

'Forest and Desert'

- *Barbarians, Hermits and Saints (350-600 CE)*

DARKNESS AND DECLINE

Barbarian invasions

The year 395, with the death of Theodosius, effectively dates the collapse of Roman power in the west. Barbarian tribes had been pressing at the borders for decades, but before the year was out the Danube frontier was irreparably breached, and 406 saw them across the Rhine. The fateful year of 410 saw Rome¹ itself sacked by Alaric the Goth; the first non-Roman army to attack it for 800 years. When Jerome heard the news in Bethlehem he summed up the emotion of the time:

'My tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth and my voice is choked with sobs, to think that the city which took the whole world has now herself been taken.'

Alaric only stayed three days as the city was starving and there was no food for his troops. Roman slaves revolting did more damage than the barbarian troops. But it was a sign:

- The Goths proceeded to settle in southern Gaul and part of Spain;
- The Vandals conquered North Africa;
- The Suevi held the northern corner of Spain;
- The Franks held northern Gaul;
- The Saxons were gaining a foothold in Britain;
- The Burgundians dominated the upper Rhone valley;
- The Ostrogoths held most of the Balkans.

Before these barbarian kingdoms could settle down into their new territories, a further threat faced all Europe, the horse riding nomadic Huns from the steppes of central Asia under their fearsome leader Attila. They terrified even the European barbarians and had been one of the causes of their own eruption into Roman territory. Not until Attila had threatened Italy in 452 were the Huns driven back and the west could breathe again.

Barbarian respect

It is remarkable that the majority of European barbarians who ravaged the west did not do more damage than they did. One reason was the respect they had for Roman culture, which represented a civilisation they were hungry for. An even greater reason was that they were at least nominally Christian at the time of their attacks. This is a remarkable witness to missionary endeavour during the preceding centuries. People like Ulfilas ('little wolf') whose Christian family, from Cappadocia, had been captured by the Goths. He returned and in 341 he was consecrated as bishop of the Goths and remained so until his death in 383. He was Arian in his theology. He made a translation of the scriptures into their tongue first reducing their language to writing; the first book in any Germanic language.²

¹ For some decades Rome had ceased to be the centre for the imperial court in the west; Justina and Theodosius based themselves in Milan, and moved to Ravenna for greater safety as a result of the barbarian attacks

² The fact he did not translate Samuel or Kings was probably due to dying before his work was complete rather than his fear that they were too warlike!



Church and political leadership

The convulsions of the barbarian invasions destroyed the political unity of the west, but a more fundamental unity survived. Rome was no longer the political centre of the empire, but was the spiritual and ecclesiastical capital. This expressed itself in two clear ways:

- With the collapse of the political structure people looked to the church and its leaders as the only organised institution to fill the gap. Many of the bishops took over the work of the collapsing imperial administration. Added to this they received refugees, kept up the morale of the people, supplied provisions and so much more. This in turn gave opportunity for the prestige of the bishop of Rome influence the situation in a way that, given time, would have unprecedented consequences.
- The church and bishop of Rome had always enjoyed a unique position due to her being the ancient capital, and Peter and Paul being linked to her foundation. At the council of Chalcedon (451) even the emperor, recognising the precedence of the Roman church, gave their delegates the right to preside. The Roman bishop at that time was Leo the Great.

Stabilising influences

Another significant event in the reconstruction of power in the west was the conversion of Clovis the pagan king of the Franks in 496. He attributed a recent victory to the God of his Christian wife Clotilde. This event had far-reaching consequences for the church. He, and other Frankish kings, were to see themselves as militant champions of catholic orthodoxy against heretics and unbelievers. Clovis extended his realm south subjecting the whole of Gaul to his political dominance and Rome's spiritual dominance.

Under Justinian (527-565) the emperor in Constantinople became the effective ruler of the west as well as the east³. He attempted to recapture territory that had fallen to the barbarians; with some success in Africa and Italy. He also built the church of St Sophia in the capital and in 529 made a collection of European laws, which were to serve as the legal basis for European civil and religious society. However following his death the Byzantine empire went into considerable decline.

Theological influences

We have heard the voices from the east that spoke so powerfully during the 126-years between 325 (Council of Nicaea) – 451 (Council of Chalcedon). During that period there were also some very influential voices and personalities making an impact in the west. Some of their words and actions would shape the western church for the next thousand years and beyond.

