

“The Celts”

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Phil. 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

[The Apostle Paul said,]

‘I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect.

But Christ has taken hold of me.

So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize.’

Phil. 3:10-11

Let us pray... O God,

May we learn from history so as not to repeat its mistakes,

but find inspiration to go on adventures of the spirit into new territory.

Amen

One of the great benefits of going to seminary is the exposure to
new ideas about spirituality that are really very old.

The practice of guided meditation by the Jesuits of Roman Catholicism
and the “Jesus Prayer” tradition of Orthodox Christianity
were especially intriguing to me.

Since then, I began to learn something about Celtic Christianity –

a cultural style of Christian tradition that has become popular in our time.

Today being St Patrick’s Day,

let’s consider the contributions of the Celts to the Church – and vice versa,
about such concerns as life and death...

*Jackie Gallagher opened the newspaper and was dumbfounded
to read in the obituary section that he had died.*

He quickly phoned his best friend Michael Finney, and said,

"Mickey, did you see the morning paper? They say I died!"

Finney replied,

"Yes, I saw it, Jackie! ‘Twas a terrible shock!

So... where is it you be callin' from?"

<http://www.arizonacap.com/mgame/irishjokes.htm>

The Celts of ancient times – before Ireland became Christian,
really didn’t have a clear concept of the afterlife –
and lived boldly in this life, but dreaded the next.

They had myths about other worlds –

probably stories from fishermen who journeyed across the north Atlantic;

But these ‘otherworlds’ were really just other places in this world.

There were fairy lands and even a land of the dead,

but these were unknown territories of trickster gods and places of dread.

They practiced magic and human sacrifice to appease tribal gods
to help them survive in the midst of a violent world.

Willard, p.2

They also practiced human slavery –

and around 403 AD/CE, a teenage boy named Patrick was kidnapped
from the Roman colony of Britain and brought to Ireland as a slave.

He was living under terrible circumstances, ill-clothed and ill-fed,
when one day – six years later, while shepherding a flock of sheep –
he received a vision.

He was told to simply walk away – he did,
and he kept walking until he reached a coastal town
where he boarded a ship and made his way back to Britain.

He continued his education, became ordained, and was commissioned as a bishop;
But he had a calling to return to Ireland, because he loved the people there...

Thomas Cahill wrote the book, How the Irish Saved Civilization,
which sounds like a bold claim –

though not so strange considering the author is of Irish descent...

But it is a remarkable story that is bittersweet.

Mr. Cahill's thesis is that – after the Roman Empire collapsed in continental Europe,
during the period of history called the Dark Ages,

Christian monks working in Irish scriptoria,

copied all the books they could get their hands on,
and so they preserved the literature of the West.

They brought books with them on missionary efforts to reestablish
faith and knowledge in the European mainland.

This allowed the Roman Catholic Church to reassert itself and re-organize society
as Europe entered the Medieval-era of competing kingdoms.

What is amazing, though, is this was accomplished by a culture
which was previously illiterate – yet embraced the written word

thanks to the mission work of St. Patrick
who returned to Ireland in 432 CE.

Three of the popular legends generally attributed to St Patrick include
that he taught about God as a Trinity by using a shamrock

with its three individual leaves unified by a common stem.

Another legend is about how he drove all the snakes out of Ireland –
probably as an allegory for his opposition to

black magic, human sacrifice, and slavery.

He is attributed with writing the hymn called “St Patrick's Breastplate”,
which includes the following verses...

Willard, p.3

*I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.*

*I bind this today to me forever
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in Jordan river,
His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heavenly way,
His coming at the day of doom...*

*I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks...*

*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,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/t/stpatric.htm>

Cahill writes:

'The difference between Patrick's magic and the magic of the druids
is that in Patrick's world all beings and events come from the hand of God,
who loves human beings and wishes them success.
And... all nature, indeed the whole of the created universe,
conspires to mankind's good, teaching, [nurturing], and saving.'

For about 30 years, St Patrick labored among the Irish Celts
and succeeded in the peaceful transformation
of Ireland's culture of violence and slavery,
by helping them see the world was still enchanted,
'full of adventure and surprise', but no longer terrifying.

Willard, p.4

Cahill goes on to say, Patrick helped them see that

‘Christ has trodden all the paths before us, and [that]

at every crossroads and by every tree the Word of God speaks out.

