

Thin Places

In my seminary studies I've been doing a lot of reading about the Celtic tradition of Christianity. It's a beautiful old tradition. Although it goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, there are some pieces of it that fit our modern puzzle quite well, here at Open Prairie.

One such piece is the Celtic emphasis on local autonomy. In those early centuries, the Roman church was built with a top-down structure. Ecclesiastical power was concentrated in the hands of bishops, and the bishops were located in cities, near the centers of secular power. By contrast, the Celtic tradition was rural and decentralized. Ireland and Scotland at this time didn't have much in the way of cities, so the Celtic Christians organized around rural monastic communities instead, with each abbot or abbess having considerable local autonomy.

Another piece that fits with our story at Open Prairie is that the Celtic Christians had at least the some leanings toward gender equality. Unlike their Roman counterparts, the Celtic Christians did not always insist that religious leaders must be men. In some places women were ordained—St. Brigid of Ireland was even consecrated a bishop—and it wasn't unusual for women to be the leaders of double monastic communities.

But for me, the most important insight of the Celtic Christian tradition has to do with the goodness of creation. Now, all Christians generally see some mixture of good and evil in the world. We tell a story of how God created the world and saw that it was good. But we also know that we are capable of great evil. So where do you see the balance between the two? Do you think of yourself as fundamentally flawed, unable to do good except through the grace of God and the teachings of the church? Or do you think of yourself as having a spark of divine fire, a light of God that you still have direct access to, no matter how many mistakes you've made in your life? The first view, that humankind is wholly corrupt, was preferred by the early Roman church, and also by later Protestant thinkers like Calvin. It's a belief that makes good strategic sense for any church: it removes authority from individuals and reserves it for the organization. But the second view, that all creation including humankind bears the light of its Maker—that was the view of the Celtic tradition. They didn't deny the existence of evil. They believed that the life and teachings of Jesus are a gift that can help people recognize and cultivate their own sparks of divine fire. But they also believed in those sparks. They believed that the light of God could be discerned in all creation.

The Celtic tradition had a special fondness for the Gospel of John. We just read, John 1:9, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." When the Celtic Christians read this passage, they took it to mean that the light that was present in Jesus is also present to some degree in every person. And we just read, John 1:12-13, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." When the Celtic Christians read this passage, they took it to mean that we are all children of God, all brothers and sisters of Jesus, all born of the same Spirit.

This belief in the presence of God in all things and in all people had many interesting consequences for them. To mention just one, it gave them a deep sense of the importance of

hospitality. There is an ancient Gaelic rhyme about hospitality. Translated into English, it goes like this:

I saw a stranger in the evening:
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place:
And in the sacred name of the Triune
He blessed myself and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones.
And the lark said in her song
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

For the last few weeks I've been a pilgrim and a stranger. I've been away on travels related to my class. And, my friends, I've been to some wonderful places.

I've been to the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. It's a beautiful and remote spot, and it played an important role in the history of Christianity. In the year 563, an Irish monk (and nobleman, and scholar) left Ireland with twelve brother monks and a plan to found a new monastery in Scotland. He was called Columcille, which means, "Dove of the Church." This was a great moment for western civilization. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the fires of literature and learning were going out all over Europe. But those fires had been kept alive in the thriving monastic communities of Ireland, and now Columcille contributed to the rekindling. As his community on Iona grew, he sent new monks off, twelve at a time, to found new communities—something like sixty new communities were founded from Iona in his name.

Tradition says that when they launched the boats that carried these new church planters away from Iona, they sang a particular song. It's the Iona Gloria, and I'd like to teach it to you now.

(Teach the three-part Iona Gloria.)

Columcille is better known (outside of Ireland, anyway) as St. Columba. There are many stories about him: his commanding voice, his care for poor people and for animals, his gift for healing. On one journey he was sailing up a certain loch in Scotland, and he saw men burying someone who had been attacked by a monster. When the monster appeared again and attacked one of the monks, St. Columba sprang into action. A successor of his, the abbot Adomnan, wrote his biography some hundred years after his death, and recorded the incident like this:

The blessed man raised his holy hand and invoking the name of God he formed the saving sign of the cross in the air and commanded the ferocious monster, saying, "Thou shalt go no further nor touch the man! Go back at all speed!" At the voice of the saint the monster was terrified and rushed down the river."

And that is the earliest recorded appearance of the monster of that loch: Loch Ness.

One of the missions launched from Iona was that of Aidan. We might say that Columcille baptized Scotland, and taught it to read; Aidan did the same for the north of England. And he did it using the same approach: he lived simply; he traveled on foot; he cared for the poor; and he learned about the people and adapted his religious tradition to their ways, rather than the reverse. Aidan chose to base his religious community on the tidal island of Lindisfarne, off the east coast of the north of England, and thither I went also. It's a beautiful island. I walked there and prayed there. I sat on a rock there and sang a song to a group of seals, who sang back to me.