Jerome (347-420)

Jerome was born in the Balkans, but studied literature at Rome. Although a Latin speaker he spent much of his life in the east, which makes him an important bridge between the

³ The initial years of the barbarian conquests saw the throne of the western empire at Ravenna filled by Roman 'puppets' of the Gothic invaders, the fiction ended with the death of the adolescent Romulus Augustulus in 476.

two halves of the Christian world of his day. In the east he not only learned Greek but also Hebrew, a rare accomplishment in his day. He also encountered monasticism that left a deep mark on him. In 382 he returned to Rome where the church was both worldly and strained after years of the struggle with Arianism. This led to street riots and deaths over the appointment of the new bishop Damasus. Jerome became friendly with Damasus, who asked him if he would make a new translation of the scriptures into Latin. This became his great work.

The Latin translations of Jerome's day were very inaccurate and there was no standardised text. When he had completed the New Testament he went on to the Hebrew scriptures. This was a formidable undertaking as all previous translations were based on the Septuagint, and were very unsatisfactory; he went back to the Hebrew. By 405 his task was complete, but it met strong opposition. He called his critics, "Two-legged donkeys who think that ignorance is holiness!" It was the support of Damasus that won the day, plus its intrinsic worth. It would be called the 'Vulgate' ('common' ie 'the people's version'), and was to hold authority in the west for well over a thousand years.

Jerome returned to the east to spend his last thirty-five years in monastic retreat in Bethlehem, devoting himself to biblical learning. An admiring circle of friends, mainly notable Roman ladies who devoted themselves to celibacy, surrounded him. He was a difficult, though versatile, man who could be both outspoken and unfair, but who nonetheless made an important contribution to the church of his day.

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

Ambrose was a small man, with a sharp face and piercing eyes, he was also a civil servant, the governor of Milan in North Italy. In 373 Ambrose was present to keep public order at the appointment of a new bishop for the city. There was tension and disagreement, when suddenly a child cried out, "Ambrose for bishop!" It was taken as divine guidance. He was 34 years old, from a Christian family, but he had not yet been baptised. Because of public pressure he agreed and was baptised, ordained and then consecrated as bishop with great speed.

Ambrose proved to be an outstanding bishop. He became not only a scholar but a great hymn writer.⁴ He also introduced the allegorical method of interpreting scripture, used in Alexandria, to the west⁵. However, it was his relationship with imperial power that was to show how much more freedom and authority over the State bishops in the west had in comparison with those in the east. He excommunicated Theodosius for eight months because he massacred 7000 inhabitants of Thessalonica, and forced him to do public penance. Yet he misused his power in rescinding an imperial command for monks to rebuild a synagogue they had vandalised. Arians hoped he would be neutral to theological dispute, but they were mistaken and found him a strong opponent, he organised sit-ins to prevent them taking over churches and withstood even the empress Justina. A mark of the impact Ambrose made is revealed in the words of Theodosius himself, "I have known no bishop but Ambrose".

⁴ The 'Te Deum' is attributed to him.

⁵ Ambrose's use of this method in preaching would prove to be an important factor in Augustine's conversion.

Augustine of Hippo (354-431)

Augustine was born in Thagaste in Numidia (Algeria), into a nominal Christian home. He studied in Carthage, before going on to Rome (383) and Milan (384) where he taught rhetoric. He loved the pagan classics; he rejected the Bible as poor literature, and began to look elsewhere for answers. The Manichees, with their dualistic beliefs about God and matter, good and evil, provided a spiritual and emotional home. He dealt with his sexual passions by taking a concubine for fifteen years, they had a son called Adeodatus; but in anticipation of a suitable marriage he dismissed her in 384, while keeping their child. With growing skepticism about Manichaeism, he flirted with agnosticism until he heard the preaching of Ambrose in Milan. Encouraged by his now pious mother Monica, who had joined him, he attended services. Impressed by Ambrose's spiritualising of morally difficult scriptures, and by his disciplined celibate life, he was drawn towards the Christian faith. But his weak will kept him wrestling. Then in 386, hearing a child's voice cry, "Take and read", he turned randomly to the words, "Not in revelling and drunkenness ... put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 13:13-14). He was baptised, with his son, in 387 and returned to North Africa. He became an assistant to the elderly bishop of Hippo. At his death in 396 he was appointed in his place and held the post for the remaining 35 years of his life.

Augustine leaves a huge imprint upon church history. In him themes of the early church and mediaeval church combine, he is a bridge between two eras. In him the tensions of the reformation of the western church are sown. It has been interestingly said that, 'the reformation was the result of Augustine's doctrine of grace being at war with his doctrine of the church'; it is simplistic but poignant:

- His **doctrine of the church** emerged out of his conflict with the Donatists. He taught it was a mixed community like 'wheat and tares',⁶ the true church only being revealed at the end. Yet the church was like the 'Ark', clean and unclean within, but no salvation outside it.
- His **doctrine of grace** emerged out of his conflict with Pelagius, a Celtic monk from Britain. He rejected 'original sin', insisting that people were responsible for their own rebellion against God and must choose to change. Augustine, whose whole experience was dependent upon the grace of God, insisted that without God's free grace no one could be saved.

