

Short 4-session course on Celtic Spirituality.

Introduction.

This short course can be adapted for pretty much any context, and simply provides a starting point. I believe most of the facts are correct, but am fine about being corrected. Or just check it and modify it for your purposes. The intention is not for a history lesson, but to identify how the lessons of the Celts can be used for us today.

It is worth while asking the participants something of what they want from it, and modifying the details of the course around this.

The structure is standard across all sessions. There is a worship session, with some suggestions for how it should be managed. Then there is a talk – introducing and discussing the topic. Within this, there are indications for various questions or feedback, details of which are at the end of the session. The questions are intended as discussion points, not simple and straight forward questions.

The worship in particular comes from various books that I have. Something similar could be used, based on whatever is available. In truth, it is probably easier to run the course if you have some prior knowledge and understanding of Celtic spirituality.

There is more that could be said or discussed about each of these. The course was designed to cover just 4 weeks, and so has been written around this structure.

1. Soul friendship and Contemplative prayer and worship.

Worship – something contemplative. Around a candle, using a Celtic prayer from Celtic Resource Book

Talk - what do we mean by Celtic Christianity? Well we have to define two words here – Celtic and Christianity. Celtic is a term often overused today, to cover anything folksy or arty, but it actually relates to a group of tribes across Europe who had a single origin. There are Celtic peoples in many parts of Europe today – we think of them in terms of the Irish and the Scottish, but they are also in Germany and other Central European countries, from Hungary westwards. And they have had important influence in England too, in their time, as they reached out. It is worth noting that in some cases, the different Celtic tribes had different interpretations or words or parts of the belief system.

The Celts developed in many different ways, depending on their local area and situation. But they tended to be what we now call Pagan – that is, they worshipped the earth and the sky, their religion was naturalistic, and their gods were the gods of nature. Their priests were Bards – think Merlin - and their practices included the shedding of human blood, although not necessarily human sacrifice. Although don't rule that out.

That is not a good start for the engagement of Celts with Christianity. So what is the significance of that? Well, let us look at the timescales first. The period of Celtic Christianity reached from AD45 when Paul preached to Celtic people in Galatia, and the dominance of a Celtic influenced Christianity in Britain (the last place in Europe) ended with the Synod of Whitby in AD664. So this is some 600 years, during which the Celts developed their interpretation of Christianity.

What is important – and why this is relevant to us today – is that the spread of Christianity through the UK was almost exclusively through the Celtic tribes who lived here. It means that, at a very core level, Celtic Christianity is a natural expression of Christianity for many people in the UK, because it is how our people first accepted it.

Q1

That is the history. What of the issues for discussion today? Well, the Celts natural engagement with their location and the natural world around them meant that they would be very engaged with forms of worship and prayer that helped them to engage with the world around them. They could engage with God better through a tree or a bush or a stream, than with words. They met God more in nature than in books. This does not mean that they were not educated – some of them were very well educated, and we know of them partly through their decoration of bibles, but they all were much happier to commune with Nature than to sit and read. So just off Lindisfarne is a small island known as Cuthberts Island, which is only accessible at low tide. It is where he (supposedly) used to go, and stay for the hours between tides, to have somewhere with just him and God. The solitary life, for many Celts, is not a discipline as much as a freedom to not be bothered with other people and other problems, but to be with God in His playground.

It is this engagement with the natural world, this simplicity – not out of penance, but out of the enjoyment of not worrying – that inspired their worship in everything and through everything. The contemplative nature of celtic worship is about seeing God in all things.

Q2

Soul Friendship is another part of the Celtic way – the anamchara – is a person that you can choose to be with you throughout your journey. There is a difference from the concept of Mentor or Spiritual Director, because both of these imply one person who is further along the path than another. The Soul Friend is about someone who can guide you and support you, just by being another person with some knowledge and experience. They are someone you should, in the Celtic tradition, stay with for life – it is not someone to chop and change as need differ.

It is also an acknowledgment of a challenge to the issue of solitude – not a negation of it, but in tension with it, because it is an acknowledgement of the need that everyone has for other people – that “no man is an island”, because whoever and wherever we are, there should be someone who can challenge and criticise us, as well as support and encourage – and they need to earn the right to criticise.

Q3

Discussion points/Questions

Q1. So why are you interested in Celtic spirituality? Does this picture mean anything to you?

Q2. If you are honest, what do you find the easiest to truly worship God with – things or words?

Q3. Who is there that will challenge and encourage you?