Well, I'm no saint—obviously—but I couldn't help feeling a bit like one of the Celtic saints as I sat there communing with the seals. There are many stories that connect the Celtic saints with animals; I think this is another consequence of that emphasis on the goodness of creation. The most important early saint associated with Lindisfarne is St. Cuthbert, who was a monk there, and a hermit, and ultimately a bishop. Icons and other images of Cuthbert often show him with two otters, and of course there's a story behind that. Cuthbert did penance by standing in the North Sea up to his neck, with his arms outstretched in the cross vigil, reciting psalms from memory. When his feet froze from this procedure, two otters came and wrapped themselves around his feet to warm them up. No animals came to warm up my feet, but then, as I already mentioned, I'm no saint.

Of those early years, of Columcille's time, and Aidan's, and Cuthbert's, little now remains. On Lindisfarne, there's a stone priory; but it was built much later than the original monastic settlement, probably around 1120; and even that now stands in ruins. Back on Iona, the beautiful Benedictine abbey there was first built around 1200, on or near the site of Columcille's older church. It was restored in the 1900s, and today serves as one of the bases of the Iona Community. That Community is an ecumenical religious community with members all over the world; only a few are actually on Iona at any given time; and their very interesting projects have nothing to do with romantic, theatrical reenactments of the past.

So even though there are buildings that appear ancient (at least to American eyes), there is actually little visible evidence of the first few generations of Celtic Christian monks who settled Iona and Lindisfarne. The Celtic monks lived simply, and they rarely built with stone. A wooden church with a thatched roof sufficed for them. After all the layers of subsequent grand construction, and after the destruction wrought by Viking raiders, and the further destruction of monastic property that came with the Reformation, and the decay of more than a thousand years, little now remains.

One thing that does remain is the high cross of St. Martin on Iona. It dates from before the year 800, so it has stood where it now is, as the focus of outdoor worship and pilgrimage, for over 1200 years. The lowest few courses of stone in the tiny shrine of St. Columba may date from that period too; tradition says that the shrine marks Columcille's first burial place. More lasting than stone, as it turns out, have been the books—the astonishing illustrated gospels produced by the monks. The Lindisfarne Gospel was produced on Lindisfarne around the year 700. The world's most famous illustrated gospel, the Book of Kells, was produced by a group of monks on Iona around the year 800. These works testify to the artistry, dedication, and prayerful labor of

the early Celtic Christians.

George MacLeod, the founder of the modern Iona Community, described Iona as a "thin place"—a place where only a thin veil separates the material world from the world of the spirit. That phrase, "a thin place," has become a standard part of the literature on Celtic spirituality. Now, I had a wonderful experience on my trip. I'll never forget the beauty and ancientry of the places I got to visit on my pilgrimage, and the amazing collection of people I got to meet. And I got to read some fascinating books, and spend a day in a seminar with a fascinating author. But, alas, I must report that I didn't find the veil separating the material world from the world of the spirit to be particularly thin on Iona or anywhere else. For me, that veil is about equally thin everywhere.

I could be wrong. God knows there are plenty of mysteries in the world; who am I to say that God might not choose to be more present in some locations than in others? But though I felt the presence of God very deeply in prayer by Saint Martin's cross on Iona, I also felt it very deeply on the shores of Lake Michigan, where I just hosted my ninth annual Lake Michigan Beach Training, all stiff and jet-lagged from my trip to Scotland. And I feel it very deeply walking the trails in the Starved Rock State Park with Kelly and Fern and Fox. I feel it very deeply in Kelly's beautiful garden in our own backyard. And I feel it very deeply here in Open Prairie, though this space has been prayed in for fewer days than Iona has years.

So here's my conclusion: thin places are everywhere, and nowhere. I am the thin place. I have in me a spark of God's fire, the true light that enlightens everyone, and the many mistakes I've made in my life have not extinguished that spark. The light of God can still shine in me and through me. And every one of us likewise is God's own thin place, I do believe. We are Christ's hands in the world, and we bear Christ's light. We are the thin places of the world; it is through us, with God's help, that the world of the spirit touches the world of the flesh.

The Celtic Christians had a poem or a prayer for every occasion, and this one is no exception. Here's one they said about making the pilgrimage to Rome:

To go to Rome
Is much trouble, little profit;
The King of Heaven, whom thou seekest there,
Unless thou bring Him with thee, thou wilt not find.

Dear God, be with us in all the pilgrimages of our lives. Help us to be your thin places, and let your light shine through us to enlighten all the world.

Amen

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