Augustine's greatest work, 'City of God', was born out of the experience of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west and the pagan accusation that it was due to Christianity's rejection of the ancient gods. He says that the city of this world is secular and transient but the city of God is forever. He does not make a simple link between the city of God and the church; the church is rather the 'pilgrim' part of the eternal city. It is captive in the earthly city, and also, membership in the church gives no certain citizenship of the city of God; only the elect.

Leo the Great (400-461)

Born in Tuscany, Leo was very active in the church before being elected as bishop of Rome in 440. He was one of the greatest administrators of the early church. He combined Roman law with church procedure to strengthen the influence of the church in society.

⁶ Note that the parable says the field is the 'world' not the 'church'.

He argued, on the basis of Mt 16:18-19, that all bishops should be subject to the bishop of Rome. This laid significant foundations for the papacy in the years ahead. He also enhanced his authority by seeing his 'Tome' on the person of Christ accepted as the basis of the council of Chalcedon which met to settle disputes on this matter. He defended the 'orthodox' position of the church against Manichaeans, Monophysites and Pelagians.

He saved Rome from destruction by leading the delegation to meet Attila the Hun in northern Italy and persuading him to withdraw (452). In 455 he persuaded the Vandals to refrain from murdering the population of Rome.

THE CELTIC CHURCH

Isles of Britain

Looking for the beginnings of Celtic church we must try to uncover the origins of the Christian faith within the British Isles. These origins are obscure, lost in the mists of time, and subject to considerable speculation. It seems fairly certain that the gospel was brought across the channel by merchants from Gaul and perhaps elsewhere, maybe even before the close of the New Testament era, but maybe not until the beginning of the second century. The tantalising threads are as follows:

- In 2Tim 4:10 Paul says, "Crescens has gone to Galatia", some mss read "Gaul"; if this was so the gospel would not have taken long to cross the channel from northern France
- In 176 Irenaeus, listing the lands which the gospel has reached does not mention Britain, however in 177 the persecutions in Vienne and Lyons may well have seen escaping Christians travelling across the water to Britain
- In 208 Tertullian, and in 239 Origin, both name Britain as one of the places the gospel has reached and specifically mention those outside the impact of the Roman empire (ie Celts)⁷
- In c 250 the Roman Alban is martyred in Verulamium ⁸
- In 314 we have the first certain date regarding Christianity in Britain, when three bishops came from Britain to the Synod of Arles to debate the Donatist issue
- In 397 Ninian, a Romanised Celt, established his monastery at Candida Casa (lit 'pure house') in the lowlands of Scotland having been sent as bishop to Galloway extensively evangelised the area
- In 410 the Celtic teacher Pelagius was causing theological disruptions in Rome
- In 431 Palladius was sent to Ireland by Caelestine (the bishop of Rome) to be their bishop; probably to deal with the impact of Pelagianism
- In 432 Patrick began his evangelistic work in Ireland

Irenaeus, bishop of Gaul in 177, was a Greek speaker but he had to learn the Celtic vernacular in order to carry out his work among the Gaulic people properly. By 328 there were 28 bishops in Gaul, by 378 there were 50. This rapid growth of the church in Celtic Gaul must have had an influence on the Celtic areas of Britain.

⁷ Tertullian - "districts of Britain not penetrated by the Romans, which yet have been brought under the sway of Christ"; Origin - "the power of our Lord and Saviour is found even among these people who are separated from the Roman world in Britain".

⁸ This date is pure conjecture, dates from 220 - 303 are suggested for Alban's death

Early in the fourth century Irish invaders had established small but significant settlements on the westerly coasts of Britain. It is very likely that the gospel spread to Ireland via members of these settlements, who had been evangelised by Britons, returning home.

In the second half of the fourth century Roman Britain saw increased aggression from peoples outside; by the Irish from the West, Picts from the north and by the continental Saxons on the south-east coast. Roman forces finally left British shores in 410, their services required elsewhere, but the Roman population remained in the form of freeborn Britons who were Roman citizens and enjoyed its culture. These Romano-Britains mobilised their own defence force for several decades to protect their culture.

