

St Paul's October 23, 2022, Keith Rowe.

'St Columba and the Celtic option'.

When we moved to Hawkes Bay in 2016 I was struck by the names of the Presbyterian Churches and schools in the area: two churches named after Saint Columba, and then the schools, Iona and Lindisfarne. All names associated with a form of Christianity that was once popular in parts of the British Isles, was repressed for centuries but is being rediscovered in our day. It is known as 'Celtic Christianity.' St Columba, who is associated with the early development of Celtic Christianity, was an Irish missionary who promoted a form of Christian practice and believing that reflected the rhythm of the lives of the common people. He was more at home in the homes of the poor than in the halls of the well off. He left his native Ireland in 563 AD and with 12 companions set up a modest monastery on the Island of Iona on the west coast of what became Scotland. By the time of his death in 597 he and his group had established 60 monasteries, many very small, on the mainland of Scotland. (A monastery roughly represented what we'd call a parish.) 1500 years later the Celtic way of being Christian, or at least its central emphases are seen by many as representing a way of being Christian that can guide us today.

Our exploration of the 'Celtic option' begins in **the Yorkshire fishing town of Whitby in the year 664**. King Oswy of Northumbria, near the Scottish border, called a church synod meeting at Whitby to decide whether the neat, predictable and Roman form of church life or the less predictable and diverse Celtic form of church life should become the officially sanctioned form of Christianity in Britain. The presenting issues for the synod included fixing a universally agreed date for the celebration of Easter and questions as to what hairstyle was appropriate for monastic clergy. (The latter sounds ominously like the sorts of trivia churches across the centuries have argued and divided over.) But there were deeper differences between Roman and Celtic Christianities and the decision before the Synod was important for the future of the Christian presence in Britain and beyond. Should Roman or Celtic forms of Christian faith and life be normative in Britain and the associated question that persists into our day: how much diversity can the church tolerate? Note that when I speak of the 'Roman' option I refer not just to what became the Roman Catholic Church, but to a style of being church that has both Catholic and Protestant forms.

The Roman way of being Christian had been introduced to Britain by Roman soldiers, traders and various European groups who dominated the southern part of what was to become England. In 597 Pope Gregory appointed Bishop Augustine of Canterbury to represent him and to give direction to the church's life. In the following decades English Kings and nobles identified with this expression of Christianity. One historian describes it as 'a new kind of Roman colonization'. A problem was that when Augustine arrived in Kent there was already an alternative and vigorous form of Christianity flourishing particularly amongst the Celtic people of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. This is where we meet up with Columba and his monastery on the Island of Iona which had become the base from which Celtic evangelists travelled, setting up

monasteries and developing their particular form of Christianity. Rather than imposing a style of Christianity imported from abroad, these Celtic missionaries sought to graft the way of Christ on to local traditions along with an intuitive love of the land and of nature. A similar monastery to Iona was set up on the Northumbrian coast at Lindisfarne. So, Iona and Lindisfarne became key centres of Celtic Christianity in the north while the centre of the Roman mission was in Canterbury in the south. If the Roman form of Christianity represented uniformity, imposed creeds and identity with the Church of Rome, the Celtic form welcomed diversity and was a far more indigenous movement, a sort of people's church, a bit disorganised, untidy around the edges, a community of storytellers and poets.

There was conflict as the Roman form of Christianity moved northward from Kent and the Celtic form penetrated south from the land of the Picts. Should Iona/Lindisfarne or Rome provide the compass by which the British church would guide its life? The Synod of Whitby (664) determined that the Roman dating for Easter should be universally observed, the dress and hairstyle of monks and clergy was to follow the Roman custom and the Roman way of being Christian should become the official and legally sanctioned form of Christian practice and theology throughout Britain. Monasteries were to follow Roman customs and of course taxes were to be paid to Rome. It was an enormous decision made by a relatively small group. The cross in and above this church is a Celtic cross. The cross of Christ is central and is surrounded by a circle symbolising God in and through the world, holding us and indwelling us. No one and no thing lives outside of that circle. There is a beautiful saying, often identified with the Celtic Spirit: 'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' We are invited to be a people for whom Christ is the centre and for whom God-Spirit is found in all that is - in our neighbour and in nature, in poetry and in prayer, in Hindu and in Muslim, in the future and in the past; no one, no one, lives outside that circle of God-love. God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere. The history of the Presbyterian or Scottish church is the ongoing story of a people caught between two ways of being church: on the one hand loyalty to written creeds and church structures and on the other a church cherishing freedom of thought and practice, what I have called the Celtic option. The first, a neat, tidy, creed based church, living within straight lines: the second, a church of the people, sensitive to the aspirations of the poor, accepting of diversity and understanding of human frailty.

