

## Celtic Treasure

I invite you to come back with me to times long ago... to two traditions.

First... is the Jewish Kabbalah, an ancient wisdom that reveals how the universe and life work. In it we hear "In the beginning there was the infinite, Absolute Source of the world, the Ein Sof." The world as we know it began with an emanation of light from this Source. However, it is postulated that "in an accident of cosmic proportions, the vessel holding this light shattered and broke open, and the light of God was scattered throughout the universe into an infinite number of holy sparks. (*Could this be the "Big Bang?"*) These countless sparks of holiness are hidden deep in everyone and everything..."

The purpose of human life is to uncover these sparks of light and restore the earth to its original wholeness. Everyone and everything we encounter is a shell or container for a hidden spark of holiness. It is up to us to help free that holiness, which we do through our lovingkindness and compassion. Everyone participates. It is a collective task. Every act of lovingkindness, no matter how great or small, repairs the world. This tradition suggests that the human race is a group of people dedicated to this holy purpose! And the name that Kabbalah uses for this work is *Tikkun Olam*. We repair and restore the world.

**... And a Second Tradition** – Before we went to Scotland, Mike and I have explored the Celtic traditions, which have not been emphasized in Christianity for a long time. Two early strands of Christianity arose in England - one brought by Celtic missionaries from Ireland and Iona; the other, from Rome. The problem was that the two traditions had different Christian ideas and practices, including the way priests cut their hair, the correct church hierarchy, and even the way they calculated the date of Easter. The Romans claimed authority from St Peter; the Celts, from St John. In year 664, the Northumbrian king, Oswiu, called a meeting, "the Synod of Whitby" (presided over by the **Abbess** Hilda) to attempt to resolve the conflict. When the Romans pointed out that Peter holds the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, the king decided for the Romans, and the Celtic teachings fell out of favor and into obscurity.

So, you might ask, *the year 664...* why should this matter to us? In other words, what difference does it make?

In the Roman tradition, humanity is inherently, basically evil and sinful... and from the Garden of Eden, we have been cursed with Original Sin... God's focus is on one particular people. This tradition enshrines the light of truth and, indeed worship, within the four walls of the physical church structure.

Roman tradition often seeks spirituality in withdrawing... in monasteries, hermitages, and retreats... in being alone.

But in the Celtic tradition, using John's gospel for inspiration and guidance, there is a very different focus/emphasis - Sin is "leprosy of the soul....distorting the countenance of our soul...so that we are not being truly ourselves." Christ reveals God's light restores us.

For the Celts, God is with all of creation.... in relation to the whole of life! The **light** of God is there to be glimpsed throughout creation; and it is all GOOD! On Iona, worship often

happened around the high (outdoor) Celtic crosses, in the openness of nature, as opposed to within a great church, although an abbey church was eventually built." They declared that God is with and in all that has life." The crosses, with their circle enclosing the intersection of the cross pieces, add God's infinite love, or eternal life, to the meaning."

As you might expect, several important teachers of the Celtic traditions have arisen over the centuries. **We're going to visit 4.** In Christ of the Celts, **John Newell** goes so far as to say, "At the heart of every atom in the cosmos is the Eternal Presence" that calls us each by name. "Dr. Newell [and Celtic Christianity] teach us to make room for an open encounter with the light of life wherever it is to be found." Christianity is "The Way" - to live in Christ. Newell adds: "Listen for the heartbeat of God in the whole of life... " and within each of us... within myself...within yourself.

Another great Celtic theologian, **George MacLeod**, taught: "Painstaking service to humanity's most material needs is the essence of Christian spirituality. To move more deeply into life, and especially into its places of struggle and suffering...is to move closer to the Life of Christ, the light that is within even the darkest situations... "

MacLeod saw "the material realm of creation is shot through with spirit.

- the threads of heaven and the threads of earth are inseparably interwoven. Christ is alive in both the material and the spiritual."

MacLeod saw violence as "the thorn within us all...He saw creation as vibrant with God's life; but bound down, held by forces of darkness, and yearning for redemption, for release. He saw Salvation, therefore, as being liberated from these, in order that our essential goodness and the original blessing of the earth, might be set free. He saw that the redemption Christ brings is a freeing of the good that is **in us**, indeed at the very heart of life."

"The ministry of **the church** is to liberate and free the goodness of God that is already at the heart of all life, yearning, as St Paul would say, for its release."