By 450 Britain was beginning to crumble into barbarianism with an essentially prehistoric warrior culture. For the next century any detailed history of the islands are lost in a mist. The social, political and spiritual struggle is the stuff of Arthurian legend. When by 550 the mists begin to clear Britain is a divided territory. The Celtic Britons have been driven west into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland. In the east the Romano-Britains have been decimated by plague and barbarians. South-east Britain is in Jute control, the Saxons controlled the rest of the south where their kingdoms of Essex, Sussex and Wessex took shape. The Angles occupied the rest of the country in their three kingdoms of East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria.

The turbulence of the times had a major impact upon the Christian community. The crumbling of the Roman infrastructure within Britain, the pagan invasion from the continent, the pushing of the Celtic Britons west meant that the church became isolated from the rest of Christendom and thrown on to its own resources for survival. What emerges during this time is an expression of the Christian faith which is a truly a bright light in the dark ages.

The personalities

Some of the significant personalities of the Celtic church were:

- **Ninian** (360-432) was a Romanised Celt, who early in the fifth century began preaching in the lowlands of Scotland, the centre of his activity being the monastic centre, 'Candida Casa' (lit 'pure house'), which he founded at Whithorn. We cannot be certain about the details of his evangelistic activities, but they seem to have followed the example of Martin of Tours who influenced him. Archaeological evidence suggests the Christian faith continued in the areas he worked long after his death.
- **Patrick** (390-461) came from a nominally Christian family in the west of England. In his teens he was captured by Irish raiders and sold as a slave in Ireland. The experience led him to firm Christian commitment. Eventually escaping, and returning to his family, he may have joined a monastic community and even gone to Europe for some training. A dream begging him to return led him back to Ireland having been ordained a bishop. He gained cooperation from local tribal chiefs and preached freely, gathered converts into groups, some even of noble birth, and ordained clergy to pastor them. He approved of taking vows of asceticism, but the inspiration for Irish asceticism seems to have come later from people with contact, with at least stories, of Egyptian hermits. Patrick's deep faith was his sole support during his struggle of over 30 years.

- **Columba** (521-597), in 563 left Ireland with twelve companions to 'go on a pilgrimage for Christ'. Whatever the circumstances of his leaving it was to prove to be a significant event. They landed on the tiny island of Iona on the west coast of Scotland, where he established a monastery. This was to become a base for the evangelisation among both the Picts and Scots on the mainland, and appears to have been an important influence in bringing their internal wars to an end.
- **Aidan** (died 651) was the person who responded to the invitation of Oswald king of Northumbria for someone from Iona to evangelise his kingdom in 633. He eventually arrived and settled at Lindisfarne; so began the first Celtic evangelisation of the Anglo-Saxons. He was a gentle, humble, Christ-like man who lived in poverty until his death in 651. Along with his successors like Cuthbert, they spread the gospel throughout the north east of England.
- **Hilda of Whitby** (614-680) born with Northumbrian royal blood in her veins she was converted and baptised in 627. Served in the secular world for a number of years. She was influenced by both Roman and Celtic streams of Christianity. Making her way to become a nun in France, Aidan recalled her to become Abbess of a convent in Hartlepool. In 659 she founded the double monastery (women and men) on the cliff-top in Streanshalch (Whitby). It became famous as a school of theology and literature (nurturing five future bishops and Caedmon the earliest known English poet). At the Synod of Whitby (663-664) Hilda defended the Celtic customs, but accepted the Roman traditions with good grace when the decision went against her.
- **Celtic and Roman missionaries**, by 664, were doing extensive evangelistic work throughout Britain, coming into close contact with one another, and the difference of emphasis between them could not be overlooked any longer. The consequence was that Oswy, king of Northumbria, called Roman and Celtic clergy to Whitby for a synod. The issues of tonsures and dating Easter were real, but emotions ran much deeper. The tradition and infrastructure of Rome persuaded Oswy to decide in their favour. There was some dissent in the Celtic church but Cuthbert agreed to abide by the decision. As a consequence the zeal of the Celts inspired the church in England to some remarkable feats of mission.

The characteristics

What was it about the Celtic Christians that was to prove so distinctive? What were the unique features and character of the way in which they displayed their faith? One writer begins her study of the Celtic church with these provocative words:

'In the so-called Dark Ages a religion flourished in the islands of Britain which had more in common with Buddhism than with the institutional Christianity of the West. It was based on a church founded without martyrs, and one that neither inflicted suffering nor encouraged bitter theological disputes. It was marked by compassion and moderation in all its dealings'.⁹

There is without a doubt something about the character of the Celtic church which has left its mark in the consciousness of church history which draws people towards it when they are looking for freshness in expression of faith and depth with simplicity in their

⁹ Shirley Toulson '*The Celtic Alternative*' Century 1987; 1

spirituality. There is much we would still love to know, but before we look at them in more detail we can summarise some of the central characteristics as:

- They demonstrated considerable learning and were formidable at debate;
- They showed very good organisational abilities;
- They developed remarkable artistic skill, seen in their manuscripts;
- They had a delightful tendency to roam from place to place;
- They displayed a simple, gentle, integrating approach to truth;
- They emphasised the active participation of people in worship;
- They stressed the teaching of John rather than the Roman focus on Peter;
- They saw land ownership as communal rather than individual;
- They used different tonsure and dating for Easter than the Roman church.

