

Church of the Good Shepherd  
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I come to tell you a tale, a tale of a distant land, a land of mists long forgotten, a land of heroes and holy men, of saints and scholars, of reclusive ascetics and wide-ranging adventurers. The people who lived here, among the islands and isolated corners of western Europe, were at the furthest reaches of civilization, and yet they had an outsized influence on the history of the Continent, shaping the emerging culture of medieval Europe. I'm speaking of the Celtic Church and the remarkable contribution it has made to Christianity and to world history, and may yet make to *our* life today.

There's a lot of confusion, it must be said, about the Celtic church. A lot of what has been put forward as “Celtic Christianity” and the “Celtic church,” particularly in recent years, is a romantic re-creation, reading into this long distant past what authors want to find there. “The Celtic church was non-authoritarian, non-Roman, evangelical and capable of listening to the rhythms of nature and women,” one devotee insisted. Another claimed that the Celts had a healthier view of sex, that women were equal with men, that they had a creation-centered rather than a salvation-centered faith, that theirs was an un-dogmatic *laissez-faire* Christianity that was open to new thinking. These descriptions are at best half-truths and misleading for it. They say little about the actual, historical church of the Celts but a lot about what these persons desire for Christianity but do not find in the institutional church of today. In truth, the Celtic church, the *real*, historical religion of the Celtic people, is far more interesting than what we imagine it to be, and far more compelling.

To appreciate this, we should perhaps begin with clarifying just who we are talking about. The “Celts,” as we call them today, were a distinct ethnic group in Western Europe. They were never a unified empire like the Romans, but were a bunch of loosely organized tribes united by a common language and a shared religious outlook and practice. At one time Celtic influence extended across western Europe, but by the first century, they had been pushed by invaders to the margins of the Continent—the Irish or Gaels in Ireland, the Picts and Scotti in Scotland, the British in Britain, the Welsh in Wales and Cornish in Cornwall, the Bretons in Brittany, France and the Galicians of Galicia, northern Spain. There was even a branch of Celts in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey—the Galatians, to whom St Paul wrote one of his letters. Though pushed to the far fringes, the Celtic peoples survived and even flourished there. And when the Gospel came to their shores, they readily embraced it, making the Christian faith their own and adding their own distinctive flair.

Now, one of the first things that needs to be understood about the Celtic Church is that there was no “Celtic Church,” not as a separate institution anyway, in competition with the church on the Continent. What we call “Celtic Christianity” is best seen as describing a confederation of churches, which, though far from Rome, nevertheless saw themselves as part of the same Trinitarian, Christ-centered, sacramental church built on the Scriptures and the teachings of the Apostles that spread over Europe, Asia Minor, and Northern Africa. The Irish, Scottish, Welsh, British and Cornish saints, if they had suspected they were in any way divergent or idiosyncratic,

they would have been the first to correct it. What distinctives the Celtic church displayed stemmed not from deliberate defection but from the kind of Gospel that came to them and from the character of the people, their culture, before the Gospel arrived. Not unlike how the way a tree or vine expresses itself is the result of both its genetics and the soil in which it takes root, its “terroir,” as the French say.

The “terroir” of the Celts was considerably different from the people of the Roman Empire. Life for the Celtic peoples was predominantly rural and tribal, and so their Church was centered not on great city cathedrals nor organized into the Roman administrative units called dioceses, as on the Continent, but instead was centered around monasteries, loosely organized and autonomous communities where abbots held more sway than bishops and women abbesses had considerable authority even over men.

These monasteries were more than just places of worship; they were also centers for economic activity and, more importantly, places of learning, with monks collecting and copying the great works of classical civilization, both pagan and Christian. In time these monasteries also became the first schools and even universities in Europe, attracting not only monks but also future monarchs and other ambitious students from throughout the land. The importance of these monasteries as custodians of learning in a time of rising illiteracy and ignorance after the fall of Rome is often unappreciated, but it amounted to nothing less than “saving civilization,” as one author has argued.

Monasticism it seems also meshed well with the Celtic spirit. The Celts grew up hearing the stories of great warrior-heroes, like Cuchulainn, Lugh of the Long Arm, and Finn McCool, and so the tales of the first monastics, Anthony of Egypt and Paul of Thebes, and their austere ascetic disciplines spoke to the Celts, offering them a new, less violent ideal to strive for. There are many dramatic accounts of Celtic holy men, who sought to reproduce in their own land the wild remoteness of the Egyptian desert, seeking out lonely and isolated places in the depths of Ireland, Scotland or Wales - places that still today bear the name Dissert or Dysart. There, in a clearing in a thickly wooded countryside, or on a rocky promontory on the coast, or perhaps on one of the remote island holds, men would dedicate themselves to lives of prayer, silence, and solitude.

