**A Month of Celtic Spirituality**

# **Background**

The original Church in England was Celtic, at least in the North and in the South-West (before Augustine), until the Roman Catholic take-over was confirmed at the Synod of Whitby in 664. To appreciate Celtic spirituality fully, we have to set aside our catholic heritage and our protestant and post-Enlightenment insights to imagine ourselves in an agricultural community just growing enough to eat, without modern power or communication, and with no Bible in a language they could understand. That is the environment in which Celtic spirituality was born and flourished.

Celtic Christianity was profoundly Trinitarian in its rhythms of speech, prayer and in its artwork. The protection of God the Holy Trinity was invoked regularly (the Celtic Caim prayer – now in the part of the St Patrick’s Breastplate hymn where the tune changes – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUrERen9Vyc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUrERen9Vyc%20) ). Celtic Christianity involved your whole being. All were treated as equals, and they governed themselves by discussions in Synods.

Sexual equality was lost with the arrival of male-dominated and hierarchically-minded Roman missionaries who formed a strong following in the South of England, and then moved North. Abbess Hilda (614-680) of the twin monasteries (for males and females separately) at Whitby, who presided over the great Synod there, was the last of a line of Celtic Orthodox saints in England.

Unfortunately, to experience contemporary daily Celtic worship from the Iona and Northumbria communities you probably have to buy a book. You might like to order one and use it during this month. The links are in the resources section.

# **Week 1 A “Walk in Two Worlds”**

Celtic Christians knew that God was not remote from their day to day lives. God was all around them, in the landscape of nature, in the regular rhythms of a natural life, in the rising and setting of the sun, in the cycle of the seasons, in work of all people. Everything was sacred.

If it existed at all, the boundary between the sacred and the earthly was viewed as very ‘thin’. Creation was alive with the Presence of God. The whole of creation pointed to its maker. ‘Thin Places’, places where the reality of God beyond the visible, was easy to see were sought on pilgrimage journeys. These places were more to be found in the wildness of creation than in the comfort of home. The whole of the Christian life was seen as a journey to become more aware of God in daily life. ‘For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made’ *(*Romans 1 v19-20*).*

In one session this week, ponder your reaction to this Celtic sense of the Divine Presence everywhere.

In another session, think of where you have been conscious of God’s invisible world beyond that immediately evident. Where for you are these ‘Thin Places’?

In another, think about this world as being “alive with this sense of the presence of God” (O’Loughlin). How can you personally best access that? Are you conscious of walking in these two worlds in your daily life?

Now plan a journey to experience what you see as a ‘Thin Place’. Make that visit if you can!

Finally, this week, ponder whether you see your own life as a journey to, and in, God. What have been the highlights of that journey?

# **Week 2 Rhythm in Life**

The structure of the days, months and years was God’s work (Genesis 1 v14-18), as were the seasons. To live as a creature on earth was to live within those rhythms, no other measurement of time was needed. God’s cyclical rhythms were also present in our bodies: Ageing and menstruation kept time with the sun’s circuit and the moon’s. Body clocks kept time with those outside. Food production too was cyclical, in time with the seasons. Celtic Christians lived attuned to these natural cycles in a way rarely seen today. They had to, as they lived on the edge of famine from crop failure. They hallowed and blessed God and all aspects of their world through prayer.

In one session, consider how closely you live to the natural cycles of the world. If you were to live more closely attuned to these cycles, what in your life would you change?

Go for a meander in the countryside, if you are able, or into a park. Notice the passing of the seasons. Note the effect of animals on the ecosystem. Note the effect of mankind. How does that make you feel?

In Celtic times, adverse climate changes had to be responded to quickly or people starved. In one session, consider how that plays out today – but don’t get too irate or depressed! Celts were sensitive to God’s Presence in his world – does that give you hope?

We hear a lot these days about work-life balance. Consider how Celtic spirituality might inform this debate. How will you now choose to live?

# **Week 3 Sacramental Living**

The Christian journey was seen as bringing the individual into harmony with God’s providence throughout the ages. Baptism was seen as the door to this life **in** Christ*,* a life of following his Gospel. Celtic Christians saw themselves as living in the ‘redeemed time’, after the coming of Jesus. After Baptism, they lived their life **in** Christ, with all that that implies. Celtic spirituality involves a balanced, whole-being, every-day relationship with God. *“*The existence of time was seen as an invitation to settle oneself into harmony with the whole creation on its journey from the Beginning, when it came into being, to the End when Christ would be all in all (Col 3v16).” (O’Loughlin).

Life was seen as sacramental, so everyone must be a part of and value *“*the community where sacred signs are treasured and decoded*”* (O’Loughlin). So our life must be lived both within and transcending time and space; because God is both within and transcends time and space. God was to be found – and God was most real – in the Eucharist made within the diverse Christian community. God in Bread and Wine spoke simultaneously to the experience of heart and mind, not head-dominated or feelings-dominated, but a whole being union with God.

Consider in a one session whether you see your life as part of that great progression of life down the ages, from its beginning to its end, when Christ is all in all? You make a unique and essential contribution to that progression of human life. ***“***So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matthew 10 v31).

In another session, consider how you value “the community where sacred signs are treasured and decoded”.

In another, think about how sacramentally you see your own life. And about how you see life and vitality in Sacraments.

# **Week 4 Monasteries**

Celtic Christians saw monks, born in and supported from their communities, as “living at the very gates of paradise… They stand as a sacrament between this world and the Christian Promised Land… For every monastery points to the things of heaven just by being a monastery.”(O’Loughlan). They valued their monks: To keep a cleric in a monastery, praying studying and advising, took the work of 50 people working in agriculture. Growing in holiness was a matter of tackling the underlying weaknesses (which lead to sin) daily. Their diagnosis was assisted by an “anam chara” (a soul-friend or confessor) usually a monk. Such would be recognised as Spiritual Direction today.

In one session, consider what *“*living at the very gates of paradise*”* would look like for you.

In another, consider whether there is anything we can learn today from the relationship between monastery and its community, and between church and its community.

In another, consider how soul friend or Spiritual Director might enhance your Christian living, if at all.

“For Augustine, Humans can use the creation and even enjoy it, but such enjoyment is transitory. The only enjoyment that is not marred by a limit is in God.” (O’Loughlin).

How does that make you feel?

Finally, review your month of Celtic spirituality. What have you enjoyed? How do you wish to take this forward?

# **Follow-up Resources**

* [Iona Abbey Worship Book - New revised edition - The Iona Community - ebook - ISBNs 9781849525183 9781849525190 9781849525206 (ionabooks.com)](https://www.ionabooks.com/product/iona-abbey-worship-book-new-revised-edition-downloadable-book/)
* [Celtic Daily Prayer Book 2: Farther Up and Farther In - Northumbria Community](https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/celtic-daily-prayer-book-2-farther-up-and-farther-in/)
* Thomas O’Loughlan (2000) *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition* DLT
* Sheldrake P (1995) *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* DLT
* Adam D (2008 – New Edition) *Rhythm of Life: Celtic Daily Prayer*  SPCK
* [Care for Creation | Emmaus House Spirituality Centre](https://emmaushouse.org.uk/care-for-creation)
* [Laudato ‘Si | Clifton Diocese](https://cliftondiocese.com/laudato-si/)
* <https://www.lindisfarne-scriptorium.co.uk/>
* <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giwRgBxt9kA>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPRhsD4sHgs>
* [Athelstan Pilgrim Way – 36 churches in North Wiltshire](https://athelstanpilgrimway.org/)

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