Reflecting in more detail we can see that the Celtic church was:

▪ **Orthodox, eclectic, distinct**

For all its uniqueness there is never the slightest question that the faith of the Celtic church was anything but entirely biblical and orthodox in every sense. This is a tribute to the solid foundations upon which it was built. We cannot identify all the primary influences, but what is clear is that they embedded the Celtic believers in truth. The importance they gave to scripture, and especially the Gospels, revealed in their illuminated artistic masterpieces, must have played an important part in this. They seem to have been untouched by the Asian controversy which ravaged the churches of the Mediterranean, and had considerable impact among the barbarian tribes that overthrew the western empire. While the theological disputes of Pelagianism originated with a Celtic teacher the church as a whole appears to have handled the issues well. At the Synod of Whitby the discussion was about tonsures and dating Easter, which are not theological subjects at all.

Nevertheless, the Celtic Christians appear to have been able to build upon much that they found within their own indigenous Druidic culture without any sense of their compromising, that which was essential to their witness, and discipleship of Jesus.

Surprisingly, there were also strong influences from the eastern churches, particularly in the areas of mysticism and monasticism. While some of this may have come through Gaul, it seems more likely that the links were much direct, probably via trade with Egypt and elsewhere opening up contact with the Coptic and Syrian churches and their practices.

So the orthodox, oriental and druidic were drawn together through the catalyst of a community and individuals who, through the empowering of the Spirit of God, showed a genius for being able to express truth in both a faithful yet distinct way. The Celtic church must surely be a model for indigenous churches across the world. They must also be an important starting point for the whole discussion of the relationship between the gospel and culture.

▪ **Individual and community**

There is certainly something freeing about an encounter with Celtic Christians. It is hard to express in words, but nonetheless it is there. It is not simply that they lived at the frontiers of the known world, in isolated places lashed by harsh Atlantic winds and waters, or the rough North Sea. It is in the way they lived and in who and what they were. It is in the

gentleness that marks their heroism, in the restlessness that marks their commitment, in the individualism that marks their community.

The Celtic church did not create or impose a cohesive organization as the Roman church did because it based its structures on an imperial administrative model. Instead, the Celtic church expressed itself in a loose structure centered on tribes and families, held together by monastic links. This is not to imply that the church was in some way less organised, quite the reverse, but its structure and organization were indigenous and organic. Land ownership was communal rather than individual. There was a strong emphasis on the active participation of people in worship.

Yet within this powerful environment of community the individual person found their place of freedom, respect and fulfillment. It was the custom to have a 'soul-friend' (Irish: *anmchara*; Welsh: *periglour*). This was someone who was a more mature Christian who would act as both as a spiritual counselor, guide and as a friend. They would especially help new converts and young monks, but were also seen as an essential part of Christian fellowship and growth. They had no priestly function. They may take the part of a confessor, but would only offer wisdom, advice and encouragement; there was no power to grant absolution for sins. There is a Gaelic saying that, "Anyone without a 'soul-friend' is a body without a head". So within a strong community each individual person had considerable freedom and independence of thought and expression quite disturbing to the Roman church.

▪ **Monasticism**

As we have mentioned above Celtic monasteries formed the infrastructure for the life of the church, and the spiritual fountain of the community. The Roman administrative system, largely based upon cities, saw the bishop with his seat in the city as the dominant figure. Among the Celts, with their pastoral economies, the monastery with its abbot was the natural centre of church authority. The Celtic monasteries grew out of the combined influences of the indigenous druidic colleges, the coenobitic movement in the Egyptian desert and the developments in western monasticism brought by Ninian and others.

Celtic Christians saw themselves as having a choice, either to live an ordinary life of faith within the normal structures of people and politics, or to withdraw from everyday concerns and pursue their Christian vocation as a solitary or in monastic community.

In the monasteries, daily worship and private prayer were central. There was corporate worship five times a day, the eucharist was held in reverence, as were the scriptures, and foot washing was a regular feature of their worship. There was also a severe penitential system, which while often copied from the hermits in Egypt was much harsher in the cold climate of the north: like standing to the neck in cold seawater while reciting the Psalter!

