

Celtic Christianity III: A World of Pure Imagination

Psalm 19:1-6 & Luke 19:36-40

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/11th September 2005

“I tell you, if these – [the crowds] – were silent, the stones themselves would start to sing” (Luke 19:40). I’ve always been struck by this verse, particularly the way it was put to music in the rock-musical “Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)” in the 1970s. I remember playing the track over and over again on my LP recording as loud as my Victrola (bet you haven’t heard that word in a while) would go. It’s a great melody, rousing, triumphant. But I think what caught my interest and sent my thoughts wondering then, and continues to stir something within me, is this remarkable notion that rocks can actually sing, but don’t because it is first humanity’s job to sing the creator’s praise – that’s part of what it means to be human, to sing “Hosanna.” But if we were silent then choruses from the rocks will pick up the great hymn of the universe. I wonder, then, if stones eagerly wait, are anxious, just chomping at the bit (whatever that would mean for a *rock*) to have a chance to sing. Jesus seems to imply that there is something *latent* in rocks that could be quickened at any moment which gives them the possibility to praise – that’s the thought that amazed me. Now if this is true for rocks, then maybe it is also true for trees and oceans, mountains and flowers? Jesus seems to imply there’s more going on in inanimate objects than meets the eye. It’s *that* idea that quickened my imagination as a child – and whatever is left of it as an adult – to be open to the fact that maybe there’s a whole lot going on around us all the time, but fail to see, or forget to look for.

If rocks have a latent capacity to act in a musical way, then how many other things and people in this amazing world possess latent capabilities and gifts that need to be discovered? Maybe there is more going on than we think. Stay within this outlook long enough and we find ourselves in the world of the poet or the psalmist who knew that day and night “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork” (Psalm 19:1-2). Then it doesn’t take long for us to be in the world of this morning’s wonderful opening hymn with its quirky words (I know) in which earth and all stars, every living thing, even test tubes sing out to the Lord.¹

It’s this latent capacity or quality that has always fascinated me. What or whom stands behind all that is? The author of the children’s book *The Little Prince*, Antoine Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) once said, “It is only with the heart that one can rightly see what is invisible to the eye.”²

¹“Earth and All Stars,” Herbert Frederick Brokering, 1965. *Presbyterian Hymnal*, PCUSA.

² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (1943).

How can we come to see the world through our hearts? Isn't that what Jesus did, isn't that what he called his people to do? How do we see more deeply into the world? How do we discover and release the latent potential in all people? How do we more clearly sense the power of God's presence sustaining this world in love?

The way the early Celtic Christians discovered the presence of God was through the extraordinary power of their imagination. In fact, noted Celtic scholar, Ian Bradley, makes a convincing argument that the contemporary church desperately needs what they possessed – *the power of imagination*, which included an appreciation for mystery. Christianity, especially over the last four hundred years, has become unnecessarily intellectual. Ideas, although important, are secondary to the experience of the Holy. The Celtic Church was not anti-intellectual, for they produced major theologians for the church. But, as Bradley shows, “they excelled at expressing their faith in symbols and metaphors and images, both visual and poetic. They had the ability to invest the ordinary and the commonplace with sacramental significance, to find glimpses of God's glory throughout creation and to paint pictures in words, signs and music that acted as icons opening windows on heaven and pathways to eternity.” They have much to teach us how to rekindle the faculty of imagination, which Bradley argues is “the most neglected aspect of growth and development in the faith.”³ Perhaps this has something to do with the declining number of Christians in the world and the emptying of churches, maybe it has something to do with a failure of imagination.

Here's an example of an ancient Irish verse:

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
 Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair;
 Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,
 Frost, snow-flakes and ice, all in water their origin share,
 Three Persons of God; to one God alone we make prayer.

This is from a people “who perceive with their senses rather than their intellect or emotions” alone.⁴ The Celts inhabited a world of dreams, visions, and premonitions. They were open to mystery, comfortable with the unknown. And in order to connect with it their eyes and ears were attuned to what was around them. St. David of Wales (d. c. 601), the waterman, used to wade out into the sea off Pembrokeshire to chant the psalms. St. Cuthbert (635-687) stood in the frigid waters of the North Sea to sing with the otters. This way of being is still found in Celtic cultures. Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912), writing more than a century ago, gave an account of knowing “men and women of eighty, ninety and a hundred years of age [who]continue the practice of...going one to two miles to the seashore to join their voices with

³ Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), pp. 84-85.

⁴ Bradley, pp. 85ff.

the voicing of the waves and their praises with the praises of the ceaseless sea.”⁵ This appears so foreign and strange to us. But the Celts could live out their faith in this way and many other imaginative ways because they were not afraid to use their imaginations for the glory of God.

