendency towards puritanical perfectionism and physicality; these elements all characterise Celtic Christianity, and one more for today – **patterned.**

Celtic Christians had an acute sense of life's intricate patterning, rhythms and integrity, and this they expressed in their ritual, their art, their prayer and their work. They were aware of and attentive to distinct states and conditions (living/ dead, day/ night, morning/evening, good/evil, past/present, physical/spiritual, body/soul). But also, of mysterious connections and fluidity – of the flow and ebb of the tide... the day... the season... the breath, and of life itself. This was portrayed visually in the endlessly intertwining and ever twisting spirals of their standing crosses and evocative illuminated manuscripts. 'It suggests a world and a faith which is in a state of perpetual motion', Bradley writes. It's not linear or straight forward, there are twists and turns, crossings over and doubling backs, but neither is it just chaotic frenzied activity. 'It is much more ordered and controlled with an intricate symmetry, a definite pattern and the constant sense of being circumscribed within clearly defined bounds', the constancy of God's dynamic presence – 'everywhere and everywhen' (to use a Celtic phrase).



The lives of the Celtic saints reflect this pattern, flowing between action and contemplation, community and isolation, engagement and withdrawal, and in this regard, they reflect the pattern of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. *‘Walk with me and work with me’*, Jesus says in one translation of Matthew 11 (Peterson, *The Message*), *‘watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace’*.

And I wonder what might happen if we were to approach the coming week in this spirit? Praying our daily tasks, for example, simply and mindfully? Attuning more deliberately to shifts in weather and light, to the ebb and flow of the day? Being in and with the natural world – the trees, rocks, birds, spring rain and spring wind ... recognising the implicit presence of God in the integrity and dynamism of the whole? And if you wanted to stand for hours in a bath of cold water, well, you could give that a go too!! But seriously, exercising some discipline in our days – some periods of silence and stillness – this too can help us become aware and more responsive to the Spirit’s presence in all things, and her promptings in our spirit. As the community of St Ninian’s, we are in some sense heirs of this tradition – so let’s explore its riches in the warp and weft of the week, and let us pray: O Lord, open our eyes to your presence, our minds to your grace, our lips to your praises, our hearts to your love, our lives to your healing, and be found among us. Amen