We have only to be quiet and listen...’

that the world is ‘holy’, the open ‘Book of God – as a healing mystery’,
filled with ‘divine messages’.

About 100 years later –

after St Patrick had died and the Roman Empire had collapsed,

there were many monasteries established throughout Ireland
which were producing books.

The illiterate Celts had embraced literacy and made bookmaking an art form –
even developing their own style of calligraphy.

Ironically, the love of books led one monk named Columba
to provoke a battle between rival kingdoms.

His side won and he got the book,

but he himself was judged and sent into exile.

With 12 companions, he set sail for the island of Iona

where he established a community in 564CE.

Iona became a base for reaching out to Europe with books
and their joyful Celtic perspective.

One image associated with the missionary efforts of Columba
is from a parable in Ezekiel 47 which speaks of a stream,
welling up and flowing outward from God’s temple
to bring new growth to a wasteland.

That is what happened as Celtic missionaries went forth,
bringing their books with them to establish monasteries
throughout Europe.

Then the times turned against the Celts,

who lost their leadership role as Viking raids destroyed and sacked
many of the monasteries of Ireland – including Iona,
allowing Roman orthodoxy to return to power.

In the 17th Century, English Calvinists came close to wiping out the Irish,
and in the 19th Century, the Potato Famine killed many
and forced millions more to emigrate.

The 20th Century saw terrible conflicts between Catholics and Protestants
of Ireland until peace finally appears to have taken hold.

Willard, p.5

As Thomas Cahill claimed, the Irish 'saved civilization' by reintroducing hope in a time of ignorance and despair, challenging Christians ever since to bring light into their own time.

Besides bringing about the peaceful transformation of a violent society, Celtic Christianity brought a relaxed attitude toward the role of women in Church leadership – a practice that was suppressed with Roman preoccupation of sexual mores, but an inspiration for our own time.

Like an ocean wave, Celtic Christianity formed for a moment in time when it was most needed, before returning to the sea of possibilities.

That is God's grace at work – not sparing us from hardship, but conspiring for the success of humankind along with all of the earth and created universe, the saints and prophets that came before us, and Christ, Himself who will surely come again.

Perhaps we are in such a position as a progressive church to offer fresh perspectives in a conservative community.

We are in a unique position as a gathering of talented and experienced retirees to venture out from our church as a base to share the wealth of our knowledge and experience to communities and congregations beyond our own.

I will close with 'A BLESSING' by a contemporary Irish author, the late John O'Donohue, from his book, Eternal Echoes:

Blessed be the longing that brought you here and that quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to befriend your eternal longing.

May you enjoy the critical and creative companionship of the question "Who am I?" and may it brighten your longing.

May secret Providence guide your thought and shelter your feeling.

May your mind inhabit your life with the same sureness with which your body belongs to the world.

May the sense of something absent enlarge your life.

May your soul be as free as the ever-new waves of the sea.

May you succumb to the danger of growth.

May you live in the neighbourhood of wonder.

May you belong to love with the wildness of Dance.

May you know that you are ever embraced in the kind circle of God.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Philippians 3:4b-14,
has the Apostle Paul –*

*like any modest Irishman with a good opinion of himself,
giving credit where credit is due
for what is most important...*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

⁴Others may brag about themselves,

but I have more reason to brag than anyone else.

⁵I was circumcised when I was eight days old,

and I am from the nation of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin.

I am a true Hebrew.

As a Pharisee, I strictly obeyed the Law of Moses.

⁶And I was so eager that I even made trouble for the church.

I did everything the Law demands in order to please God.

⁷But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable
is worthless.

⁸Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

I have given up everything else and count it all as garbage.

All I want is Christ ⁹and to know that I belong to him.

I could not make myself acceptable to God

by obeying the Law of Moses.

God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ.

¹⁰All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life.

I want to suffer and die as he did,

¹¹so that somehow I also may be raised to life.

¹²I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect.

But Christ has taken hold of me.

So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize.

¹³My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived.

But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead.

¹⁴I run toward the goal,

so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven.

This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.

John 12:1-8

- [1] Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany,
where Laz'arus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.
- [2] There they made him a supper;
Martha served, and Laz'arus was one of those at table with him.
- [3] Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard
and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair;
and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.
- [4] But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said,
[5] "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii
and given to the poor?"
- [6] This he said, not that he cared for the poor
but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box
he used to take what was put into it.
- [7] Jesus said,
"Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial.
[8] The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."