

# What is Celtic Christianity?

*By Andrew Dunn*

The interest today in Celtic spirituality is huge. Whether it is in the art, music, saleable handcrafts, or books about it, or in the growth of modern Celtic communities and retreats, this ancient way of describing how to be Christian, and how to relate to God, God's creation, God's word and God's people, is attracting attention.

"The rediscovery of the Celtic world has been an extraordinary revelation for many Christians in recent years, an opening up of the depths and riches within our own tradition which many of us had not before suspected", writes Esther de Waal in Wales.

The breadth of the interest in Celtic spirituality is surprising. People across the theological spectrum find elements in Celtic Christianity that attract them. Liberal Christians find the emphasis on the love of God and inclusiveness irresistible. Conservatives discover in Celtic spirituality a theological and biblical orthodoxy that gives them certainty about its aims and roots, and enables them to explore its spiritual offerings with confidence.

Those involved with Creation spirituality, along with green and eco-sensitive believers, delight in the Celtic honouring of creation as God's Second Book. Feminists find the gender equality in leadership honours their discoveries. Earth-centred Christians delight in the maternal principle of the early Celtic cradling which gave women a prominent place in society, mission centres and church.

The charismatic and prophetic interest of modern renewal strands find a warm affinity with the lived experience of so many Celtic saints. The Celtic Christians' struggle with evil, darkness and death-which found the victory of Jesus' death 'on the tree', and his resurrection, to be the heart of the good news-is music to many ears today where the forces of darkness are encountered.

In exploring themes of Celtic spirituality, then, one can meet some interesting and diverse people all sipping from the same honey pot! Many of them with an increasing concern to do God's mission in a new millennium and to 'be the Church' in fresh and winsome ways that don't limit, damage, eject and judge people in their growth in Christ.

## **The Roots of Celtic spirituality**

St. Paul is speaking to the Celts (or "Keltoi") in his letter to the Galatians, the people who became widespread throughout Europe in succeeding centuries with their main locations in Brittany, Ireland, Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. The mission into Celtic areas had three important roots that shaped its theological and spiritual understanding.

The first arose from creative mission activity of the Antioch and other 'eastern' churches which sent missionaries to Brittany. There mission centres were established which prepared people like Patrick and Ninian for their life's work in the west.

Secondly, the impact of 'desert spirituality' with its austerity, deep love of God, profound personal spirituality and strong commitment to Christ, marked the mission to Brittany and beyond.

Third, their Biblical emphases were from the writings of St John-the Gospel, the Letters and the Revelation. The Johannine emphasis on the presence of God among us, the Word made Flesh, the Spirit who has come in Jesus' name, the risen Lord speaking to his Church and drawing it, and all believers, into union with him ("Abide in me and I in you . . . without me you can do nothing" (John 15; 4-5) -- all moulded the Celtic way. Indeed, just as John leaned upon Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, so the Celtic converts saw themselves as listening for the heartbeat of God with their mystical (experiential) devotion and life in the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, day by day.

It is not pressing the matter too far to say that the Celtic emphasis on the immanence of God, the rich experience of God as trinity, the relational nature of the people of God (a horizontal view of the Church rather than a top-down hierarchical view) all come from the eastern emphases they inherited, rather than from Rome and the western church. In fact, it is not

overly simplistic to contrast the Johannine view of the church, faith and mission of the east with the much more activist and authoritarian Petrine view of the Roman west. Certainly, it was the clash of these two views of 'how to be the people of God' that reached its climax at the Synod of Whitby in Northumbria in 664 AD with devastating results for Celtic Christianity. The Roman view of church structure and regulations, dates for central festivals (e.g. Easter) and the hair styles of monks, all won the day when the Roman and Celtic mission leaders met at Hilda's monastery at Whitby. Over the next few centuries the Celtic way withdrew to the Highlands and islands of Scotland, the far corners of Cornwall and Wales, and in other areas went underground, but did not die out.

### **Why now?**

We can discern a number of reasons for the renewed interest in Celtic spirituality at the end of the second millennium of the church's life. There is a tiredness with the busyness and demands of church life. The feeling is abroad that there has to be a better way which does not wear us out, even burn us out. There is a yearning for a deeper way of being the church which does not demand being part of the tired, complex, demanding and often immovable structures of formal western Christianity. There is an increasing sense that the way ahead does not involve more and more waves of renewal from outside our land. There is strong reaction to styles of church and leadership that manipulate, hurt and abuse people. The end of the age of rationalism has produced a huge outburst of interest in spirituality often expressed in 'New Age' spiritualities and in post modern thinking about systems, theologies, philosophies, faith and life. The warmth, God-centred and immanence-focussed elements of Celtic faith and experience of God is very attractive in this new environment. Coming to experiences of God via the Celtic way gives a very different view of God, of Jesus, and of how to be the church-how to be spiritual people and how to relate the faith. The winsomeness and gentle elegance of the Celtic relational way has immense attraction today.

### **The leading emphases**

Here are some of the elements of this refreshing spirituality. God is love! (1 John 4:8;16.) God is here! God is everywhere and everywhen. God is immanent, palpably so.

As I prepare a meal or fix a door,  
I encounter Christ of cup and saw.  
*(John Hunt, We Spirited People, P 63,  
Caxton 1998)*

God is known among us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (John 16:13-15) As one poem puts it:

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,  
Three joints in the finger, but only one finger fair,  
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one  
shamrock to wear,  
Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share,  
Three Persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer  
*(Hull, The Poem Book of the Gael, Chatto 1912 )*

This experience of God in trinity was wonderfully functional:

The Three who are over my head,  
The Three who are under my tread,  
The Three who are over me here,  
The Three who are over me there,  
The Three who are in the earth near,  
The Three who are up in the air,  
The Three who in heaven do dwell,  
The Three in the great ocean swell,  
Pervading Three, O be with me.

