

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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The Celtic Christian Way

This summer I traveled to the island of Iona. It was I think my seventh trip there. You have to want to go there. Two planes got me to Glasgow Scotland. Then I took a train up the west coast to Oban, then a ferry to the island of Mull, then a bus across Mull, then a second ferry to Iona. Since the sixth century it has been the center of Celtic Christianity.

Scholars today are discovering a diversity of kinds of Christianity in the early years. There was no uniform, monolithic form of Christianity, rather a multiformity, though the Roman Catholic form became dominant as the years passed.

In 563 an Irish monk name Columba sailed from Ireland and landed on the tiny island of Iona- it is 3 1/2 miles long and 1 1/2 miles wide. There he established a Celtic Christian monastery which became the center of Celtic Christianity. From there traveling monks evangelized England and Northern Europe.

What happened to Celtic Christianity? It flourished until the Council of Whitby in 664 when there was a debate over which form of Christianity was the correct one, Celtic Christianity with John as its center or Roman Christianity with Peter at its center. Rome with its emphasis on rules, doctrine, hierarchies won. Celtic Christianity lost, but it has been alive at the edge of mainstream Christianity all through the centuries. I call it the Celtic Christian stream (Think of Christianity as being made up of the Catholic Stream, the Protestant Stream, the Baptist Stream, the Pentecostal Stream, etc.).

In the mid-twentieth century a leading minister in the Church of Scotland George MacLeod led a group of people to rebuild the ancient Abby and establish an ecumenical spiritual community which carries on today. They call themselves the Iona Community.

When I visit there today I participate in the twice a day worship services, 9:00 am and 7:30 pm which are led by the Iona community. The rest of the day I spend reading, writing and hiking around the island.

I

What are the distinctivenesses of the Celtic Christian stream? The first is *listening for the heartbeat of God in all of life*, not just in church and scriptures

but all of life. John's gospel speaks of the light of God present in all creation and it uses the image of the heart or bosom of God:

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who was in the bosom of God, he has made Him known.

Celtic Christianity listens for the heartbeat of God in Christ and in Creation.

George MacDonald the great Scottish writer who was an influence on C.S. Lewis wrote:

Then God shone forth from all the lowly earth,
And men began to read their maker there.

In Celtic Christianity the whole of life is sacramental.

II

A second dimension of Celtic Christianity is the goodness of God in all people. We were all born in the image of God. Therefore we believe in Original Goodness rather than Original Sin.

When Judy Schindler was here she listed the ten great teachings of the Torah. The first was the image of God in which we all were made.

Roman Christianity followed Augustine who developed the doctrine of Original Sin. The image of God was completely obscured in us.

There was however an English theologian in the fifth century who taught the goodness of creation and the original goodness of every child born into the world. His name was Pelagius. He was declared a heretic and excommunicated. So most of us in seminary learned about him only through the writings of those who condemned him as a heretic.

If you go to infant baptisms in many churches you see the doctrine of original sin in the words that are spoken. In the historic Church of Scotland's Confession of Faith we read:

Mankind is wholly defiled in all parts and faculties of soul and body. Utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good and wholly inclined to all evil.

Celtic Christians believed in the presence of sin and evil but it was not the deepest truth about us.

So the Iona Community has confessions of sin in their services. Like today:

Before God and with the people of God, we confess to our brokenness:

to the ways we wound our lives,

the lives of others,

and the life of the world.

But in its “Affirmation” we say:

With the whole church

We affirm

That we are made in God’s image

befriended by Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

With the people everywhere

we affirm

God’s goodness at the heart of humanity

planted more deeply than all that is wrong.

With all creation

we celebrate

The miracle and wonder of life;

the unfolding purposes of God,

forever at work in ourselves and the world.

III

A third dimension of Celtic Christianity is its Doctrine of Revelation. It says that we have *two* books of scripture: Creation and the Bible. An ancient theologian in the Celtic Stream put it this way: Christ moves among us in two shoes: Creation and Scripture.

God reveals God's self in all of life. So after the scripture reading in the Iona worship service we say:

For the word of God in scripture

For the word of God among us

For the word of God within us

Thanks be to God.

Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins see God in Creation: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God", and "Glory be to God for dappled things."

How would we live differently if we believed God was revealing God's self in Creation ,in all of life, as well as scripture?

Wendell Berry says the Bible is best read outdoors, and the farther outdoors the better! It would change the way we read the Bible. We would pay attention to God's *work* as well as God's *word*.

In the Abbey at Iona, there are small ferns that have found their way from outside to appear in some the cracks between the stones. They've not been pulled out. It's a beautiful symbol of Creation and the Bible as the revelation of God.

IV

A fourth dimension of Celtic Christianity is the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose. Yes, the Celtic Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit is The Wild Goose. Quite a different image than the Spirit as a dove.

The wild goose of the Holy Spirit is leading us out into the world. There's a wildness to it, it is changing our lives, ruffling our hair, propelling us into the world to witness the grace of God. I've re-written the hymn "There's a Wildness in God's Mercy." The first line is "There's a Wildness in God's Mercy like the wildness of the sea." It was inspired by Iona.

The early Celtic Christian monks were not cloistered all of their lives in a monastery. They were sent into all the world as missionaries and evangelists, led on an adventure by the Wild Goose of a Spirit. A friend of mine says in his benediction often: Go in the restless peace of God.

V

When I go to Iona I am met by the wildness of nature. The weather changes from hour to hour, from blustery cold wind and rain to bright warm sunshine. Someone has said you can experience all four seasons in one day there.

I experience the wild beauty of creation as I hike every day. Then I go to the Abbey to sing and pray and hear the word of God. I love the alternation of the wildness and the worship. Actually it's *all* worship.

Celtic Christian Theology changes the way we live and worship. I repeat: First, in Celtic Christianity we listen for the heartbeat of God in all of life. The light of God streams into all of God's world.

This means for me that God is at work revealing God's self in all religions, not just Christianity. There's a quote by Mother Teresa I use in my World Religions class. She who gave her life to the poor of India said: "I love all religions; I am in love with my own."

Second, we believe in the goodness of creation and the original goodness of every child born. In Original Goodness, not Original Sin.

Celtic Christians take sin seriously but the deepest truth is our goodness. I like the Jewish way of seeing our human nature. We are born in the image of God, but we have the daily conflict between the *yetzer hatov*, the good impulse, and the *yetzer hara*, the evil impulse. It's like the cartoon of having an angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other, competing for our attention.

There's an old story about the Eskimo who had two dogs, one white and one black. Every Saturday he would enter them in a contest, a race. People bet on who would win. Sometimes the white dog won and sometimes the black dog won, but the Eskimo won every time! Someone asked him "How do you know which one will win"? The Eskimo said, "The one who wins is the one I feed during the week."

We have an innate goodness with a daily ethical battle on our hands between the good impulse and evil impulse. Which impulse will we *feed*? That's the one who will win.

Thirdly we believe that we have two scriptures: Creation and the Bible. We study the world as a text of scripture which reveals God to us and we study the Word of God in scripture. There's a song I love called Holy Now. One verse talks about a "red bird singing like a scripture verse." God is everywhere.

Fourth we believe that the Holy Spirit has a wildness to it, like the Wild Goose. It does not domesticate us, it transforms us. It leads us out to where we need to go.

Celtic Christianity lost at the Council of Whitby, but it has been kept alive, like an underground stream which comes above ground here and there, now and then, replenishing Christianity.

The Iona Community has its own worship book and writes new hymns for worship. One of my favorite of their hymns is the one we will now sing. "The Summons" or "Will You Come and Follow Me." It captures the spirit of the community.