

The parish church at Escomb, by the river Wear, County Durham UK, was established after Saint Aidan's death in 651 and before the Lindisfarne Gospels - a multi-cultural witness for which major celebrations are being planned - were produced in 713. Escomb is one of only three Anglo-Saxon church buildings from that time that is still regularly used for worship. The building holds Roman stone, and architecture showing both Irish and European influences. It has just launched a new development termed Celtic Church. Normal Church of England services are maintained at the regular times, but on fourth Sunday afternoons a different congregation, The Celtic Church, meets. The theme of the first service was 'What springs of life were blocked that need restoring in order to heal people and land?' Each person was invited to touch the 'mysterious fruit' carved on the ancient Celtic altar cross, and on their way back to bless themselves from a bowl of water from an ancient local spring. Afterwards, each took a stone that had been brought from the ford across the river that helped originally to make Escomb a spiritual centre, and placed them outside in the shape of a Celtic cross. Ray Simpson was invited to preach on the following subject:

'What difference would it have made if the Synod of Whitby of 664 had not imposed Roman regulations?'

Notes based on his sermon.

There are two false or inadequate portrayals of the synod of Whitby

- 1) 'It preserved the links with the universal church' as a Roman Catholic bishop said to me. It did do that, but that is not the only thing it did. The way in which it was done broke the guidelines on respect for local culture that are set out in Vatican Two documents. It preserved organisational uniformity, but it severed organic unity.
- 2) 'It ended the Celtic Church'

There never was an independent Celtic church. There were local expressions of the universal holy, catholic, apostolic church in the various kingdoms of Celtic lands in the early Christian centuries.

All churches throughout the world had deacons, priests (presbyters) and bishops –consecrated by bishops who'd had hands laid on them, it was thought, going back to Jesus. These bishops occasionally met in ecumenical councils, and by the fourth century had decided what scriptures and creeds had the church's authority. It is true, however, that in an age before internet and travel, regional churches got on with their divine calling by taking initiatives that they felt were inspired by God. They assumed that going all out for God was what the church everywhere was meant to do, and that's what made you good and loyal members of the universal church.

A mature understanding may lead us to reject those two false stereotypes, but also to embrace four marks of the best of that early Celtic spirituality that can be life-giving for us. Each of these marks springs from integrity.

1. Integrity in how we make group decisions.

Many scholars surmise that King Oswy, who ordered the synod, knew that it was in his political interests to be in alliance with kingdoms that followed Rome, and had determined the outcome before the synod began. Bishop Wilfred, the protagonist for the Roman party, belittled his opponents in a proud and prejudiced manner. The Whitby decision-making process was a million miles from the model we should seek: humble, open-minded truth-seekers coming to listen and learn and then making a decision based upon conscience.

2. Integrity in valuing what's good in culture.

Pope John Paul II addressed native North American peoples in Phoenix, 1987, as brothers and sisters of one human family who are meant to walk together in mutual respect, understanding, trust and love. He said 'Within this family each people preserves and expresses its own identity and enriches others with its gifts of culture, tradition, customs, stories, song, dance, art and skills.... I encourage you, as native people belonging to the different tribes and nations in the East, South, West and North, to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future...' Indeed before the Whitby Synod, Pope Gregory the Great wrote a letter to Augustine, whom he had sent as a Roman missionary to Anglo-Saxons in the south, asking him to respect local customs, but nothing of that spirit characterised the Synod of Whitby. One example can serve as a parable of the whole approach of the Roman party. In the church in the western part of the Roman Empire, on the mainland of Europe, those who became monks in the standardised religious orders were required to shave off their hair back and front. In Ireland and Britain, for whom the long flowing hair of men was part of their human glory, those who became monks cut off their front hair but continued to have long hair at the back. The synod required them to obliterate local customs and cut off their back hair.

Irenaeus, the third century bishop of the congregation of Celts at Lyons, had taught that 'the glory of God is seen through a human being fully alive'. In that tradition, you show your devotion to God by dedicating all of yourself, including your creativity, your body, your humanness, your hair, so that they become signs of God's glorious diversity. God wants us to kill our self-will, not our expressions of divine artistry. Dull, cerebral, imposed uniformity carries the stench of hellish death. And something very precious and life-giving was nearly, but not quite killed at Whitby.