**John Scotus Eriugena:** (800 - 877) taught "In the rising of the morning sun God speaks to us of grace and new beginnings; and the fertility of the earth is a sign of how life wells up from within, from the dark unknown place of God."

And **Grace?** Grace is the seed of resurrection sown in our nature. It "cooperates with nature, restoring or releasing its essential goodness."

Now consider "**Spirituality** - It is not about looking away from life, but more deeply into it; not about denying the human, but about releasing our truest selves, and the life of our truest self partakes of the very substance of God's life, the One Self that is at the heart of all. In Christ, we see this."

The Celtic tradition (in the Spirit of the Disciple John)...includes other teachings such as:

- Spirituality is guided above all else by a sense of the welling up of love from life's deepest springs...

Instead of a heart filled with sin...the heart is the place of God's *abiding*...and God's LOVE.

- To be mystical is not to turn away from the affairs of the world, but rather to go more deeply into life, to find God in the heart of life, deeper than any wrong, and to liberate God's goodness within us and in our relationships."

Christ comes to root us again in this holy Ground of all being, this unknowable, unspeakable God. God, forever being revealed in new creation, in new birth... and this leads us to the idea that *all of life is sacred*... Goodness is not merely a feature of life, but is the very essence of it. Celtic teachers invite us to look to the deepest patterns and rhythms of earth as disclosing the goodness of God, yes, even the *heart of God*.

Further yet, God's wisdom in deep within us...We need to reconnect with it. The Celts indeed embrace the idea that all of the great (religious) traditions (Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism) have wisdom... and are given to complete or complement each other...By studying all their beliefs, "We are being invited to grow up in our religion." There we can look for light to complete the truths we hold most dear.

**And the meaning of the cross?** For the Celtic Christians, it is mystical... related to LOVE.

It was felt to be a revelation of love, not payment for sin.

The Celtic crosses standing high "express the belief that Christ and creation...are inseparably interwoven."

And Christ came to show us how to live, and is forever a companion for our soul, not violent, not a ransom.

Christ expresses the heart of the first work of God... of creation... This is the deepest and most essential energy of our Creator.

Again, Macleod, among others, preached against violence, calling it "the thorn within us all."

**And who is Christ for us today?** He remains the image of God... as we are. Christ is NOT foreign to us, but reveals God, God's light, and the deepest truth of our being to us...

The image of God is at the core of the human soul. It has not been destroyed... maybe covered over or lost sight of... but it is still at the beginning of who we are...

+ Passion for what is just and right is deep and demands self-giving

+ Although our nature is sacred, it is deeply wounded and in need of the healing energies of grace. Christ comes to restore us to our true depths.

The Celtic tradition challenges us to live as Christ lived...Looking for the light of God. We have lost sight of our vision of what is at the heart of the human soul... and the body of creation. As a vital part of Creation (AND the Kingdom of God), "We are all one!" – in community, with compassion and forgiveness as part of every day of our lives.

Too often in the past our approach to **truth** has been to assume that we have it and others do not; that we are right and others, wrong. Consequently, we have thought that our role is to tell people what to believe. Instead, Celtic wisdom tells us to recognize that truth, as we understand it, is ever changing... The more we study, the more we realize that, as Celtic tradition declares, "We can never know truth completely... it forever unfolds."

John Newell contends: We are being invited into a new humility, to serve the holy wisdom that is already stirring in the hearts of people everywhere, the growing awareness of earth's interrelatedness and sacredness. There is an essential feature of this *rebirthing* within the Christian household which is to remember that the well of truth is not ours. It is deep within the earth and deep within the heart of humanity. Our role is to be a servant at that well.

**This is the Celtic Christian message ... this is our treasure...**and we share it with other faiths. As the Jewish ancients instruct, "We live not by choice but by grace. Life itself is a blessing. We are here to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better," and must keep this ever in mind...We must choose truth and love again and again... maybe every 20 minutes! We are born of light, and can be that scriptural light on the hill, laying the foundations of a new spirituality for the twenty-first century, with ancient treasure for the human heart and for yearnings of the world today...This is not just a Christian desire, or Jewish, or Muslim...but is a holy human desire...It will cost us much, but it is critical for the healing of creation! Amen.

Bless each life around you! When we do this, we free  
the goodness in them and ourselves, and help to restore the world  
to its original wholeness! Go forth, therefore, and find how you can grow  
in wisdom and learn to love better, and practice!