Still, the characteristic the Celts are most known for and that is most celebrated is their love and appreciation of nature. It is was not the case, though, that the Celtic saints would just wander around all day making poems about the beauty of nature. Theirs was not so simple or romantic a view of creation. They in fact had a healthy respect for it, recognizing the dark side, the menace of nature's mighty powers, as well as its beauty. Indeed, there was more to the Celts' appreciation of creation than the simple love of beauty, nor was it a blithe affirmation of creation's goodness, made from the comfort of a climate-controlled home. Their love of nature came from living so close to it, being exposed to it, and, out of that experience, from the conviction that the natural world is charged with the divine presence of God and reflected of his glory. They saw God in creation, believing that all creation was God-infused, his power manifest in everything.

So I've talked about monasteries and their being places of learning, about asceticism and self-discipline, and how the Celts saw creation as manifesting God's glory and power. The thing that

strikes me throughout all this that the Celtic saints had a strong sense of closeness with God. God was an intimate, almost physical presence to them in their lives, in their prayers, in nature. This is the characteristic that I think many Christians today find most attractive, most compelling about the ancient Celtic Church. We sense that there must be a purer, more passionate, more vital form of faith than we find on offer in our churches. The faith practiced by the Celts—the great saints of Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall and Wales—is attractive for this reason. It is a faith that displays both tenderness and passion, with a dedication to beauty and yet a commitment to purity of the most extreme kind, a triumphant hymning of creation and yet an unswerving devotion to the cross. Here is a Christianity that is basic and primal, a religion which sees God breaking in on the ordinary, mundane, and earthy. This is something many people today long for.

And yet, the Celts' closeness with God did not arise accidentally, or by merely wishing for it. It came as a result of struggle, of hardship, of deprivation. The Celtic Christians were a people clinging on to faith at the edge of the known world. Their spirituality was that of a people on the edge. They lived close to nature, close to the elements, close to God... and close to poverty, homelessness, and starvation. They were under constant threat, from invasion by Romans, Vikings and other Germanic tribes who were bigger and more powerful than they were. Theirs was a spirituality and theology of the insecure, a faith of those who knew more suffering than happiness in this life.

Their experience was not unlike many in the Scriptures whose faith was born of the wilderness, of suffering and hardship. Jacob on the run from his brother at Bethel. Joseph in jail after being sold into slavery by his brothers. Moses on Mount Sinai. Elijah on Mount Carmel. Jesus in the desert wilderness. All had powerful encounters with God amidst suffering and desperation.

The challenge for those who long for a more immediate and intense relationship with God is how can we experience that intimacy, that closeness, when not in distress, when we aren't under pressure, under threat. How can we know the wild grace of God apart from the wilderness?

What our Celtic ancestors would say, I think, is that you can't, not from where you are. If we want to know God, to experience his closeness, we must do as they did: leave the bustle of urban life, remove ourselves from the comforts of home and the distractions of our social lives and the non-stop noise of the TV, get away from it all, from other people, from social media, and simply be, be with God. I'm not talking about simply taking a walk in the woods or hiking to some scenic overlook so that you can think "spiritual thoughts." Though, that'd be a good start. But it's really about removing from ourselves from all the things that we lean on, that prop us up, that protect us and prevent us from relying solely on God. For only when we are in need, when we are exposed and utterly vulnerable can we know, really know for sure, that God is there and will catch us.

Now, that's not really something that many of us relish doing, I know, putting ourselves in positions of vulnerability, where there is no safety net, no security, particularly at the stage of life many of us here are at. Not everyone can go off to a secluded cave or wind-swept island to devote themselves wholly to spending time with God.

For those of us who can't do that, or for whom it seems too scary, the Celts offer...another way: *learn to practice the presence of God*. The Celtic church witnesses to a down-to-earth spirituality, where an awareness of God informs daily life and transforms it, so that any moment, any object, any chore or labor, can become the time and place for an encounter with God. The Celts, not just the monks, but everyday believers, called on God throughout the routines of daily life. A vivid example of this can be seen in the *Carmena Gadelica*, a collection of prayers, blessings and incantations from Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here you find prayers and blessings for lighting fires, washing clothes, making butter, bringing in the harvest and other daily tasks. Now, these chores are no longer regular activities for many of us, but they suggest how, by invoking God throughout our day, we can recognize God's presence in all of our life. What would it mean to invoke and acknowledge God's presence as we sit down to eat, as we drive in our car or shop for groceries, as we wash dishes or email a friend? How would doing that open us up to a greater awareness of God's presence? As an old woman in Kerry, in the southwest of Ireland, says, "heaven lies a foot and a half above the height of a man." That is, God is always around us, close at hand, his kingdom able to be seen if only we lift our eyes.

It is said that the Church is always forgetting and remembering, rediscovering in its past neglected truths and traditions that we need to recover for today. In an age when religion is considered by many to be irrelevant and church seems wholly disconnected from spirituality, the ancient Celtic saints give us a model for how the two can come together to empower a vibrant, passionate, intimate relationship with God. As we explore the Celtic Christian tradition further in the weeks ahead, keep an eye out for what God would have us learn from our ancestors in the faith, for what they offer may be the very thing we need to be faithful and passionate Christians today.