

Church of the Good Shepherd
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August 21, 2022

St Patrick, he of shamrock and snake-banishing fame, is celebrated today as the Patron Saint of Ireland. What most people don't know is that in fact Patrick was not Irish by birth. He was born into a Roman family in western Britain. He came to Ireland for the first time as an adolescent, when he was captured by Irish raiders and forced to tend herds for the local Irish chieftain. There among the hills and forests of the Emerald Isle, Patrick, though underfed and underclothed, grew strong in faith. He came to Ireland "ignorant of God" but he learned to "pray incessantly in all weathers and night and day for God's help." Not surprising then, when Patrick returned to Ireland as a missionary years later, and was asked by two heathen princesses, "Who is God?", he answered not by reciting the Nicene Creed or by teaching the Four Spiritual Laws or giving a presentation on his church's "Vision and Values". Rather, he responded out of his own experience of God in nature:

"Our God, the God of all men, God of heaven and Earth, seas and rivers, God of suns and moon, of all the stars, God of high mountain and lowly valleys, God over heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven. He has a dwelling in heaven and Earth and sea and in all things that are in them. He inspires all things, he quickens all things. He is over all things, he supports all things. He makes the light of the sun to shine, he surrounds the moon and the stars, he has made wells in the arid earth, placed dry islands in the sea. He has a Son co-eternal with himself. And the Holy Spirit breathes in them; not separate are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Patrick was speaking from his own experience of God, molded by the elements of God's creation. But he was in that response also expressing a key feature of the faith that would flourish among the Celts of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Britain—a deep appreciation of the goodness of creation.

I mean, if you had to name the characteristic of Celtic Christianity that is most widely recognized and celebrated, more than likely it would be this—the Celts' love and respect for nature. And there's good reason for thinking so. The Celts' high regard of creation world permeated their world and their faith. It is manifest in their poetry, in their prayers, in the lives of Celtic saints and even in their art, where drawings of birds and animals serve as punctuation marks on the pages of their illustrated Bibles and intertwining patterns of fruit and foliage fill the borders of illuminated manuscripts.

Now, it needs to be said that the Celts' regard for creation was not merely a simple love of natural beauty, nor was it a romanticized claim of the 'sacredness of nature' advanced from the comfort of a climate-controlled office. The Celts in fact had a healthy respect for nature, recognizing its dark side, the menace of nature's mighty powers, as well as its beauty. No, when people today praise the Celts for being "creation centered," what they are alluding to is the fact the Celts world was a thoroughly religious universe, a universe that is dynamic, living, and powerful, reflecting a power which comes ultimately from God. Men and women are a part of this universe, indeed are at the center of it, and they seek to relate harmoniously to it. If you read the creedal hymns and litanies from the Celtic Church, you'll find a celebration of the totality of creation and an affirmation of our personal involvement with it, with God and his universe,

plants and animals, men and women, all bound together in the unity of one created order. This world is a wholly different world from the systematized, mechanized, Newtonian world that we know, where humanity stands apart, dominating the rest of the created order. For the Celts, creation was something they were intimate with, that they interacted with, and respected as the place to encounter God.

The Celtic Christians came to this belief by three main routes. The first route came through the Celts' own pre-Christian pagan religion. The native religion of Britain and Ireland, the Druid religion, was a nature mysticism that revered rivers, forests and hills as the dwelling places of divinities and sacred spirits. The pre-Christian Celts had a strong sense of the presence of deities and spirits in nature and they took this reverence and respect for nature with them when they became Christians. And the monks and missionaries who converted the Celts were happy to accept that element of their pagan faith and baptized and incorporated it into Christianity. Churches were built on the sites of sacred druid groves, springs and wells associated with pagan deities were given saints names, and ceremonies celebrating creation such as well-dressing, harvest festivals, and the blessing of crops, were incorporated into the church's calendar.

A second route came frankly from living so close to nature, and having the time and the temperament to study and contemplate its variety and beauty. Following the hermits, Irish, British, Welsh and Scottish monks tended to establish settlements in wild and remote places, having a particular penchant for islands and often retreating to caves and cells for seclusion. Their lives thus became intertwined with the times and colors and rhythms of the world around them. They read the psalms and said their prayers amidst the sounds of the wind and the trees, the changing light of night and day, the comings and goings of fauna and fowl. It's hardly surprising that they grew to love the cry of seabirds, the barking of seals and even the buzzing of insects who were sometimes their only companions.

The third main influence came in fact from the Bible. It's not possible to read far in the Old Testament without being struck by its witness to the essential goodness and preciousness of the natural world in the eyes of God and his enduring concern for his creatures. Indeed, one needs to go no further than the opening chapters of Genesis to read the recurring refrain "and God saw that it was good" declared with every stage of the unfolding creation. Further into the Old Testament, the Psalms, which were so dear to the heart of the Celts and so prominent in their worship, were filled with the sense of the wonders of nature, from the heavens stretched out like a curtain to the cedars of Lebanon where the birds build their nest and the high hills which are a refuge for the mountain goats. The Hebrew prophets talked of the close relationship between God and his creation, involving even seemingly inanimate objects, as in Isaiah's famous passage about the mountains and hills breaking forth in song and the trees in the field clapping their hands.

