

INTRODUCING CHRISTIANS TO CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

By Ray Simpson, Church Planter, Author, Principal Celtic Christian Studies Tutor and Founding Guardian of the international Community of Aidan an Hilda. He lives on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne.

1. Why learn about Celtic Christianity?

- a) Because 'any church or nation that forgets its memory becomes senile' (Church historian Professor Henry Chadwick). Scripture frequently calls us to remember God-guided pioneers such as Abraham, Israel and Moses, and the 'rock from which we were quarried' (Isaiah 51:1). The story of the pioneers who first evangelised Celtic lands might be regarded as *The Acts of the Apostles Book Two*.
- b) Because we now realise that many models of church and mission have been defective: Celtic Christianity offers us a better model for today.
 - i) Previous models have been influenced by Greek dualism that separates spirit from matter. The Celtic model, like the Hebrew, is holistic.
 - ii) Most expressions of church have been top-down, either allied to empires and states, or started independently by talented individuals who have not put to death an empire-building mentality. The typical early Celtic model of Church is bottom-up, not top-down, incarnational, earthed in spiritual disciplines that sustain humility, community and service.

2. What is 'Celtic'?

The term is used differently by archaeologists, historians and researchers of social and spiritual phenomena. Historians refer to a language group - the Goidelic-speaking (Irish, Scottish, Manx) and the Brythonic speaking (Welsh, Cornish, Breton). These Celts were known as 'the fathers of Europe' until Roman armies pushed them into the western shores of Europe. The apostle Paul wrote to Celts (Galatians - Gaul, Galicia, Gaelic have the same root). John planted churches among the Celts of Asia Minor (Turkey) - c.f. *The Letters to Seven Churches* (Revelation 1-3). These had the feel of an extended family. They were rooted in relationship more than regulation. John's influence came into Europe's western shores through Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons d. c 200) and Martin of Tours. See my chapter *The House That John Built in Houses of Prayer* www.kevinmayhew.com.

3. Celtic Christian Spirituality

The term 'Celtic spirituality' may be used to describe either pagan or Christian spirituality, both of which are currently reviving. The term 'Celtic Christianity' can refer to the evangelisation of Celtic lands between the 5th and 8th centuries and to revivals of very varied expressions of it, (both Catholics and Protestants

have claimed it as theirs). I argue in various publications that the present revival is more far-reaching because it coincides with the end of the 'Christendom era' and with the rising awareness that The Gospel needs to be bottom-up, holistic, creation friendly and more a Way than an institution, and that models from the past millennium lack these. In *Restoring the Woven Cord* (DLT) Michael Mitton suggests that the Biblical, Justice, Pentecostal, Sacramental, Creation, Community and Contemplative strands of Christianity were present in early churches in Celtic lands and that God is calling us to weave these together again today.

Although some scholars are keen to point out that early churches in Celtic kingdoms were part of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' throughout the world, certain Gospel qualities shine especially brightly in the Celtic tradition. For example hospitality, prayer in the rhythms of the sun, awareness of the presence of Christ, angels and heaven breaking into ordinary life, the spirit of adventure and pilgrimage, prophecy (or 'seeing') healing and holy dying. See my book *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* (Kevin Mayhew UK or published as *Celtic Christianity* by Anamchara Books USA). Much material on these features can be found in the eighty or more *Lives* of Celtic Saints, which are mostly late and sometimes legendary, and in many modern re-telling of these stories. Adomnan's *Life of Saint Columba* and Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* are examples of historical treatment.

A sense of place is part of Celtic spirituality. The Holy Spirit is everywhere, but offers particular graces to places as well as to people (c.f. Jacob at Bethel). So a recovery of the importance of the land as in Old Testament teaching is often explored, as also 'the healing of the land'. This includes healing of wounded group memory and of the place upon which wounds have been inflicted. Russ Parker explores this in *Healing Wounded History* (DLT). Paul Sparks, in his world tours to promote 'New Parish'

Celtic spirituality also speaks to the thirst of many free-spirited Christians to re-connect with spiritual disciplines as an expression of grace. My *A Pilgrim Way: New Celtic Monasticism for Everyday Christians* (Kevin Mayhew) explores this.

It also speaks to Christians who are becoming disappointed with churches which have, perhaps unconsciously, sold out to consumerist and selfishly individualistic culture. The idea of having churches which we belong to because we are family, not because we agree about everything, and whose leaders are like senior members of a family, is being promoted by Bethany Church USA and its *Prophetic Ministries*. The idea of churches which support what God is doing in the neighbourhood where they meet is being promoted by people like Paul Sparks (e.g. his *The New Parish*). Ian Bradley in his *Colonies of Heaven* (DLT) explores lessons we today might draw from Celtic churches which were extended families or tribes, and I explore this, and the possible emergence of contemporary villages of God in *High Street Monasteries* (Kevin Mayhew).

For more information see our resource catalogue, reading lists and downloads on www.aidanandhilda.org and www.raysimpson.org