

## THE SUN BEHIND THE SUN

Frank Shirbroun, St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, April 30, 2017

INTRODUCTION: Teresa and I are highly honored to have a part in the series of Celtic Christian Eucharists that begins today. Last fall, at the invitation of Father Eric Stelle, we did a similar series at St. John's, Gig Harbor. Many there found the series especially nourishing to their own spiritual pilgrimages and we did, too. So, when St. Augustine's Adult Formation Committee asked us to do something similar here, we were happy to say, "Yes!"

What Teresa and I will do each Sunday in this series is to lift up several Celtic Christians who are identified with the distinctive themes of Celtic Christian spirituality. Our hope is this: if we learn something about these Celtic Christians and their faith, we may gain enlightenment and encouragement for our own Christian pilgrimage.

I don't know how much you know about "Celtic Christian Spirituality", so, perhaps I should begin by saying something about the meaning of this term as we shall use it during this series. We are talking about a *unique way of being Christian* found in lands around the Irish Sea, especially Scotland, Northern Britain, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland. It is a very early form of Christianity that flourished there mainly from the fifth to the ninth centuries A.D., up to the Viking raids in the 800s, which sacked and destroyed many Celtic Christian communities.

Now, I am being careful to use the term "Celtic Christian Spirituality" because we are not talking about a Celtic church in the sense of an institution with a central organization, or a hierarchy, or a uniform set of practices like our Episcopal church. We are describing a different **way of being Christian**, but a way that also had much in common with other ways of being Christian. A rough analogy might be the differences between Christian beliefs and practices in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches. There is **only one body of Christ** with different ways of understanding and living out what that means. Still, Teresa and I believe that Celtic Christian Spirituality offers us both gifts and correctives: gifts that will enrich our own Christian pilgrimages, as well as correctives for things we have lost or overlooked.

Parenthetically, I may say that we Episcopalians are heirs primarily of Roman Catholic Christianity that has been mediated to us through the Protestant Reformation.

Therefore, there is a strong tendency for us to think in terms of **dichotomies**--between mind and matter, between body and spirit, between nature and humanity, between heaven and earth. And there is a tendency to view the body and sex and the world in primarily negative terms. We also tend to deny that there is another, invisible world, an unseen reality that touches our world, a world of spirits, of angels and demons. Many do not want to go there! As a good friend of mine used to say, "When I turn out the lights, I expect them to stay out!" Because Celtic Christians honored much of their pre-Christian Celtic culture, they continued to believe in the unseen world—the world of spirits—as a real world and as an influence on their lives. They welcomed connections with the invisible world, in part because they rejected most of the dichotomies we tend to embrace.

PELAGIUS: The most distinctive feature of Celtic Christian Spirituality is the strong affirmation of the **goodness of the whole created order**, including every human being. This may not sound so surprising to us today; but it was in their day. And we need to remember that it was not until the 1979 BCP that we had prayers explicitly for nature.

There are two Celtic Christians who emphasized especially the goodness of creation: **Pelagius and Eriugena**. Never heard of them, you say! Well, that's why we are here!

Pelagius lived in Britain in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He is the first prominent Celtic Christian theologian and his early writings contain themes that have developed into some of the main characteristics of Celtic Christian spirituality. The most typical mark of the Celtic Christian spirituality that appears in Pelagius's writings is his strong sense of the goodness of creation—creation in which the very life of God can be glimpsed.

"Everywhere," he says, "narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven from Earth." Pelagius wrote to a friend, "Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's Spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's Spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's Spirit dwells within them. Look at the fish in the river and sea: God's Spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent.... When God pronounced his creation

good, it was... [because] his breath had brought every creature to life. Look, too, at the great trees of the forest; look at the wildflowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God's Spirit--God's life--is present within all plants as well." Then he says, "The *presence of God's Spirit in all living things* is what makes them beautiful, and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on earth is ugly." Isn't that an amazing affirmation?!

[REPEAT the affirmation]

Because Pelagius saw God as present within all that has life, he understood Jesus's command to love our neighbor as ourselves to mean loving *not only our human* neighbor but *all the life forms* that surround us. "So when our love is directed toward an animal or even a tree," he wrote, "we are participating in the fullness of God's love." [I had to think about that this morning at 6:00 am when a flicker began drumming on our eve trough!] This recognition that the life of God dwells in every created thing led Celtic Christians to honor the living water of a river, to take special care for birds and animals, even to offer prayers for the most ordinary things of life, like kindling a fire, or milking a cow, or lying down to sleep.

Pelagius emphasized especially the essential goodness of human beings. Because humans are part of God's creation, which is *good*, and because humans are created in the image of God, *Who is good*, humans must be created good! If we are created in God's image, Pelagius believed, we can exercise the same free will that God has to behave in ways that honor God's image in us and conform us ever more closely to the image of God within us.

When Pelagius went to Rome, he found himself in conflict with St. Augustine of Hippo, who had a quite different understanding of humanity. It was St. Augustine of Hippo who formulated the doctrine of original sin, which suggests that God's image was lost in the fall of Adam and Eve, that we inherit their sin and that we are, in fact, born evil, not created good. Therefore we are *not* free to choose the good. Alas, for us, Augustine's view carried the day and has become the source of much of the negative valuation of humanity, sexuality, and the natural world. And, alas, for Pelagius, he was excommunicated as a heretic! But that is another story.

These affirmations of the goodness and sacredness of the whole created order are so refreshing to me, so freeing, precisely because they tend to overcome the dichotomy between body and spirit, between heaven and earth, between humanity and nature and they counter the tendency to view our bodies, our sexuality, and our world in negative terms. I thank God for Pelagius!

ERIUGENA: These positive affirmations of the goodness of creation and the essential goodness of every human being are echoed 500 years later by the 9<sup>th</sup> century Celtic Christian theologian, Eriugena. Eriugena wrote homilies on the Gospel of John, which, he believed, tells us *God is in all things*, the essence of life in all things. He says that God has not created out of nothing, but out of God's own essence, out of God's very own life. Thus, everything that exists participates somehow in the life of God. This is the life and light that is in all things, "the light which is the light of angels, the light of the created universe, the light indeed of all visible and invisible existence", as Eriugena writes in one of his homilies. [Homily XI]. Thus, for Eriugena, also, the whole creation is a theophany, a visible manifestation of God. Again, those who have eyes to see may see God in everything and in everyone.

In contrast to Augustine's view of human nature as fallen and as having lost the light and life of God, Eriugena taught that grace is not opposed to human nature, but cooperates with nature, restoring it and releasing its essential goodness. For Eriugena and Celtic Christians, what humanity has *lost* is *not* the light that is within all life, for, according to John's Gospel, "the darkness has never overcome the light"; rather, what has been lost is "the *true beholding* of the light from the inner eyes." The grace of the resurrected Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit help us recover "the true beholding of the light from the inner eyes" and help us live into the image of God in which we are created.

What make the affirmations of Pelagius and Eriugena ring true to me is the **Incarnation** described in our Gospel lesson for this morning: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." That the Word of God—God, Godself—would take on human flesh

and be joined irrevocably with the material world is the strongest possible affirmation of the goodness of creation. Matter matters, something every Celtic Christian believed.

PATRICK: The reading Teresa read to you from “St. Patrick’s Declaration of the Great Works of God”, sometimes referred to as “Patrick’s Confessions”, offers an even deeper insight into the goodness of creation—the absolute certainty that the life of God dwells within all that exists. Patrick, a 5<sup>th</sup> century British missionary to Ireland, was in a very dark and desperate place when he says, “I saw the sun rise in the sky and, while I called out ‘Helia, Helia’ with all my strength, behold the sun’s splendor fell on me and dispelled immediately all the heaviness from upon me. And I believe that Christ, my Lord, assisted me.”

Commenting on this typical Celtic understanding of the sun, Noel O’Donoghue says this: “From the beginning...Celtic Christianity has been at home in the world of nature and has taken the pre-Christian nature worship, including sun worship into itself. When Saint Patrick tells us that Christ is the true sun he is not dismissing the natural sun as merely providing a metaphor for the shining glory and nurturing presence of Christ... For Patrick and Celtic Christians the sun is...rather a medium through which Christ shines. That same sun which we see physically is but the outward appearance of that light which enlightens every man and woman, as St. John the evangelist tells us.” The Sun (capital “S”) behind the sun (small “s”)—another amazing Celtic Christian affirmation of the truth!

This all came home to me in a new and forceful way some time ago when Teresa and I were returning from vacation. We were listening to a CD of religious music when the hymn “Amazing Grace” came on. Now, I have sung this hymn since I was a boy, but I had never made this connection before. Verse four, my father’s favorite verse, goes like this, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the **sun**, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we first begun.” **There it is!** The Sun (capital “S”) behind the sun (small “s”), whose brightness is and will be our brightness, “the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world”, Jesus our true Sun.

SO WHAT? I hope it is clear by now what Pelagius, Eriugena and Patrick have to offer us as gifts and correctives. Do we see those shafts of divine light that pierce the veil

between heaven and earth? Do we have eyes to see the beauty of God in every thing God has created? Do we know that God is the Sun behind our sun, the living water in all water, the true life in every living thing? Do we know that the goodness of God dwells deep within each of us however much that goodness may be covered over by the evil we have done?

Here at St. Augustine's we often hear these words spoken during the Eucharist: "You formed us in your image and called us to dwell in your infinite love. But we failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us, and so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love." This is why we come to this table this morning: to ask for forgiveness for our willful blindness to the goodness of creation and to the goodness of each person around us, to ask for forgiveness for persisting in our embrace of the dichotomies that distort the truth. And we come to ask for the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our seeing, so that we can truly behold the light and life of God that dwells in all the things that God has made. As we come, we are surrounded by a great cloud of Celtic Christians, including Pelagius and Eriugena and Patrick, who have born faithful witness to the goodness of all creation. AMEN