*And:*

I lie down tonight,  
With the Triune of my strength,  
With the Father, with Jesus,  
With the Spirit my might.  
*(Both from Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica, Floris  
Books. 1992)*

We need theologies that embrace the 'within-ness' of God. We need to recover the faculty of "religious imagination" (Esther de Waal) to see and understand what this means for faith and life in the post modern age. Here is a major challenge to rationalism, including theological rationalism. Here is a way of listening with spiritual ears, seeing with a fresh imagination-of sensing with a soft and tender heart the signs of grace in every activity of life from the most menial to the most challenging.

### **"Listening for the heartbeat of God".**

(J. Philip Newell)

This becomes a central image for devotion and prayer which can never be turned into a system or liturgy. It keeps both the individual disciple and the church awake to the gentle nuances of grace as they impinge on our life.

All things God has made are interconnected and all of it is good. The intertwined Celtic knots and art work are symbolic of the connectedness of all that God has made. Pelagius (the first Celtic theologian) taught that sin and human foibles had not eliminated the image of God in humans but had overwhelmed it, covered it up. Jesus' death and resurrection brought victory over sin and death, releasing again the image of God in people.

### **The church without walls**

Building on relationships within families and communities suggests fresh ways of being the people of God which have relevance for the church of the new millennium.

### **Living fully in the simple activities of life**

Whether at home, at the hearth, in the kitchen, garden, workplace or in the complexities of modern business, embracing and relishing simple daily tasks has an attractiveness for many.

### **Rediscovering the 'standing places'**

Encountering again the 'standing places' of one's life and faith journey encourages a sense of pilgrimage back through, and on from, our formative places and experiences.

Pilgrimage, 'peregrinatio', lies at the heart of mission. This Spirit-led wandering makes us available, vulnerable and creative as we go about the doing of the faith. Pilgrimage is not simply visiting the sacred places but wandering forth as the Spirit leads and finding ourselves in the place of God's appointing, there to become if necessary 'green martyrs' for Christ on his radical mission.

### **Engagement with life and its pain as well as its joy is central to the Celtic way**

No triumphalism here. Life in all its shades and colours is to be lived in the presence of God! As the third millennium opens up and more of us find ourselves marginalised in our own lands through the secularising and anti-faith forces at work, we need to embrace this huge insight or we will turn away in frustration and defeat.

## **Authority and power**

Within the Celtic view of the church, authority lies with those who are seen to be wise in the things of God, deep in wisdom, transparent in the love of God, simple in faith and lifestyle, open and clean in relationships, clear of eye and heart. Power is a term foreign to the Celtic view of authority and leadership, and, I suspect, from their view of ministry and mission.

## **Gender equality**

The gender equality achieved naturally in the mixed monastic communities at Whitby and elsewhere, often under women's leadership, was an achievement of biblical equality (Galatians 3:27-28) that we have yet to see in modern western Christianity!

## **All the company of heaven and earth.**

God's people include all the company of heaven and earth, the saints who have gone on before us as well as the saints here on earth. The lives, faith and witness of this "large crowd of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) nourish and encourage us. Together with them we are Christ's body in a lively engagement.

## **Its place in the modern Christian scene**

Celtic spirituality offers many people from 'the old country' connections with their roots. These are cultural and spiritual roots, a history and an identity which many are finding significant for them and their families as the new millennium dawns.

Then there's the utter simplicity and earthiness of this way of faith. God meets us in the simplest, as well as the more complex things of life. One beautiful series of prayers come from a woman in the outer Hebrides praying as she stirs the peat fire into life before dawn, kneeling on her earthen floor; as she makes her bed, cooks the family breakfast, milks the cow, makes the butter and goes about the day's work. Technology and material pursuits have squeezed out this realism from much of life today, and yet . . . and yet . . . if only it could be recovered!

There is a unifying factor in Celtic spirituality that reaches back before the many divisions of later Christianity. It also has a unique way of drawing folk from so many strands and emphases in the modern church back to the honey pot of grace.

Celtic spirituality offers much for the present as we have seen. It is of particular significance as we look forward into the next century and millennium. Michael Mitton (Michael Mitton is with Anglican Renewal Ministries in England) says of his research and writing on things Celtic: "As we have explored the various strands of the Celtic Church, we have done a lot of looking back. And yet . . . I felt as if I were looking forward . . . [to] the kind of church that is required to carry the gospel to "the coming generations." (*Michael Mitton, The Soul of Celtic Spirituality, 23rd Publications, 1996, P 147*) If it is true that the church which survives through the Third Millennium will be a contemplative church (Mitton) and a mystical church (Karl Rahner) then in delving into the Celtic way and distilling out its secrets and riches we may well be helping to set the parameters for the way ahead.

Celtic spirituality offers an incarnate Christianity both in its experience of God each day and in its engagement with the pain of the world-with the poor, the disenfranchised, the wounded and the refugee-every bit as much as with the safe and the sound.

It also offers us a challenge to our most basic heresy! Pelagianism describes the deep rooted human need to add our effort to God's grace. How often do we blame ourselves for not praying enough, doing enough or being good enough for the blessing to come?

How often as church leaders do we subtly manipulate our folk with things we lay on them that produce guilt as we buy into this human tendency? The Celtic way says a resounding "No!" to these distortions. Above all, Celtic spirituality is a simple, engaging and deeply nourishing way of faith and prayer whose profundity is easily overlooked, even dismissed, by the rational mind and heart that places thinking and reasoning above heartfelt listening and 'being' in God.