

## **Celtic Christianity IV: Into the Coracle**

Genesis 12:1-9 & Acts 16:1-12

*Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/18<sup>th</sup> September 2005*

In 563, Columba set off from the coast of Derry in the north of Ireland running from his past. He was 42 years old, probably of royal blood, a man of wealth, education, and distinction. From what was he running? We're not entirely sure. He had twelve companions with him, but together they had no idea where they were going. He knew they had to leave. Columba was a Christian, the founder of many monasteries in Ireland, but his people were engaged in war and some think there might have been blood on his hands, whether literally or metaphorically. He needed to make penance for something. In fact, he was determined to venture very far from Ireland. He got into his boat with his companions and set sail. He wasn't sure where, but he knew that if he arrived on a distant shore and could look behind him to see Ireland, it was not far enough. So he arrived at one place and looked behind and Ireland was still on the horizon. So he got back into his boat and set sail to another island. He climbed to the highest point to assure himself that Ireland was not visible. Today, this hill is known in Gaelic as *Carn Cul Ri Eirinn* (Hill of the Turning Back to Ireland). The island is Iona. It is there that Columba settled, on the site of an old Druid temple, to form a new monastery that eventually grew to 150 monks. From that remote place on the edge of the world, on an island off an island off the west coast of Scotland, Columba built a community that became the missionary center for the evangelization of Scotland and northern England. Its monks traveled all over the British Isles with the zeal of the gospel, eventually making their way to the continent of Europe.

The Celtic monks were incessant travelers throughout the British Isles and the Continent because the gospel sent them out into the world. They had an extraordinary missionary zeal. It was the gospel, the message of God's good news in Jesus Christ, which sent them into new lands, to meet new people not only to bring Jesus with them, so to speak, but to encounter him along the way. In this way, the Celtic Christians were being faithful to that sense of journey and adventure built into one's experience with Yahweh. Our text from Genesis 12, the call of Abram, is a case in point, with God's command to "Go!" Jesus never stopped walking and when he finished he sent his disciples out to continue the work. Or think of the missionary journeys of Paul throughout the Mediterranean. It was the call of the Spirit that sent him out into unknown places for the sake of his own salvation and the salvation of the world.

As you know, when we meet God the directions of our lives usually change. Our experience of God sends us off down new paths, towards new horizons, to new places in order to become new people. It is often said that God accepts us just as we are – and this is true. But God never leaves us there. God takes us as we are in order to bring us someplace else, to become who we really are, to fulfill God’s vision for our lives. It is not surprising that the early Christians were known as The Way, people of the one who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), because to be a Christian means to be a person *on the way*. There is never a sense of arrival, but a process of being and becoming. There is never a sense of arriving home, at least in this life. For us the journey *is* home. This means in order to start the journey, one must have a leave-taking, one must step out and risk.

“Embedded deep in the Celtic psyche,” Ian Bradley, a leading Celtic scholar writes, “was the sense,” quoting Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”<sup>1</sup> The Celtic Christians didn’t give up that inherent trait of massive *wanderlust*. They were inveterate explorers and adventurers, forever curious about what life was like on a distant shore or in the neighboring glen. But when that trait was combined with the biblical importance of journey and adventure, it fired their imaginations all the more.

Celtic Christians sometimes referred themselves as *peregrini*, from the Latin *peregrinatio*, people on the move – pilgrims. *Peregrinatio*, or pilgrimage, was part and parcel of their lives as Jesus followers. Now this was not pilgrim as in making a pilgrimage to a holy shrine and then going home, but pilgrimage understood as a journey, an intentional leave-taking that allowed them to grow as Christians. Most monks had their own “*anamchara*”, or soul friend.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes a pilgrimage would have been undertaken for penance, or recommended by one’s *anamchara*, or soul friend, your spiritual mentor.

A pilgrimage very often meant getting into a coracle – a small boat about twice the size of our communion table – and setting off from the coast trusting the Holy Spirit to take you where you needed to go. Many monks perished and were never heard from again. Others landed on dry ground to build cells or hermit huts or monasteries. There is the story of three monks who set off from the south of Ireland in a coracle without oars or proper provisions and drifted across the sea for seven days before arriving on the north coast of Cornwall. They were brought before King Alfred who questioned

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> St. Comgall (d. c. 597 or 602), St. Brigid (b.c. 541/2 – 525), and others are quoted as saying that a person without a soul friend is like a body without a head.

why they had come, and they replied, “*We stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, we cared not where.*”<sup>3</sup>