In 1867, George MacDonald (1824-1905) attempted to rescue imagination from those who had become enslaved to reason. MacDonald was a Christian writer who wrote fantasy novels, his writings later influenced C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) in the creation of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. MacDonald wrote an essay which argued that creation was an exercise of God’s imagination and that humanity embodies the thought of God. Thus, he wrote, “the imagination of man is made to the image of the imagination of God.”⁶ Now, like any faculty, it can become depraved and deprived, but he considered it the leader of all human faculties. In this way MacDonald was being true to his Celtic roots. The power of the imagination baptized and fired by the Spirit can be seen in a person like J. R. R. Tolkien’s (1892-1973) epic *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, Tolkien was very good friends with C. S. Lewis and they spent much time together in an Oxford pub, and at one point in a frustrating conversation with then skeptical Lewis (this was before becoming a Christian), who believed the four gospels were “only myth”, frustrated, Tolkien said, “Lewis, you suffer from a failure of imagination.”⁷ Can you imagine telling C. S. Lewis that he doesn’t have enough imagination?

But, you see, there is a connection between imagination and the truth of the gospel – so that we not only believe in facts or hold to beliefs and confess our creed, but through the power of imagination *we enter into* the very source of the beliefs, we enter into the new life of the gospel, we apprehend everything a new perspective. That’s why Christians seem odd (or should) because we see the world differently and from that vision we act in the world.

The contemporary Irish mystic and theologian, Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, has shown how “the Celts saw into nature, discerning shapes and presences that were at once physical and spiritual. O’Donoghue calls this way of seeing *imaginal*, which is helpful, because when people hear the word ‘imagination’ many hear ‘imaginary,’ which suggests that something isn’t true, not real. But that’s not what the Celts were trying to do. They were trying to *see into* the world what is already there and bring it out, to perceive with the soul the soul of things. “[Imaginal] is not a faculty that projects inner fantasies on to the world; it is a faculty that perceives what is really there, but not obvious to people who lack this faculty.”⁸ It is trying to draw out what it already there. Curiously, this is

⁵ Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica (Ortha nan Gaidheal)*, I, xxxiii, cited in Bradley, p. 92

⁶ George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (London, 1905) as cited in Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for Our Future* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 100.

⁷ H. Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London, 1981, no. 18), cited in Simpson, p. 101

⁸Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, *The Mountain Behind the Mountain* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), cited in Simpson, 100.

how the Celtic Christians did evangelism. They didn't convert people to Christianity by forcing them to confess a creed, but it was more a matter of "liberating and releasing the divine spark which was already there in every person."⁹ They could see the image of God in people and they connected with that image. They saw the latent Spirit of Christ in people and called people to see themselves in a new way. They connected with the latent power and presence of God all around them and encouraged others to live into the same kind of vision. We desperately need more of this today, don't we?

I've been giving a lot of thought about imagination, especially in light of the horrible events in Louisiana and Mississippi these past two weeks and as we come up on the fourth anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a day not unlike today. Perhaps, in both instances we have been hurt by a massive failure of imagination (as the 9-11 Commission acknowledged), in protecting ourselves from a "9-11" and its aftermath, as well as planning for something like a hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. I've been thinking about the relationship between *imagination* and *empathy* in wondering how the nation, or closer to home, the church responds to this natural disaster and begins to pick up the pieces. So I have wondered what it must feel like to be so very poor and maybe black and poor, losing a home, losing loved ones in such a dehumanizing way, caught in the New Orleans Convention Center, losing one's pet. What then, needs to be done? How can my heart be broken enough to look out with compassion and allow me to see the poverty that is all around me in Baltimore, and ask why are blacks disproportionately poorer than whites? What needs to happen in my heart in order for me to see the world more clearly? What needs to happen for me to imagine how God looks out upon the world, what does God see? For what does God hope? The church has already contributed so much and will continue to do so. But what can the church offer, what imaginative vision can we offer the nation or the people of New Orleans as they rebuild their lives and their city? There are considerable opportunities for resurrection, perhaps only if we're *imaginal*. In addition to everything we're already giving, the church can extend one of its most powerful, but often neglected faculties, its imagination. What does God see, latent in this horrible situation, latent in the world and in these people, that we can't see but need to see? Time will tell. But imagination is key.

One of my favorite parts of "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" is when Wonka invites the children to join him in seeing the world the way he does. In this way, Wonka is a Christ-figure, who calls us to see the world in a new way. For I can hear Jesus singing the same words to us:

Come with me and you'll be in a world of pure of imagination.

Take a look and you'll see into your imagination.

...

⁹ Bradley, p. 94.

If you want to view paradise.
Simply look around and view it
Anything you want to, do it.
Want to change the world, there's nothing to it.

There is no life I know
To compare with pure imagination
Living there, you'll be free
If you truly wish to be.¹⁰

That's the kind of world, I hope for – not of chocolate (although that would be cool);
this is the kind of world I hope for. May it be so.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

¹⁰ “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” (1971), based on the book by Roald Dahl. Music and lyrics: Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley