

The Celtic Church and Celtic Worship (Part 2)

Part 1 of this article (in the June 2022 edition of Parish Link) dealt with the historical aspects of the Celtic and Roman versions of Christianity and the point at which they diverged. This part will consider the organisation and worship of the two streams. An important point to bear in mind is that a church, particularly one newly founded, will inevitably reflect in its organisation and worship the environment in which it exists.

The emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official Roman religion in 312AD. While existing Christian practices may have had some influence on the state religion initially, the Roman love of order will quickly have been brought to bear. Organising the new religion would naturally have followed existing models, of which the two most obvious would have been Roman society in general, and the army. Both were male-dominated, hierarchical, authoritative, rational and legalistic. These features carried over into the organisation and worship of the Roman church, which tended to identify with the major power of cities. Church leaders thus became powerful men, leading to an authoritative hierarchy, and the form of worship developed into proscribed liturgy. Evidence for the style is seen perhaps in the attitude of Augustine when meeting with the Celtic elders, who insisted that they must be subject to his authority (see Part 1).

Celtic society on the other hand was much looser. It was primarily rural, based around family, community and tribe. There was a love of poetry and mysticism, and women were often involved in leadership roles. Before the coming of Christianity the pagan Celtic beliefs centred on the natural world; the earth was the source of life, spirits were everywhere and the natural phenomena such as the sun, moon and wind were divine indicators (and consequently to be worshipped). Humans were an integral part of this creation. Such beliefs could readily be transferred to Christianity by accepting a creating and sustaining God, who alone was to be worshipped. Celtic Christian life showed a degree of independence between communities (the organisational unit being a monastery or other religious centre). There was a consequent variation in forms of worship, though common elements were spirituality, shared contributions and a celebration of the whole of creation.

The emphasis of the Roman church was on “knowing”, rather than the Celtic emphasis on “living”. The former encouraged a rational and institutional approach; the latter was more relational and inspirational. Magnus Magnussen observed that “Roman Clergy said ‘Do as I say’ and expected to be obeyed, the Celtic clergy said ‘Do as I do’ and hoped to be followed.” While one may be drawn more instinctively to the Celtic approach, it must be remembered that New Testament teaching stresses the importance of both knowing and living!

After the Synod of Whitby the Christian church in the West followed the Roman style, which developed over the centuries into what we see as Roman Catholicism. Many features of Catholic organisation and worship were retained by the fledgling English church at the Reformation. The major departure of course was that the English monarch, rather than the Pope, became the Head of the church. Though there has been a softening in recent years (e.g., incorporation of women clergy), many features of the old Roman church are still

visible in the Church of England. However, many people are now appreciating the alternative approach offered in Celtic worship.

As a final thought, let us return to the point that the organisation and worship of a church will mirror the social order in which it exists. When the Church of England came into being it reflected society of the time, which was mainly rural, male dominated (with some notable exceptions such as Elizabeth I), hierarchical and with a high attendance expected at a parish church on Sunday (which had its own clergy). However, over the past seventy years or so society has undergone major changes. These include Sunday trading and sport, secularisation, free movement of the population, feminism, instant communications, fewer clergy and the “importance” of the individual above the group. No longer are we in a society in which the “community goes to the church”, so perhaps the “church must go to the community”. It is heartening to see increasing signs of this (Street Pastors, food banks, etc), but in order to encourage these new directions perhaps radical changes in church attitudes are needed too.