Now, we have to be careful here because there is a difference between genuine peregrination and restlessness and escapism, of which the Celts were also painfully guilty. “The Book of Lismore,” a medieval Irish compilation of the lives of the saints, distinguishes three kinds of pilgrimages. The first, leaving one’s country in a physical sense but with no inner change of heart, was dismissed as a waste of time and energy. The second, earnestly desiring to leave everything familiar and comfortable behind and embark on a life of pilgrimage but being forced by pressing duties to remain at home, was recognized as a worthy calling. The third, leaving one’s country for God and forsaking a life of comfort and ease for one of austerity and virtue, is regarded as the highest calling of all.”<sup>4</sup>

Whether you agree with this or not, all these categories get to the heart of the matter for the Celts – pilgrimage as journey and the purpose or goal of pilgrimage was, as they put it, “*seeking the place of one’s resurrection.*”<sup>5</sup> What a powerful image this is – seeking the place of one’s resurrection.

What is remarkable is that they knew that one didn’t have to travel in order to be a pilgrim. Otherwise, you’d have the countryside swarming with monks running off whenever they pleased and leaving home. You can see the chaos that would bring. This would make it tough to have a monastic community or any community at all. But if you’re going to travel and see life as a journey but are not changed by the experience, then it is a waste of time. “This stress on the importance of the inner journey of repentance, resurrection and rebirth brings us to the heart of the Celtic idea of pilgrimage. *Peregrination*, Bradley writes, “was the outward expression of an inner change, a metaphor and symbol for that journey towards deeper faith and greater holiness and towards God...”<sup>6</sup> The outward journey is an expression of the inner journey. Like walking the labyrinth is an outward expression of the inner movement of the human spirit searching for the Spirit of the Holy. Walking, traveling, making pilgrimage allow us to connect with the movement the Holy Spirit is seeking to realize within us. It is how we grow and develop as Christians.

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Bradley, p. 80.

Jumping into a coracle with no provisions and no plan seems a little foolish, or courageous – sometimes they are indistinguishable. They knew, as I believe we need to remember, that to be a follower of Jesus is a journey and any journey involves some form of risk – and foolishness and courage. There are times when we must be prudent, practical, and cautious. But there are times when we need to jump into the coracle and go where the Spirit wants to take us.

This past week one of our fellow-travelers to Scotland, Diana Brown, unfortunately had to back out from the trip, leaving one space open. Sheri Comisac heard about the opening and quickly wondered whether she should go, making such a big decision at the last moment. A couple of things happened over a few hours which were signs that she was meant to go, but should she? (You'll have to ask Sheri to tell you the "signs.") One of the signs came from a friend who gave her a quote that read, "Jump and the net will appear." Very Celtic. Sheri is going. The problem, of course, is determining when the right time to jump is.

Sometimes, I wonder if our preference for the known over the unknown, of playing it safe, causes us as Christians to miss out on the thrill of the adventure of life in Christ. How much are we missing by staying where we are and playing it safe? How much is the church missing by playing it safe? It was George Macleod (1895-1991), founder of the Iona Community in the 1930s, who said, "Christians are explorers, not mapmakers."<sup>7</sup> Here he captures a sense of that Celtic love of the unknown, and I must say, it resonates with something deep within me, not unlike the Eliot (1888-1965) quote, "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."<sup>8</sup> *Contained in these visions is the truth that our knowledge of ourselves and our lives are known through the experience of exploration and pilgrimage, of leave-taking, of venturing into the unfamiliar. And in many ways you don't know what you're really looking for and need to know until you venture out. We discover who we are and our potential only when we step out.*

Ian Bradley believes this idea of pilgrimage is one that we badly need to recover in the contemporary Christian experience. Ian is a good friend of mine and we have spent a lot of time over the years talking about what it will take for the church to

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<sup>7</sup> "Christ is a person to be trusted, not a principle to be tested. The Church is Movement, not a meeting house. The Faith is an Experience, not an exposition. Christians are Explorers, not map makers. And the New Social Order is not a blueprint which someone must find quickly. It is a present Experience made possible at Bethlehem, offered on Calvary, and communicated at Pentecost." Cited in Ronald Ferguson, *George Macleod: Founder of the Iona Community* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

rediscover itself and wake up. He believes the Celts have a lot to teach us and I would agree.

It was Robert Louis Stevenson who said, “For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel’s sake. The great affair is to move.” Where are you moving? Where are you on the journey? What new steps do you have to make? What’s holding you back? What are you afraid of? What will it take for you to jump into the coracle to find your place of resurrection, to find that place where God’s powerful love is bringing you alive?

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