



CONTEMPLATION AND THE RHYTHM OF LIFE: DRAWING ON THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CELTIC TRADITION

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'PRESENCE' IS WHAT DRAWS THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND CELTIC TRADITIONS TOGETHER: BECOMING AWARE OF GOD IN ALL THINGS. Over the last four-and-a-half years, I have been part of a circle of women celebrating the Celtic festivals around the Wheel of the Year. These are the two Solstices, two equinoxes and the cross quarter festivals – Imbolc (February 2nd), Beltain (May 1st), Lammastide (August 1st) and Samhain (October 31st). These eight festivals derive from the pre-Christian Celts but have become as embedded in my spiritual rhythm as the Christian ones. The Christian festivals were overlaid on these earlier ones so there is a naturalness for me in keeping both. Discovering how closely these earthly celebrations wove together with my long-held contemplative prayer-life delighted and healed me and so I wrote *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*.¹ It is a book of prayers, morning and night, for each month, honouring the Celtic and the Christian traditions.

As a priest and counsellor, I subscribe to the view that we are more motivated by our unconscious than by our conscious selves. Our spirituality must comprise of our inner life made up from past experience, knowledge, imagination, how our bodies 'work' in the world, our sleeping dreams, our waking hopes, our sorrows and fears. These will be affected by our outer lives: the rhythm of the seasons, what is happening in love and work, in our world or our community, our age and stage. Our spirituality and our beliefs take in everything in our inner and outer lives.

The Celtic wheel of the year is a framework that is already on our spiritual radar because it is drawn from the world around us, the natural rhythm of life in the seasons, so we are already in the realm of what is. The natural world is spiritually significant for most people and has the capacity to affect our inner life. Indeed, many people would identify their most spiritual moments as when they are caught up in nature.

CONTEMPLATION

Traditionally there are three kinds of prayer. There is *meditatio* which is when we listen to God and meditate on the Word (e.g. when we read the Bible or say the Office). There is *oratio* which is our responses to God – when we develop our relationship with Christ in prayer, for example when we ask God for things or say thank you or ask for forgiveness or take a step of faith in our lives. Then there is the

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► gift of *contemplatio* which is God's response to us which involves us resting in God. Our prayer life can be made up of all three.

Thomas Keating describes contemplation as, 'the opening of mind and heart – our whole being to God beyond thoughts, words and emotions. Moved by God's prevenient grace, we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing ... a process of interior transformation ... initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union ... The goal of contemplative prayer is not so much the emptiness of thoughts or conversation as the emptiness of self.'²

The space is not filled up with our responses to God or even an active listening to God just a receiving of God through awareness – like noticing our breath. Over time, a love grows which is not focused on ourselves but on God. Contemplation can therefore help us be open to the divine grace of non-attachment, which comes, paradoxically, through the practice of love. Mary Oliver expresses it accessibly at the end of her great poem about loss, 'In Blackwater Woods':

'To live in this world
you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing your own life
depends on it;
and when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.'³

So the more we can be aware of the present moment and be fully engaged with it, the more we can allow life just to be, without trying to possess it or control it.

This is echoed in an old psychotherapeutic truth that we all need holding in order to find freedom. John Bowlby called this concept the 'secure base'.⁴ He argued that if our attachment (to mother or main carer) is secure then we can negotiate loss – which must accompany every change – more successfully. If we give our children roots, they will learn to fly. In spiritual terms, the more we feel held in the divine presence, the more we feel secure enough to look at the things that block our growth and can begin to loosen our attachment to them so that we can grow into God.

SPIRITUAL KEYS

The spiritual keys to deepening our awareness of being held in the divine presence are paying attention and gratitude. God is all around us and within us. All we need to do is pause and appreciate how much we are part of all that is held. Celebrating outside, as I do with the Celtic festivals, allows for that receptive space. No words are needed – simply to bathe in God's loving gaze. I will never forget celebrating my first summer solstice and walking round the brow of a hill and seeing a huge pink moon hanging low in the sky. Silence was the only response. Outside, God cannot be domesticated but is present in all his/her wild and untameable reality.

'Praise to you for walking in the garden of this lovely day.

The flowers have not yet faded though soon they might.

Some of the blackberries are fat, some tart and some just right.

The nights are falling slowly, and the mellow evening light is warm.

Praise to you in this sacrament of now.

Give me grace to hold this moment that you have given to me,

to cherish it before it passes with the autumn glow,

to gather the plums and pears that have fallen to the ground,

and to taste the sweetness of today.'⁵

THE NATURAL WORLD

We can easily forget what is happening in the natural world if we live in the city. This was impossible for the pagan Celts living in an agrarian culture dependent on the changing seasons for their survival and livelihood. They prayed for providence and gave thanks, helped by their festivals which marked the changing seasons. The more we are aware of God's presence and providing the more we find ourselves overwhelmed by gratitude. In *The Celtic Wheel of the Year* every day ends with, 'As I end this day in your safe-keeping, I count three blessings before my sleeping.'

The natural world is a visible reminder that we are made, loved and sustained by God, and that our changes, like those of the seasons, are held in a divine flow and rhythm. The tangible reality can communicate God's presence beyond words or intellectual understanding.

