

It was the year 664. The Synod of Whitby, summoned by Oswy, King of Northumbria met in the Abbey of Whitby, the home of a mixed religious community under the leadership of Abbess Hilda. It was a meeting between two Christian missions, the Celtic and the Roman. The Celtic had come through Lindisfarne, Iona and the mission lead by Columba from these shores. In their spirituality they would have looked to St John. The other had come from the south, through Canterbury and Rome and would have looked to St Peter. The main issue settled in that Synod was the date on which Easter was to be observed and Oswy came down on the side of the mission from Canterbury. Eventually the Celtic Church adopted the Roman date for Easter.

The two missions that met at Whitby represented two different perspectives, two ways of seeing things. The Celtic, now pushed out to the fringes, was very much inspired by John. He is remembered as the beloved disciple who leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper, He had become an image of the practice of listening for the heart beat of God, listening for God at the heart of life. The southern mission, looking to Peter, saw God revealed in the life and worship of the Church.

On this Sunday closest to St Patrick's Day, I want to reflect on something of the spirituality of the Celtic Church and the ways in which it has been rediscovered in the life of the Iona community and the life and witness of George McLeod, who pioneered the rebuilding of the Abbey in 1938.

I go back to that image of the beloved disciple, leaning on Jesus' breast at the last supper – listening to the heart beat of God. I would turn also to the opening chapter of John's Gospel that we read from at Christmas.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ⁴What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:1ff*

And as we confess in the Nicene Creed:

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.**

The writers of the Creed, the Apostle John paint this wonderful image of Christ the incarnate Word at the very heart of creation, source of all that is.

We see it in some of the prayers of the Celtic Church in which God is invoked not as one separate, apart from creation:

You are the peace of all things calm
You are the place to hide from harm
You are the light that shines in dark
You are the heart's eternal spark
You are the door that's open wide
You are the guest who waits inside
You are the stranger at the door
You are the calling of the poor

You are my Lord and with me from ill
You are the light, the truth, the way
You are my Saviour this very day.

We see it in the art forms associated with the Celtic Church, the high crosses in which themes of scripture are interwoven with different aspects of the created order. We see it also in the wonderful illuminated manuscripts such as the Book of Kells, the Garland of Howth.

It is there in that hymn that is characteristic of the Irish Church, St Patrick's Breastplate (number 322 in our Hymn Book) In this hymn a number of themes are held together in one confession of faith. There are the great biblical themes of Christ's incarnation, his suffering, death and resurrection, the service of the saints through the ages. Then in verse 4 the writer rehearses the powers of nature all bearing witness to the wonder and glory of God.

I bind unto myself today
the virtues of the star-lit heaven,
the glorious sun's life-giving ray,
the whiteness of the moon at even,
the flashing of the lightning free,
the whirling winds' tempestuous shocks,
the stable earth, the deep salt sea
around the old eternal rocks.

All this crowned with that Christ centred invocation

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

In recent years there has been a rediscovery of the riches of the Celtic tradition. In 1938 George McLeod, until then a Presbyterian minister in the Govan district of Glasgow, lead a group to Iona with a vision of rebuilding not only the structure of the old Abbey but also its spirituality, combined with his own passion for justice and peace in the world. Part of the outworking of this has been the hymn writing of John Bell, several of whose hymns are in our hymn book.

I will close with a prayer by George McLeod, modelled on that Christ centred prayer from the Breastplate.

Christ above us, Christ beneath us,
Christ beside us, Christ within us.
Invisible we see you, Christ above us.
With earthly eyes we see above us,
clouds or sunshine, grey or bright.

But with the eye of faith
we know you reign,
instinct in the sun ray,
speaking in the storm,
warming and moving all creation,
Christ above us. . . .

Invisible we see you, Christ beneath us.
With earthly eyes we see beneath us
stones and dust and dross. . . .
But with the eyes of faith,
we know you uphold.
In you all things consist and hang together.
The very atom is light energy,
the grass is vibrant,
the rocks pulsate.
All is in flux;
turn but a stone and an angel moves.
Underneath are the everlasting arms.
Unknowable we know you, Christ beneath us.

Inapprehensible we know you, Christ beside us.
With earthly eyes we see men and women,
exuberant or dull, tall or small.

But with the eye of faith,
we know you dwell in each.

You are imprisoned in the . . . dope fiend and the
drunk,

dark in the dungeon, but you are there.

You are released, resplendent,
in the loving mother, . . . the passionate bride,
and in every sacrificial soul.

Inapprehensible we know you, Christ beside us.

Intangible, we touch you, Christ within us.

With earthly eyes we see ourselves,

dust of the dust, earth of the earth. . . .

But with the eye of faith,
we know ourselves all girt about of eternal stuff,
our minds capable of Divinity,
our bodies groaning, waiting for the revealing,
our souls redeemed, renewed.

Intangible we touch you, Christ within us.

Christ above us, beneath us,

beside us, within us,

what need have we for temples made with hands?¹⁰

