

# Learning from Celtic Christians

John 1: 1-5, 9-18

*Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 21<sup>st</sup> August 2005*

Ninian (d.432). Columba (521-597). Cuthbert (c.635-687). Brigid (c. 451/2-525). David (d.c.544). Patrick (387-493). Aidan (d.642). Coinnech (c. 515/6-600). These were names I quickly came to know when I lived in Scotland. Not only were they common, they were described as saints and together were associated with churches, *Presbyterian* churches, no less. I grew up thinking only Roman Catholics paid attention to saints. Living in Scotland, I learned that Presbyterians there don't have a problem with the idea. St. Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland, after all. His saint day, the 30<sup>th</sup> November, is a national holiday every year, the Royal Burgh of St. Andrews itself enters a festive mood with parades and worship services, dancing in the street, and the private clubhouse of the Royal and Ancient, the home of golf, is open to the public. But the cult of Andrew comes later in Scotland's history. The other names I mentioned – Ninian, Columba, Cuthbert, David, Patrick, Brigid, Aidan, and Coinnech – just to name a few, were Celtic saints. Some were recognized by Rome (like Patrick), but most were not, like St. Coinnech (one I particularly like, whose name in English is Kenneth). Many were not formally canonized, for the Celtic Christians have their own notions of what made a saint a saint. Indeed, the Celts had their own notions about a number of things.

I have to confess that when I moved to Scotland in 1990, I knew close to nothing about Celtic Christianity. It simply isn't taught here because most of us are not of Celtic extraction; they are not a part of our heritage. But in the land of the Celts I discovered a fascinating approach to Christianity that I found both refreshing and challenging. Since that time I have come to do a lot of reading about the Celtic Church, have made close friends in Scotland who are Celtic scholars, and have gained much from the Iona Community, an ecumenical community formed in the 1930s in Scotland in the hope of applying the insights of the Celts to the contemporary church. Since then I have come to believe that the Celts have much to teach us today about what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Their insights and outlook resonate with something deep within me and have shaped my own ministry and belief. Over the next couple of weeks, leading up to the Scotland tour (which will include sites important to the Celtic experience), I want to highlight some of theological ideas that I believe are helpful for this church and the wider church today.

The text for the morning is from John 1, the majestic prologue to John's magisterial gospel. I chose this text to start this morning because this gospel was near and dear to Celtic Christians. They valued Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the rest of scripture, but there was something special about John, the theological themes found in his gospel. John depicts Jesus as a man of mystery, which captured the Celtic imagination. But perhaps more than anything it was John's emphasis upon the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ that fired their imaginations and shaped their lives. It was this specifically Christian idea of the incarnation: that God actually took on flesh to dwell in and with humanity in flesh and blood in Jesus Christ, that amazed them so. God was not aloof, but

had come close, come down and in to space and time in Jesus Christ. God's grace was not simply an idea to be grasped, but a way enfleshed in time and space. The gospel of John is about enfleshment, a love that is embodied, made real and concrete with our bodies and in the body politic. Christianity was not only an otherworld-focused religion, it is first *this-worldly* – it shows us how to live in the world.

But first let me say a little about the Celtic role in world history. The Celts were around before the Romans organized their empire. In most places, it was the Celtic (or pagan) civilization that Rome conquered and occupied. At the height of Celtic civilization in the third century B. C., they stretched from Cape Finisterre in Spain all the way to the Black Sea, from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. Today's maps of Europe trace the flow of Celtic rivers: Danube, Rhine, Seine, Thames, Shannon. The Celts had settlements in London, Lyon, Geneva, Strasbourg, Budapest, Ankara. The city of Paris recalls the Parisii, a Celtic tribe established where Notre Dame now sits on an island in the River Seine. Helvetia is the poetic name for Switzerland taken from the Helvetii, a Celtic tribe. Belgium is named for the Belgae. The Bolli tribe lived in modern-day Italy and left their name with the city of Bologna and the region of Bohemia. The Romans called the Celts, Galli. The Greeks called them the *Keltoi*; the Germans, *Kelten*. The French softened the "K" to a "s-sound and called them *Seltic*. The Irish kept the hard "K" sound. The Romans called France Gaul, for the Galli, the Kelts who lived there. Caesar's Gallic wars in France were against the Gauls, who were related to the Gaels in Ireland and Scotland, from which we get the name for their language, Gaelic. Indeed, when Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians, he was writing to people who lived in a Gaelic community, an old Celtic community.

Celtic civilization was swallowed up into the Roman Empire, except for places untouched by the Roman legions – such as north of Hadrian's Wall into Scotland, Wales, and all of Ireland. In those places, Celtic sensibilities were allowed to continue untouched by Rome. As you know, when the Roman Empire collapsed by the fourth century, the Roman Catholic Church was the only institution powerful enough to fill the void. Where the Empire was, the Roman Catholic Church was. The influence of Rome continued through the church, except in those places untouched by the Roman Empire – in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. In these regions, Christianity arrived as early as 200 A.D.; we're not sure how, probably through trade with North Africa and Spain. Christianity arrived in these areas, mixed with the Celtic worldview, and fostered a distinctive way of following Christ, loosely connected to the Pope in Rome. Tertullian of Carthage (160-220), for example, writing around 210 refers to "regions of the Britons inaccessible to the Romans but subject to Christ."<sup>1</sup> Rome was aware of their Christian practices, but did not have direct oversight of them until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. From about 400-1000, through the witness of people like Ninian, Columba, David, Patrick, Brigid and many others, pagan Celts slowly became followers of the one called they called *Mac Muire*, that is, the Son of the Mary: *Jesus Christ*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Bradley, p. 41.

