

Celtic Christian Spirituality

A Celtic Benediction

Deep peace of the Running Wave to you.

Deep peace of the Flowing Air to you.

Deep peace of the Quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the Shining Stars to you.

Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

Introduction

Much has been written and said about Celtic Christian Spirituality and we do not intend to reproduce those volumes here. We include a short bibliography for your information below. Rather, just a few words of our understanding which informs the way in which we seek to live out our Christian faith.

Celtic Christianity was a faith hammered out at the margins. The Celts lived on the margins of Britain, on the margins of Europe and on the margins of Christendom. They lived close to nature, close to the elements, close to God and close to homelessness, poverty and starvation. They were under constant threat, from invasion by Vikings and other Germanic tribes, from Anglo-Saxon, Norman and Roman imperialism, from all sorts of forces that were bigger and more powerful than they were. Nor was it just their land and their livelihoods that were threatened but their language, their culture, their institutions and their beliefs. It has been said that there are two kinds of people in history - those who do things to others and those who have things done to them. The Celts as a race indisputably belong to the second category. Their story is one of oppression, suffering and progressive marginalisation - the way that was trodden by Jesus in his time on earth. But it is a story, too, of remarkable hope, imagination, wholeness and simplicity, qualities that we are beginning to discern our own need of in a society that for all its outward sophistication and success is perhaps just as threatened and suffers just as much.

Three "P"s sum up Celtic Christianity for us. Presence, Protection and Pilgrimage.

PRESENCE

The Celts had an awesome awareness of the Presence of God all about them, within and without. The benediction at the beginning reflects something of this awareness as does so many of the prayers and poems collected from ancient sources. The whole of creation was considered to demonstrate and proclaim the creator who could be seen in all things, places and situations. This was far different from the pantheistic concepts of their pagan contemporaries, who worshipped the gods of rivers, mountains, winds and sun etc. But it was a thoroughly Biblical understanding of God, His presence and our relationship with Him.

As Ian Bradley puts it:

[Our Celtic Christian forebears] did espouse quite unashamedly and unconsciously what would nowadays be called a creation-centred spirituality. The God whom they worshipped was not conceived of primarily as the Lord of history, as in so much later Western theology, but rather as the Lord of Creation, the one who has revealed himself most fully and characteristically in the wonders and splendours of the natural world. This was above all why they wanted to worship him.

PROTECTION

However, as Ian Bradley also says

...our Celtic Christian forebears were well aware of the power of evil and sin in the world. They were not naive innocents and blind optimists

Although the Spiritual realm was very real and accessible it was also seen as a place of spiritual conflict and warfare. Powers of evil constantly trying to destroy the work of God. Being thoroughly orthodox in their Christian faith the Celts knew of the victory won by Christ's death and resurrection over sin and evil. They similarly trusted in the power of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to protect and safeguard against those dark forces. The famous "St Patrick's Breastplate" is a prayer calling upon God for protection and acknowledging His constant presence. It begins:

I rise today

in power's strength, invoking the Trinity,
believing in threeness,
confessing the oneness,
of creation's Creator.

I rise today

in the power of Christ's birth and baptism,
in the power of his crucifixion and burial,
in the power of his rising and ascending,
in the power of his descending and judging.

PILGRIMAGE

There is no doubt that the Celts as a people had the wanderlust in their blood and this no doubt carried over into the Christian life after conversion. However, there was a clear distinction between this wanderlust and perigrinatio; pilgrimage for seeking the place of one's resurrection. Indeed many saints stories include 'pro Christi perigrinari volens'; "wandering for the love of Christ". The Celtic Christians recognised the difference and dismissed the former as a waste of time and energy. The latter was found in two forms, as Ian Bradley explains,

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, is recognised 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. 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. Peregrinatio was the outward expression of an inner change, a metaphor and symbol for that journey towards deeper faith and greater holiness and towards God which is the Christian life. To be a pilgrim was to live in imitation of Jesus, to take up his cross and to recognise that in this transitory world we have no abiding city.

CONCLUSION

Ian Bradley makes this comment about Celtic Saints:

In so far as there was a distinctive Celtic theology, it too stressed the essential goodness of nature, including human nature, and saw Jesus Christ as the one who was sent not so much to rescue the world from the consequences of the fall as to complete and perfect it.

There can be no doubt that the saints of the Celtic Church were for the most part very holy men and women. For all the legends about their miraculous deeds and supernatural powers they also had a great quality of simplicity and this is perhaps one of their most attractive characteristics for us today. When St Brigid, abbess of the great mixed monastery at Kildare, was asked what were the three things most pleasing to God she replied true faith in the Lord with a pure heart, a simple life with piety and generosity with charity. These were all qualities that the Celtic saints exhibited very clearly in their own lives.

And they are characteristics which we would like to build into our lives too.

Benediction

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,

wherever He may send you,

May He guide you through the wilderness,

protect you through the storm.

May He bring you home rejoicing

at the wonders He has shown you

May He bring you home rejoicing

once again into our doors.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. +

From Celtic Daily Prayer

Morning Prayer

A Northumbria Office

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