'we share the rhythm of life and death with all living things on our planet'

The Celts mainly learnt about God through what they could see and feel around them. Christians have been pre-disposed against the notion of 'pantheism' i.e. that God and the world are one ('Everything is God'). However, many Christians are panentheists, acknowledging God's active presence in the world – God is within creation as well as creating it ('Everything exists in God'). When we look at a tree, it tells us something of God. Many people, both religious and non-religious, experience their most profound spiritual moments in nature. The Christian Celts inherited this strong notion of presence from their pagan ancestors. Sacredness of place was important to the Druids especially woods, groves, rivers and springs. Later, Christians recognised the importance of nature and holy places. There is some evidence that springs and wells associated with pagan gods were given saint's names, and old rituals that celebrated creation (e.g. well dressing, harvest thanksgivings or the blessing of crops) became part of the church's calendar.

Both cultures felt strongly the divine presence in the material and created world. The Celtic knots and patterns symbolised the interweaving of physical and spiritual, of earthly and eternal. The lorica or breastplate, was a popular form of prayer, most famously St. Patrick's:

'I arise today
Through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning
Swiftiness of wind,
Depth of sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock.'

Caims or encircling prayers were also invocatory for protection, that God would shelter the Celts from evil forces without and within. In *The Celtic Wheel of the Year* there is a 'Morning Invocation' each day invoking God in each part of our bodies before we set out for the day. At night there is a 'Night Shielding' asking God to protect us through the night. The pattern of creation – life–death–rebirth/ life – tunes us into this mysterious rhythm of God. In the autumn, when we celebrate the harvest, the fruits have reached their zenith and will now die. Contained within them are the seeds of the next cycle. Deciduous trees shutting down for the winter,

their leaves dying in a blaze of colour as the sap falls and the nights draw in. The dead leaves nourish the soil in which the new will grow. For Christians, the natural cycle is mirrored in our faith: that in death – the death and resurrection of Christ – we have new life.

Our culture's denial of death pervades everything including our own Christian culture. However, the embracing of death, which was inescapable for the Celts, allows us to be less afraid. It also allows us to embrace life and this is the great gift of the Celtic tradition: to celebrate all that is within and around us now, knowing it will pass and give way to a new time.

Like death, darkness, though fearsome, is part of the cycle of life: it is where new things grow which is recognised by the contemplative traditions and the Celts. God is deep within the darkness as well as the light, and death will bring new life. God, like much of life, is hidden and unknown. Darkness sits with light, our brokenness with our healing, our bodies with ourselves, evil with mercy. The contemplative traditions recognize this Oneness of everything, what Buddhists call 'non-separateness'. It is not so apparent in institutional Christianity, but it is strong in our mystical tradition: the divine ecology of all living things. We share the rhythm of life and death with all living things on our planet.

EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

My own appreciation of experiencing being held in mercy through God's creation came during a difficult time in my own life. I needed to experience God's love in a very direct way, like rain on my face or the waves at my feet. Doctrine or theology wasn't enough. It had to be real or nothing. On my spiritual journey, I discovered the text of nature. In the woods where I lived, over a couple of years, I experienced, as Mary Oliver so expertly put it, creation 'over and over announcing [my] place in the family of things'.⁶ The tree, the bird and me all belonged together; we are made and loved by God. It was an experience of Christ's incarnate love holding me and not only me but all who live under the same sky.

'Praise to you Still Small Voice, for though
you are all around,
praise for the moments when I can hear you
better,
as I leave the bustle and the market-place
and walk awhile with you in the short

NOTES

1. T Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year: Celtic and Christian Seasonal Prayers* (Ropley: O-Books, 2007).
2. T Keating, 'The Christian Contemplative Tradition' *Bulletin* 46 (January 1993); available online at <http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=352>
3. M Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
4. J Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005).
5. Ward, *Celtic Wheel*, p. 174. 'Praising' from August.
6. Oliver, *Poems*.
7. Ward, *Celtic Wheel*, p. 274. 'Praising' from December.
8. Ward, *Celtic Wheel*, p. 114. 'Night Shielding' from May.
9. R Llewelyn (ed.), *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004).

▶ day-light hours.
Praise for the land and the trees, hushed as if
with snow,
with barely a soul, except for the deep of my
call, echoing yours.’⁷

Though we must pick up a text with words (the Bible) to encounter Christ through *meditatio* it is through *contemplatio* and reading nature’s text that we feel the language of his presence, embodied and dwelling among us felt through the Spirit, held by our Maker.

‘Spirit of God,
your kindly gusts have blown over me this
day.
As my movement dies down in the stillness of
this night,
may I feel your care nearer to me than my
own breath,
for I am known more to you than I know
myself,
loved more than even the dearest love that
I have received.
Protect all who need your silent care this
night.
Spirit of God, assure us of your presence
as we lie down tonight in your peace,
and rise in your company in the morning.’⁸

The emphasis on a more embodied spirituality is, I believe, why the Christian Celtic tradition is so popular today. Many Christians want to join up the lines much more between their daily lives, creation, their sexuality, their emotional lives and their faith. This ancient Celtic understanding is actually more contemporary than the more dualistic theologies and ideologies that flourished in the intervening millennia. The more we allow Christ to look at us, the more we see that in the bowl of this earth we are all undivided and covered by his mercy. The interconnectedness between every living thing is of God. As Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century mystic, said, ‘Love was his meaning.’⁹ The gospel of Christ is seen as God’s deep and abiding love for ourselves and all that lives on the earth, woven through by the Holy Spirit. ■