Scholarship and intellectual rigor were highly regarded, but Celtic theology was marked by its lack of speculation. They would speak of the Godhead but not philosophize about it. They emphasised the conflict of the heart and Christ's victory over the powers of evil.

▪ **Creativity in expression**

The colour and intricacy of their biblical manuscripts and the strong iconography of their engraved stones are often our first introduction to the Celtic Christians. This creativity that flourished between the sixth and eighth centuries is quite unique; there is nothing comparable anywhere else in Europe though all churches had need of copies of the

scriptures. Its end, once the Celtic church is dominated by Roman Christianity, is equally surprising. It has been said of their writing and calligraphy:

‘... the pages of pure ornament are almost the richest and most complicated pieces of abstract decoration ever produced, more sophisticated and refined than anything in Islamic art ... these pages have an almost hypnotic effect.’¹⁰

Attention falls first on the bright illuminations displaying both density and intensity, yet even the unadorned pages of text show steady lines of clear cursive script, a marvelous development from Roman lettering. There was an urgent need for copies of the scriptures, but nothing was done in a hurry. Like the Jewish scribes the Celtic transcribers always copied from a master, never from memory. Behind their patient calligraphy there appear to be many influences, which are blended with a stunning creativity to make them unique. Animals, plants, people, geometry and so much more, all to the glory of God.

Their rugged stone crosses are equally striking and distinctive. Open to the elements yet covered with intricate patterns. Their shape, the circle surrounding the cross, clearly declares a message. But what message? Each interpretation is provocatively rich:

- The circle surrounding the cross is thought to be the symbol of Druidism (occult and enclosed power) broken by the resurrection power of Jesus reaching out into the entire world
- The circle surrounding the cross is thought to represent the laurel leaves placed around the head of the victor at the ancient games, thus changing the cross of defeat into the cross of victory
- The circle surrounding the cross is thought to be the ‘wheel of life’, which interwoven into the cross, symbol of death, creates the ‘tree of life’ to which people are called; thus displaying the Celtic church’s celebration of life and the God who reveals himself in Jesus and in nature

▪ **Peace with creation**

The Celtic church showed a deep reverence for creation; Christ was described as “the true Sun”. Druidic thinking had emphasised the spirit in every single thing, and the Celtic Christians simply baptised this way of thinking into truth. They see the presence of God in all of life; a profound spirituality linked to a deep reverence for the earth, which undergirds everything. This is seen in their runes, poems and hymns. It is also seen in the work of the scribes and craftsmen who express their joyful living faith through the forms of the world about them. It is also demonstrated in the fact that the stories of the Celtic saints are filled with accounts about amazing and miraculous encounters between themselves, nature and the animal kingdom:

- Columba’s horse was aware of his master’s imminent death
- Cuthbert is dried by otters having prayed in the sea all night ... and many more

In the words of Guthlac, a hermit of the fens, “Have you never learned in holy writ that he who hath led his life after God’s will, the wild beasts and the wild birds will become more intimate with him”?

¹⁰ Kenneth Clark ‘*Civilisation*’ Pelican 1969; 26

The Celtic saints lived in harmony with what was believed to be hostile nature and wild beasts, and showed that in reality it should be one of peace. Their lives helped to free ordinary people from the fear of nature and challenge them to regard all living things with love and respect. They acknowledged that every living creature owed its existence to God. There were times when they also relied upon creatures to show them the will of God:

- Kentigen followed an unbroken ox to found his monastery on the Clyde
- Dubricius was led along the Wye by pigs to where he settled
- Ciaran found his hermitage by a stag guiding him on the shores of Loch Ree

There was a quiet care for living things, human and animal. They believed the biblical maxim of Deuteronomy 11, that those who love God will have plentiful crops and good pasture for their cattle. This meant that loving creation and showing a proper care for the earth show true love for God. The Celts were aware of the destructive nature of greed. Some were vegetarian, but all ate simple diets and had regular fasts. Nevertheless, when guests arrived they would always make sure they ate well, cutting down their own food once the guest had left.

Celtic Christian harmony with nature was also seen in their skills with knowledge of plants and the skills of herbal remedies, which led to their reputation as healers; as well of course the fact that they moved in the power of the Holy Spirit.