3. The integrity of creation

Five marks of mission were affirmed in the official report of the 1998 Lambeth Conference of bishops of the world-wide Anglican Communion. The last of these is: 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth'.

What a pity that no one at the Whitby Synod had heard such ideas spelt out! They had not been spelt out, but they had been intuitively grasped by many in Celtic lands, which were far removed from the urban centres and bureaucratic thinking that was then taking hold in the western church.

In the Bible, God tells Jews to discern the right day to celebrate their Passover Festival by being attentive to creation. They had to look for the first Spring equinox, and wait for the first full moon after that. In early centuries Christians everywhere followed that approach in their discernment of the right day to celebrate Easter, though they agreed to hold it on the first Sunday on or after the full moon. Then things got complicated. First, different centres developed different cycles or calendars and calculated the equinox on different days. Then Roman churches said Easter should never coincide with the Jewish Passover, so on certain years Easter must be pushed to the Sunday a week later than the Passover. Irish Christians were not anti-Jewish (they did not know any Jews), and they were pro-creation. I suspect that to them it seemed to violate God's rhythms in creation to change the date of Easter from that, as they thought, that had been espoused by the apostle John, who sensed the close connection between nature and the Word (John 1:3).

Columbanus taught that if you want to get to know the Creator, get to know God's creation. Celtic Christians saw Scripture and nature walking hand in hand. The theologian H. J. Massingham speculated that if the 'Celtic Church' had survived, "it is possible that the fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of western man's attitude toward the universe".

4. The integrity of who we are

After the decision of the Synod of Whitby all the Irish left for Ireland and thirty of the English. Yet two English saints steeped in the spirituality of the Irish mission gave great and sustained leadership under the post-Whitby framework, Cuthbert fought that the brothers who remained at Lindisfarne should accept the new framework without grumbling, yet in his own spiritual disciplines he sustained three treasures of the Celtic tradition: retreating to deserted places to pray, meeting with a soul friend, and praying in water, thus keeping the link between God and elements.

Conclusion

What should we learn from all this? Don't pretend. Don't polarise. Don't throw out the baby with the bath water. Don't dismiss people in institutions who use their authority badly – appeal to the best in them – model for them how they could be.

Celtic ways are being restored in and beyond the church. The bard, the wise person, goes to the source – a tree, a soul a people or a river such as the Wear. The source is pure. Purity, the heart's longing, takes us to the Source. When you live at the Source you pity but you do not lash out at bureaucratic bigwigs. You stay at the Source in your prayer, your vision, your daily habits and in your integrity

The following prayers and Lament for the Synod of Whitby echo those used at the first service of Escomb's Celtic Church. Although some sentiments expressed are rightly subject to debate, there is no doubt they reflect the views of many de-churched and un-churched people.

Mother and Father God,
use us to restore true community of women and men, sharing hearts and materials.
Father and Mother God, use us to restore true care of the land, in simple living.
Mother and Father God,
use us to restore true honouring of the beauty of the changing seasons and the myriad creatures.
Father and Mother God, use us to restore true honouring of the springs of the Spirit
Mother and Father God,
use us to restore true love between people and creatures, a love that cradles the best life for all.

The leaders in the Church gathered at Whitby in 664

Arise O Celtic holy women

Celtic voices spoke for the mountains and the islands and the people

Arise O Celtic holy men

But the power of the continental Church turned the others

Arise O Celtic holy women

And so the synod pledged the land to the Holy Roman Empire

Arise O Celtic holy men

The Celtic ways were soon called wrong and primitive and dark

Arise O Celtic holy women

All the Celtic beauty was pushed to the margins

Arise O Celtic holy men

But the springs of the Spirit of the land remained under the ground

Arise O Celtic holy women

In our days the Empire is dying and the Celtic springs flow stronger

Arise O Celtic holy men

May we take up the vision of the Celtic founders of this holy place

Arise O Celtic holy women

May we join in the flow of these ancient ones

Arise O Celtic holy men

May the healing rivers of the gentle Spirit return to our barren land

Arise O Celtic holy women and men.