

## **The Celtic Church and Celtic Worship (Part 1)**

A number of our churches have now experienced Celtic worship, so it seems appropriate to explain a little of how it differs from “normal” Anglican worship, and how these differences came about. While written descriptions of the early Celtic church may be limited, there are other sources that allow reasonable conjectures to be made. However, this can only be a brief introduction of the topic. The terms “Celtic church” and “Roman church” will be used here to distinguish the two main strands of Christianity, though in reality there would have been considerable variation in religious practices.

Christianity came to Britain during the second century (100 – 200AD) from two principal directions. The first probably involved Celtic missionaries arriving from Ireland. They established a number of religious centres, especially on the West side of the country, spreading the Gospel from there. Iona is probably the best known of the centres of the Celtic church, with Lindisfarne being another. Certainly these first efforts at mission bore fruit; the early Christian author Tertullian writing around 200AD, noted that Britain had received and accepted the Gospel.

The second direction was from the continent. Undoubtedly converted Roman soldiers may have evangelised at a low level, but the main thrust of mission would come after Emperor Constantine had adopted Christianity as the official Roman religion in 312AD. The influence of the Roman church was short-lived however, since pressures in Europe caused the withdrawal of Roman forces and society from Britain by around 400AD. The two strands of Christianity probably then had little contact for 200 years and evolved separately.

Around 600AD Pope Gregory dispatched a mission under Augustine of Canterbury to evangelise the Anglo-Saxons and assert papal authority over the indigenous (Celtic) church. Augustine was to be the bishop over the whole of Southern Britain. He held a series of meetings with the Celtic elders in which he attempted to assert his authority and reform certain aspects of Celtic worship that differed from the Roman pattern.

The Northumbrian cleric Bede recorded an account of the meetings, and related how the Celtic elders, unsure of how to treat with Augustine, consulted a wise hermit. The hermit said that their response should reflect how Augustine met them; if he rose to greet them, he was a humble man, and they should listen to him and accept his authority. If, on the other hand he remained seated, he was a proud and arrogant man and should be rejected. In the event, Augustine remained seated. In the subsequent discussions, all of Augustine’s demands were rejected, particularly his claim of authority.

One of the differences that caused problems between the Celtic and Roman churches was in the way Easter was calculated. Roman and Celtic churches used different methods, such that the date of Easter could differ between the two by as much as four weeks. The Synod of Whitby was convened in 664AD to resolve this (and other) issues. For various reasons King Oswiu of Northumbria (which was then the principal kingdom in England and whose territory included much of Yorkshire) adopted the customs of the Roman church. The Celtic church did not, at the time, change their practices and withdrew to their centres, particularly Iona. The decision fostered the separation of the two strands and saw the

consequent decline in the importance of the Celtic tradition. At this point the centre of church administration in the North of England also moved from Lindisfarne to York.

The Celtic tradition has seen a revival of interest in recent years. Iona has become a major destination as a place of Christian retreat and the community publishes considerable quantities of worship resources. In Part 2 of this article, the differences in the approach to worship between Celtic and Roman traditions will be examined.