Thus by instinct and by instruction, the Celtic Christians respected creation as being graced by God and reflective of the glory of God. To them, the natural world, just as much as the human, was charged with the sparks of the divine presence, indeed it was the theater of God's workings. The God of the Celts was certainly separate, "Other," a great mystery, unable to be reduced to "the man upstairs" or someone we can capture or box in. Yet, the Celts insisted, this wonderful,

mysterious God is close to us, infused in all the beautiful creative universe. As one hymn expressed:

“There is no plant in the ground but is full of his virtue, there is no form in the strand but is full of his blessing. There is no life in the sea, there is no creature in the river, there is naught in the firmament, but proclaims his goodness. There is no bird on the wing, there is no star in the sky, there is nothing beneath the sun, but proclaims his goodness. ”

The 9th century theologian, John Scotus, the most famous (or infamous) Celtic thinker, offers a theological explanation for the Celtic view. In writing about God’s all-pervading presence in creation, the word Scotus returns to again and again is ‘theophany,’ meaning God-made-manifest. It’s the word the church has traditionally used for when Jesus was baptized and later when he was transfigured on the mountain and the divine light of heaven shown through his mortal body. For Scotus, the creation is one big theophany, showing off God's power, wonder and creativity. Every object is a flash of the supernatural, translucent to divinity. God had not only made the world, but to some extent was identified with it, being not just the Creator but the foundation and essence of all things. Mind you, this was not so much pantheism (thinking that nature itself is divine), but rather panentheism (seeing God as being in all creation, while maintaining that God has an existence outside it).

This idea of creation as theophany, as a manifestation of God’s glory, takes on greater significance and power when we consider it in light of how the Celts understood salvation in Christ. The Celtic Christians are admittedly not known for writing great theological treatises, explaining systematically the teachings of the church. Yet when you read Scotus’ works and other writings from Celtic Christians, you can find hints of a doctrine known as a “theology of recapitulation.” You probably never heard of that before, but it was an understanding of salvation that predominated among the Early Church Fathers. The name comes from the book of Ephesians where it says, “the mystery of God’s will...in the fulness of time, is to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things on the earth...” (Eph 1:9-10). The Greek word for 'sum up' here was literally rendered in Latin as 'to recapitulate.'

According to this theology, the sending of Jesus to Earth was not some kind of emergency rescue operation that God put into action to save humans from sin, but was part of a much larger plan, namely the renewal of all creation, not just humanity, the remaking of heaven and earth.

The idea is that, when God created the universe, God looked at the created order and declared it good. God was pleased with what he brought into existence—time, space, sound, color, shape, life, animals, humankind, all things. As a result of the power of the evil one, however, the harmony and beauty of God’s work of creation had been spoiled. And although creation itself remained good, it has been co-opted, “subject to futility,” as Paul says in our first lesson from Romans, “in bondage to corruption,” demented, twisted, and distorted, with the power of evil working through people in the institutions of society to bring pain and suffering into creation. At this point, God could have destroyed the creation and started over. Instead, God chose to *become* creation. In Jesus, God united himself with creation, with humanity, taking a human body, fallen and subject to the effects of sin though it was. He did this in order to defeat the powers of evil, which he did on the cross, dying and rising to new life, thereby conquering death and dethroning the devil. With Jesus’ resurrection came a renewing of the world, a recapitulation, beginning in

him, in his resurrected body. There, we see the reversal of the fall and all its corruption, and glimpse how all of creation will soon be, restored to the way it was intended to be: a place where Jesus orders everything as its head, where peace and harmony and provision abound, where God is known and enjoyed.

As should be abundantly clear, this theology of theophany and recapitulation goes far beyond the “ecological awareness” attributed to Celts by modern-day enthusiasts. It’s true, the Celts had a strong appreciation of the sacredness of creation, but this was because they understood creation to be a place where one encounters God, where God made himself present, a place that had been corrupted but which God is even now restoring to its original harmony. This appreciation of the natural world goes beyond mere politics to involve an interpretation of all reality—the mystery of “God, reconciling the world to himself in Christ ” (2 Cor 5:19). For the Celts, the spiritual dimension, the place of creation in God’s redemption, was not simply an add-on to an otherwise secular respect for nature. Rather they saw God’s good creation as the center through which all of life is interpreted. Even more than providing an environmental ethic, what Celtic Christianity offers us today, the treasure it bears, is a view of God that does not separate creation from redemption. This is a message that many long to hear today. For, inside and outside the church, the assumption is that Christianity is solely about *human* salvation and has nothing to say about the rest of the world. Against this narrow theological vision, Celtic Christianity offers a faith that affirms a God who is involved in creation, that takes seriously the problem of evil in the world, and provides a hope for the future—God restoring creation God's way. That I believe, is good news for all people, indeed for all creatures. Amen.