

Sunday August 17, 2025
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15

Sermon: Celtic Christianity

The Celts, yes, it's pronounced with a hard C, unlike the basketball team in Boston who mispronounce the word... the Celts were a warlike people who inhabited much of Europe, long before Christianity. They were gradually pushed by the Germanic tribes, the Romans, and others to the extreme edges of Europe. When we talk of the Celts, we think of the Irish, and they are Celtic, but so are the other Gaelic people, the Scots, and then there are the Manx, the Bretons, the Cornish, the Picts and the Welsh. In the year 43, the Romans established Britain as a colony, but only the south of the main island, not the north (Scotland) or Ireland. The Romans were not interested in Scotland and Ireland because they were remote and sparsely populated.

Because of the sparse population when Christianity arrived, and Saint Patrick found Christianity already in Ireland when he arrived, probably in the 430's... he was preceded by Palladius who was sent by the church to Ireland in 431... anyway, because of the sparse population, Christianity was better suited to organization around monasteries rather than around dioceses. These monasteries (complete working communities on their own) were centres of study and learning. And out of them, at the end of the dark ages, they sent missions to Britain and continental Europe to establish monasteries and reintroduce Christianity there. One of the first and best known Irish missionary was Saint Columba who established several monasteries, including the one on Iona in 563.

Prior to Christianity, the Celts has their own rich mythology. When they converted to Christianity they didn't concentrate on sin and salvation, but on the original blessing. They found scripture lessons like Psalm 148 and Genesis 1 particularly appealing. What do you think Genesis 1 is about? Fundamentalist Christians believe this is about exactly how creation was made, right down to every jot and tittle. I think it is a story about origins: who we are, whose we are, even what our purpose is. This is important in Celtic Christianity, we are here to be responsible for the fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of the Earth. We can see this reflected not only in Celtic Christianity, but in our own creed, "to live with

respect in creation.” And not just to passively live with respect in creation, but to actively care for it.

For the Celts, God’s majesty is revealed in creation. There’s even a saying, “If you want to know God, first get to know his creation.” God’s Sacred Presence is found in creation, in every living thing, at every moment of life, in every place. This understanding led to the next facet of Celtic Christianity – the equality of all. It didn’t matter if you were male or female, had brown eyes or blue eyes or green eyes, had light coloured skin or dark skin, were blonde, brunette or redheaded, were gay or straight, you were created by God, and as such were imbued with God’s sanctity.

Out of that sense of the sanctity of all life, comes another feature of Celtic Christianity – hospitality. I’m not talking about hospitality as a program or welcoming committee where friendliness can be little more than an act to promote a business or service, or to get newcomers to join a church. Rather, hospitality is a central practice of the Christian faith where we play host to God by playing host to one whom God has made.

All this from Genesis 1: we are created by God, or in other words, the sanctity of all life; we are all children of God, or in other words, the equality of all people; we have been made stewards, given responsibility to actively care for God’s creation; we have a sacred privilege to play host to God through hosting strangers.

One of the most famous symbols of Celtic Christianity is the Celtic knot. It looks like the intersection of three circles. The Celtic knot is a Trinitarian thing that speaks of infinity, unity, and connectedness. The infinity of God, the unity of all life, and our connectedness, with one another, and with God.

May you discern the Sacred Presence in every moment, in every place, in every person you meet this week.