2. Creation and Rhythm

Worship – something from Celtic Night Prayer, something with rhythm

Talk - one of the most important aspects of Celtic Spirituality is the sense of Rhythm that is absolutely core to the Celts life. This means having a rhythm in their worship that matched the rhythm in the world around them. So as the seasons change, your worship changes. As the day changes, your worship changes. As you age ,your worship changes.

But there is more than just relating worship to rhythm. The important understanding is that these rhythms are seen as fundamental to nature – they are seen as the heartbeat of God. In their pre-Christian days, the rhythms were critical to their agrarian society, because they needed to know when to plant and when to harvest. But there is a deep understanding in the heart of these people that rhythm is a pointer to God. Not unlike, IMO, the patterns of the subatomic world can be seen as a pointer to a God who loves beauty and order.

Actually, this is something that is becoming more and more popular today. From the idea of only eating seasonal vegetables – which is far better for us and for the world – to the idea of personal rhythms. So the principle that we as people will be better is we understand the cycles of nature, and fit with them, rather than trying to fight them, is Celtic. And the more we find out about people and the universe, the more that both appear to be rhythmic.

There is an interesting aspect of this, which is the concept of Nyads and Dryads – these are the spirits of waters and trees respectively. Now this can easily turn into some form of worship of trees and water, this is not what is at the core of this belief. It is simply that trees and water have personality, have life, have something of the spirit of God in them. There is an acknowledgement that we can see something of God in trees and water – especially.

Q1.

One of the most well-known Celtic concepts is the engagement with creation. We touched on this last week, but it is core to their understanding. The Celts were, primarily, nature worshipers, and Christian Celts were people who saw God in nature – and did not often feel a need for anything else. There is a strong sense in some writing today that if you cannot see God in nature, anything else will not convince you.

There are two real issues with this. Firstly, there is a problem of panentheism – that is, the worship of God in everything. And of pantheism, which is the worship of everything as God. And these are real issues, because the original Celts were panentheistic. But a true understanding of this is to see the work and hands of God in all things, but not confuse God and the creation – rather see the amazing wonder of creation, and worship a God who made it all.

Secondly, there is a problem of orthodoxy – that is, how you make sure that everyone believes the same, when people engage with God through the world, not through liturgies. This is where much of the Roman opposition came from, because the answer is that you cannot, and should not. Worship of God should be local and relevant to the local area, not

pronounced from on high. And, yes, it is good to have people who read too, who study and know the right ways, but not to deny locally interpreted faith.

Q2

Finally, there is the question of hospitality. This was and is core to the Celtic way. Hospitality is about being available to others when they need you, about welcoming people when we meet them, about sharing with others what we have. Hospitality means going out of our way to help others, to offer support and encouragement.

Hospitality is also about honouring all of Gods creatures – so feeding the birds in winter is part of hospitality. Ecological concerns – for the land and the places that animals live – is part of this. It is about making not just our houses and ourselves, but our world a hospitable place.

Q3

Discussion points/Questions

Q1. How do you – we – relate to the rhythms of the world, and of our society?

Q2. How do you relate to Creation? Do you feel yourself truly part of it, or an adjunct to it?

Q3. How wide is your hospitality?

3 - A church without walls

Worship - get some images of Celtic knotwork for colouring in. While the participants are doing this, think of someone who means something very important to you – you don't have to say who it is.

Talk - there is a word that we have not touched on yet, for very good reason – it is “church”. The Celts had a very distinct idea of church, which was one without walls. They did not believe in buildings as churches – they build, but the buildings were foci for a meeting place, or places to keep the rain off. Whenever they had a monastery, for example, they would not treat it like many of the Roman monasteries, as a place to escape from the world into. It was simply a place to focus a number of people together, somewhere for them to sleep, and somewhere for them to eat. Their ministry was outside the walls, with the people, and with the world. There are three words to describe their understanding of church: Solidarity, hospitality and renunciation of power.

Solidarity with the people meant that when they went to evangelise, they went as a small team, with nothing, and relied on the peoples they were meeting to develop a new Christian community. This meant that it came out of the locality, not imposed from outside. Hospitality we have partly covered, but their church buildings were there to provide help and support for the local area – they were not closed against invasion, but open and welcoming. And Renunciation of power – they did not have the same sort of hierarchies as the Roman church, because the Bishops were under the abbots, and they were not allowed to own stuff or gather possessions. The monastic style – of servanthood – was at the core of their ministry style. They were not seeking power or status, but service.