So, two ways of being Christian, two spiritual perspectives or ways of seeing life and God clashed at Whitby. The Celtic mission was inspired by the example of the gospel figure **John**, who was remembered as the beloved disciple who leaned against Jesus at the last supper (Jn. 13:23). John leaning on the breast of Jesus was for them an image of the practice of listening for the heartbeat of God, ever present and active at the heart of life - in nature, in other people, in Bible and in secular wisdom. The implication is that the heart of God beats in more places than those controlled by the church. The Roman mission, on the other hand, argued for the authority of **Peter** as the rock on which Christ had promised to build his church and who was guardian of the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:18-19). Roman spirituality encouraged listening for

God through the teaching and regulations of the church. When Whitby decided in favour of the Roman mission being the authorised and enforceable religion of the land the Celtic mission began its formal decline. It was a shame for the Celtic way included emphases that the church would need over the following centuries: respect for the tribal ways of indigenous peoples, encouragement of the leadership of women and an acceptance of diversity. It contrasted with the creedal and liturgical uniformity, suspicion of women's leadership, distrust of nature and a host of regulations imposed by Rome. In the 16th and 17th century Scottish Christians implicitly reaffirmed the decision of Whitby when they threw in their lot with reformers like Calvin (1509-1564) and Knox (1514-1564) who were as authoritarian and creedal as any Pope. The harsh dogmatism of the Westminster Confession (1647), still affirmed within PCANZ was a natural progression of this Roman dogmatic tendency in Protestant guise.

Fortunately Celtic tradition and prayers continued to be valued in the homes of Scottish Highlanders and Cornish and Welsh miners. Though the Celtic mission had been formally suppressed its tradition of prayer and creation - sensitive spirituality lived on in the homes of people who chanted its prayers and poems as they went about each days tasks. Their loyalty to Celtic ways was akin to 'a spiritual resistance movement'. In 1938 George McLeod (1895-1991), Presbyterian Minister and Celtic Mystic, initiated the rebuilding of the monastery of Iona and it has become a living centre of Celtic Christian spirituality recast for a new era. Let me briefly identify two interlocking and needed ways of listening for the heartbeat of God in our day.

First, **Celtic Christians listen for the heartbeat of God in the world of nature.** The whole of nature is soaked in God-love. While the dominant Christian tradition may have regarded the world of nature as inferior to a heavenly and spiritual realm where God is encountered as all powerful and controlling creator and judge, Celtic spirituality lives close to nature. God is regarded as being a presence, creative energy, a grace hidden in the folds of the everyday. According to an early Celtic theologian, John the Irishman, 'God is the life force within all things.' We so need people, Christian and of all religions and of none, who sense the sacredness of nature and respond to a call to care for nature as our first cousin, protected by us and in turn protecting us. In New Zealand we are fortunate to be helped by Maori who in a somewhat Celtic fashion recognise the heartbeat of God within nature. We have the Bible to guide us but we also have the Book of Creation. In the Celtic perspective the two belong together. The cosmos is like a living sacred text that we can learn to read and interpret, cherish and receive from. Hopefully it's not too late to repair our ravaged world - though it will be a close call.

Second, **Celtic Christians listen for the heartbeat of God in the lives of our neighbours.** We all belong together and we are all made in the image of God. Everyone- without exception. It seems so obvious and sensible yet its here that one of the great dividing lines between Celtic and creedal Christianity lies. The greatest of all theologians in the Celtic tradition was a Welshman, Pelagius, who died about 419. Unfortunately he lived and taught under the shadow of the revered theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who caricatured the views of Pelagius and caused him

to be expelled from the church. Augustine, whose views came to dominate church theology, believed that the truest thing about all people is that we are born as sinners who without the touch of Christ will go to hell when we die. He went further claiming that God has preordained who will be saved for life in heaven and who will finish in hell. It's all up to almighty God before whom we are all miserable and helpless sinners deserving only punishment. Pelagius simply disagreed. He had too much respect for human persons made in the image of God. Augustine looked at a baby and saw a creature born in sin and needing to be baptised to wash away what he imagined to be the inherent sinfulness of its parents love. Pelagius held a child and gave thanks for a gift made in the image of God, result of human love and capable of great things. For Pelagius the essential ministry of the church is to liberate and free the goodness of God that is already present at the very heart of nature and in every person, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, past mistakes, culture, age or social status – though, as we know, that God-presence may have become obscured by all manner of difficulties. Every person has inherent dignity and is indwelt by God. If we don't learn to live this essential Celtic and Christian truth the human family will continue to be in deep trouble.

There is much more to be explored in the spirit of the Celtic tradition but that's enough for today. Except to say when you enter this church and see the Celtic cross above it and in it, remember: **'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.'**

Or you might ponder words from the *Quran*, the Holy Book of Islam (2:115): "Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God. God is all encompassing."

There are many excellent and inexpensive books that describe and explore Celtic spirituality. One of the best is J Philip Newell, *Listening to the Heartbeat of God, a Celtic spirituality*. 1997. A group in St Columba's Church, Havelock North read, enjoyed and discussed this book, chapter a month.