▪ **Charismatic power**

The presence of the Spirit of God is evident throughout all the accounts of the Celtic saints. It is popular to explain these away as myth and legend, but that simply will not do. Certainly there is evidence of some superstition and exaggeration in places, but undergirding everything is the clear sustained fact that here were men and women who lived naturally in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit is the Wild Goose, a turbulent sign in a turbulent world, a bird of strength, company, direction and destination. The power of God would be demonstrated in various ways:

- The word of authority bringing dramatic results
- Healing of the sick
- Overthrowing the forces of evil
- Demonstrating God's power as stronger than local deities
- Raising the dead ... and so much more

▪ **Pilgrimage and mission**

Among the Celtic saints there was a deep restlessness of spirit which often seems to have been inspired by the Spirit. It was the ascetic discipline of 'peregrinatio' ['wandering' or 'pilgrimage']. This led many of them to become extraordinary travelers. Sometimes their journeys were clearly planned missionary ventures. On other occasions they simply left their settled lives, sensing God's call, and set off into the unknown following the example of Abraham. In sea voyages they would sometimes simply allow their coracle to drift, letting it land where it would.

However, these wanderers were not like most itinerants, whose only home was their boat or tent. The Celtic saints traveled with an intense sense of nostalgic longing and yearning for the homeland they had left (Welsh: *hiraeth*), yet matched by a strong desire to be on

their travels again once they return home. So it was not only a deep but also a desperate restlessness.

These journeys were spiritual as well as physical journeys. They were known as 'seeking the place of one's resurrection'; a journey led by the Spirit. Very often these journeys were to take the gospel to others, but sometimes they were to island retreats or to live in caves as hermits in search of closer communion with God. Columba, who knew all about the exile of wandering, said that there were three kinds of travelers:

- Those who leave their homeland with their spirit uncleansed, such travelling is purely physical and can serve no spiritual purpose
- Those who are under the authority of a monastery and are only free to travel in spirit
- Those who leave their country entirely, in both body and soul; these travelers have chosen the 'white martyrdom' of exile

The Celtic church knew three types of martyrdom:

- *White martyrdom*: being separated from all you love for the sake of God
- *Green martyrdom*: being separated from your desires by fasting and labour
- *Red martyrdom*: being separated from physical life by shed blood for Christ

Let us conclude our reflections on the character of the Celtic church with another quotation from the author to which we referred earlier:

'The leaders of the church we have lost acted as teachers and parents to their followers; above all, they were men and women beloved for their charity, patience and quiet good sense. They lived in troubled times when pestilence and plague were rife, and when famine was so acute that people in England were actually fighting each other for food. Yet the Christian 'saints' remained faithful to the golden rule of Christ's love, and were convincingly close to both the unseen world of spiritual truths and to the material destiny of the earth and her creatures. Above all, they followed out the injunction of Micah, 'to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' They were people of great humility. The advisers of kings, they forbore to ride horses when they went on their journeys lest they lost touch with the common people. They followed a religion that was primarily concerned with the relations between people, a religion of an isolated landscape, in which to meet a fellow human being is to hail them.'¹¹

MONKS AND HERMITS

Monasticism

Our story so far has made repeated reference to monasticism, a phenomenon that runs parallel to the whole story of the church we have been discussing. The roots certainly go back to the third century, and some would suggest earlier, and are complex and fascinating:

- A number of ascetic communities arose (eg Qumran) amongst the Jews in the closing decades BC;

¹¹ Shirley Toulson *'The Celtic Alternative'* Century 1987; 10-11



- Virginity and chastity for the kingdom of God was increasingly held in honour in a growing number of Christian circles;
- Widows would often remain single, giving hospitality and caring for the poor and the sick; themes which would always mark out monasticism;
- The single-minded spirituality of the single person was admired because they could give themselves uniquely to prayer and study;
- The end of persecution meant that physical martyrdom was no longer possible, so a way of spiritual martyrdom was sought;
- Growing moral laxity in the church following Constantine lead many to explore more radical expressions of Christian life; spiritual 'athletes';
- There was the subtle influence of different ideas,¹² which said that the material order and the body in particular was evil and needed rejecting;
- They sought the solitude of the desert because the wilderness was the prophets and Jesus had met with God;
- The desert was also believed to be the habitation of demons (eg the 'jinn' of the Bedouin); so they were at the frontiers of spiritual conflict;
- Some believed the ascetic life would lead them back to a state equivalent to before the Fall, hence some living with and taming wild animals.

This astonishing variety of influences, admirable and questionable, demand sensitive caution as we chart and assess monasticism. Whatever our personal feelings about the phenomenon we are looking at something that is to have a continuing and remarkable impact on the story of the church.

Ascetic personalities

Asceticism of different kinds expressed during the earliest days of the church, we pick up the story as it emerges as an identifiable movement.