Q1.

Because of this, the Celtic churches wrote prayers for every situation they could. They did not have “holy times” or “holy activities” – everything was holy, whenever and wherever, if it was done in the right spirit. The modern approach to this is to have prayers while washing up, prayers while making a sandwich, prayers while telling the boss just what you really think of him.... Every situation was one which should be covered in prayer. This is a critical understanding, because it means that every act can be a prayerful one – prayers while writing web sites, or balancing accounts, because these activities are part of our God-given abilities. And it means that they honoured those who worked as much as those who became monks – each was working towards the same God.

Q2.

They were also very hot on imagery – the illuminated manuscripts that we know of are just some of the examples. They believed that it was part of their ministry to use their artistic skills to produce books that were valuable – as they all were at that time – but were also celebrating the variety and colour and vitality in the world around them.

These would have taken them weeks – maybe years – to produce. They are labours of love, but also labours of worship. What we see in these extraordinary images is monks offering their skills, in worship. And this is truly sacrificial worship – not only in time, but many of

them would damage their eyesight doing these. But let us not forget that these were not produced to be objects of worship. They were objects created through worship, and are not as important as the one who is to be worshipped, or, for that matter, other people.

One of the common images that you see in these is the endless knot. This is a form that conveys a number of messages:

- a) The endlessness of God. It is a more fun version of a circle – there is a lot of fun to be had tracing the knots.
- b) The unity of God. “Proper” knotwork has one thread only, which interconnects with itself.
- c) The oneness of the world – the knots would often entangle beasts or plants, which was a way of drawing them all into a sense of one-ness. And drawing us into this too.
- d) Pilgrimage. The wandering twisting of the knot is a symbol of our wandering twisting walk with God and towards him. And sometimes away from him.

Q3.

Discussion points/Questions

Q1. How does our view of “church” differ from the Celtic one? How does our practice of church differ?

Q2. What situations do you have that would benefit from more prayer? Specifically.

Q3. How was your experience of colouring in? Did it help you see and understand more? Try it again sometime.

Death and all her friends

Worship - encircling prayers.

Talk - one of the most challenging and interesting aspects of the Celtic worldview is their understanding of death. They viewed life as a journey – the sense of journeying is critical to their perspective on life. The idea of everything in life being a journey is vital, and death is just one of the stages in this journey. So the journey continues into somewhere known as “the otherworld”. This was also a place that the living could, in certain circumstances, travel to. It is a realm that sits alongside our normal world, and at thin places, it sits closer than at others. The otherworld is not heaven, and is not hell – both of these are inaccessible from earth, and are post-judgement or at least implies judgement. The otherworld is a place of the dead, without judgement, but a place that can give you a wider view on reality. It is the spiritual aspect of life – and this is helpful from a Christian perspective, because it makes it clear that the spiritual world sits **ALONGSIDE** ours, not somewhere else. And some places are easier to touch the spiritual side of life than others.

The approach of death is also something presaged in some of the folklore by beings that leak through from the otherworld known as *bean sidhe* – which has translated into English as banshee – spirits who would reputedly wail when someone was about to die. The connection between the two worlds was close, but especially close for some people, who were more sensitive to the presence of beings of the otherworld.

Q1.

In some of the thin places, there are ways of reaching the otherworld – that often involve walking around things sunwise. That is, the same direction that the sun travels across the sky. This idea of circling is critical – and this is what we did at the start. The concept of an encircling prayer, connecting the concept of a circle with the protection and the praying, is occasionally reflected today. Beating the bounds is about encircling the parish in prayer. But we have lost something of this sense of surrounding ourselves, which is unfortunate, because it is powerful. And it is clearly imagery – walking around holding a finger out does not mean anything in practice, but it indicates drawing a circle around yourself, which is important.

Q2.

The final aspect of these sessions is the importance of stories and storytelling. We have touched on this in various places, but it is a vital part of Celtic mythology. In fact, the mythos of the Celts is held in the stories, and these are myth in the true sense. Myth is not just about stories that are not true, myth is about stories that have a truth within them, and the interpretation of the truth is in the story. The telling of stories is a Celtic version of preaching, and is a lot more fun.

[At this point, read a Celtic story out – you may need to find one, there are many available]

Q3.

Discussion points/Questions

Q1. Where are your thin places?

Q2. Do you feel encircled? Do you feel safe? Do you know that God surrounds you and holds you?

Q3. What are the important stories in your life? What truths do you find in the stories you know?