Why was Jesus so attractive to them? Probably because the gospel of John stressed that in Jesus one found both the humanity and divinity of God. In one person there were two natures, single and complete. They had no problem with this because it wasn't in their nature to divide up the world between holy and profane, sacred and secular (as was common in the Greek and Roman worlds and is just as pervasive in our own world). The pagan Celts were closer to the Jewish and later early Christian view we find in Psalm 24, "The earth and all it contains belongs to the Lord." Judaism doesn't divide up the world – all the world belongs to God. Psalm 139 states there is no place in the universe beyond the searching of the Spirit. Such divisions of religious or non-religious were alien to the Celts. The entire world is alive to the presence of divine mysteries. So it made perfect sense to hear of a God who would come so close in Jesus Christ.

Because God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, we find a celebration of the intersection between spirit and matter – both are at work to reveal and demonstrate God's presence in the world. Because Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, we know that God has come close, very close to us. God is close, Jesus is close, the Spirit is close, all three, three in one are close to us, speaking to us, shaping our lives. Christ's Presence is present, active. Not just in the Eucharist or priestly functions, but in all of creation. Not just in churches, but in homes, at places of work. Because the world is Christ's, there's no place you can hide. The Celtic Christians had prayers for everything in life, nothing was a profane act, it was all holy, from milking the cow to tending the fire. Everything could be holy and sacred.<sup>3</sup>

They believed that the presence of Christ was physically woven around their lives. Christ upheld them and encircled them. This is wonderfully captured in the well-known prayer attributed to St. Patrick, "St. Patrick's Breastplate:"

I bind unto myself today  
the strong name of the Trinity,  
By invocation of the same,  
The Three in One and One in Three,...  
Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,

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<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in the prayer of the Rev. Dr. J. Philip Newell, Church of Scotland minister and former warden of Iona Abbey. "In the many details of the day let me be fully alive. In the handling of food and the sharing of drink, in the preparing of work and the uttering of words, in the meeting of friends and the intermingling of relationships let me be alive to each instant, O God, let me be fully alive." (Chosen for the worship bulletin.)

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger....<sup>4</sup>

The incarnation tells us that God loves the world and the Son of God continues to embody this love in the world, in the lives of real people with flesh and blood. This is because the world matters to God. In an age that is so full of pessimism, a world where people are worrying about getting “left behind,” the church needs to get the message out that the Word of God longs to be enfleshed in the world, in our lives. God wants to live *here*, to take up residence here in people, among people, for the healing of the nations. In an age where so many are giving up on this world, this part of the Christian message needs to be affirmed.

It was a message near and dear to the ministry of George Macleod (1895-1991), a Church of Scotland minister who in the 1930s drew great strength from the Celtic Christian vision in his care for the poor and hungry of Glasgow during the Depression. Macleod led the rebuilding of the abbey on Iona, a place first occupied by St. Columba in 563. From that tiny island off the coast of Scotland, Columba directed the evangelization of Scotland. One of the best summaries of this Celtic vision comes from a story that Macleod loved to tell.

“A boy through a stone at the stained glass window of the incarnation. It nicked out the “E” in the word HIGHEST in the text, GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST. Thus, till unfortunately it was mended, it read, GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGH ST. [Now, what you need to know is that in Britain the “High Street” is the equivalent to our “Main Street.” You’ll hear or read phrases like, “in the High Street today, prices fell, etc.” The High Street is the center of community, the heart of British society.]

Macleod suggest, at “least the mended E might have been contrived on a swivel so that in a high wind it would have been impossible to see which way it read. Such is the genius, and the offense, of the Christian revelation. Holiness, salvation, glory are all come down to earth in Jesus Christ as Lord. Truth is found in the constant interaction of the claim that the apex of Divine Majesty is declared in Christ’s humanity.” Glory to God in the Highest; Glory to God in the High St. Which is which? “The Word of God,” Macleod urges us, “cannot be dissociated from the Action of God. As the blood courses through the body, so the spiritual is alone kept healthy in its interaction in the High Street. God’s revelation of Himself was not a series of mighty acts done to Israel, but a series performed in and through Israel as a community in the totality of its life.”<sup>5</sup>

Even though the window text is taken from Luke 2, the angels’ message to the shepherds, it still points to the significance of the incarnation at the heart of the Celtic vision of the Christian life. The Celtic challenge to the church today is for us to continue

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<sup>4</sup> It is also known as the *Lorica Sancti Patritii* and the Deer’s Cry (*Faeth Fiada*). The earliest available text dates to the eighth century with no direct link to Patrick. See N. D. O’Donoghue, “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” in James P. Mackey, ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & Clark, 1995), pp. 45ff.

<sup>5</sup> George Macleod, *Only One Way Left: Church Prospect* (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1964), p. 64. This famous parable might have been ‘borrowed’ from the Rev. Dr. Professor Edgar Primrose Dickie (d. 1991), Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews. Professor Dickie was a member of the church I served in Scotland and it was suggested that the story actually originated with him and not Macleod.

to live out the genius and the offense of this revelation for our day. Glory to God in the High Street. Glory to God in the Highest. Can you tell the difference?

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