- **Anthony** (251-356) born in Upper Egypt to a Christian family, a Coptic speaking peasant, is the first known Christian monk¹³, and the one with the greatest early influence. As an eighteen year old he gave his possessions to the poor and lived an ascetic life. A few years later he moved into the desert where for twenty years he lived a completely solitary life. He act impacted the Egyptian church and he had to retreat further and further into the desert to avoid visitors. During Diocletian's persecution he returned to Alexandria encouraging those in prison. On his return to the desert others began to follow his example, living in other caves in the vicinity, sometimes meeting to pray. This was to become the pattern over the years, hermits living near each other, often looking to a mature one for guidance and direction. Anthony became a friend and influence on Athanasius during his exiles and struggles with Arianism; it is through him that we know most about Anthony. With Anthony we also see into the spiritual struggles and temptations many ascetics faced due to their harsh discipline. This remarkable man was to live to be 105 years old.

¹² Indian, Persian, Greek neo-Platonism, Gnostic and Manichaeism

¹³ The term 'monk' like 'monasticism' comes from the Gk *monachoi* - lit 'people who live alone'; the terms 'hermit' and 'anchorite' also emphasise some one living a solitary life. Technically 'monk' and 'monastery' should not be used of people living in communities! The term *eremite*, from the Gk *eremos* - 'desert' is used of someone living a solitary life in the desert for spiritual reasons.

- **Pachomius** (286-346) a pagan soldier who was converted while serving in Egypt, began the life of a hermit but came to believe that drawing ascetics together into a community would enhance their spiritual development. Here we have the beginnings of 'cenobitic' monasticism (from Gk *koinobios*, lit 'to live together'). He established a monastic commune at Tabennisi in the upper valley of the Nile. He gave its members a code of discipline, or 'rule', to organise their daily routines and devotional life by. His sister Mary set up the first known community for women.
- **Simon** (390-459) The desire to be 'spiritual athletes' was always destined to lead people to extremes, even within the austere world of asceticism; the desire to be more zealous for God, and sometimes to show more commitment and therefore more spirituality than other monks. Simon began to live on top of a pillar in Syria. He kept increasing the height of his 'pillar-cell' until it reached the height of 72 feet. He was given the nickname *Stylites* (lit 'the pillar man'), and became a great attraction, preaching fervently to the crowds who came to see him. Others followed his example and a pillar-cult developed! But this was only one example of many. Adamites walked around naked, Dendrites lived in trees. Some stood on one leg for weeks at a time, others had themselves walled into caves. One wished to be devoured by hyenas but when he entered their cave they refused to touch him! These were the extremes, and we must not let them divert our attention from the main development of the movement.
- **Basil of Caesarea** (330-379) enabled the monasticism that was born in the sands of Egypt, and had spread to the deserts of Palestine and Syria, to find its way westward into Cappadocia. He studied monasticism in Egypt and developed it in Asia Minor; building communities, encouraging useful activities like prayer, Bible study, agriculture and nursing. His monks staffed the hospital he founded in Caesarea. He sets a pattern that will be very influential in the centuries to come; not only east but west. It is important to remember that the rule he gave his monks, the Basilian order, is the basic order for eastern monasticism today, and the only order of the Greek Orthodox church. Monasticism, understandably, began to raise problems for church authority. Where the leader of a monastery was a bishop like Basil there was no problem. Many monks were independent and sometimes troublemakers. The council of Chalcedon (451) ruled that all monks must be subject to their local bishops.
- **Athanasius** (295-373) The warm deserts of the east were an obvious place for monasticism to begin, its ideas moved west primarily through the influence of two men we have already spoken about. During his visit to Rome in 340, during his second exile from Alexandria in the midst of the Arian controversy, Athanasius told the Christians in the city about Anthony and the Egyptian monks and encouraged them to follow their example. As a result we find communities for dedicated virgins in Rome from around 350.
- **Jerome** (347-420) left Rome in 373 to visit Syria, by that date he was already cultivating the ascetic life, his four years in the desert developed that. On returning to Rome he propounded monasticism with great vigour. Despite his abrasive manner his lasting contribution to monasticism was encouraging the kind of ascetics who would devote themselves to Christian culture, and culture generally, after classical civilisation collapsed under the barbarians.
- **Martin of Tours** (316-397) is the most important name in the early days of western monasticism. Born to pagan parents he made a Christian decision at the age of ten.



Legally bound to follow his father in the army, he continued to nurture his faith. Giving half his cloak to a beggar led to a dream of the man being Jesus; this led to his baptism. Leaving the army he was influenced by Hilary of Poitiers that led him to found a monastery in 360. In spite of his asceticism and unkempt appearance, within 10 years his fame had spread throughout Gaul. His exorcisms, healings and missionary activity led him to be appointed as bishop of Tours in 371. He founded a new monastery and began further extensive missionary activity. While honoured by the great he showed only humility and gentleness, yet like Ambrose condemned the execution of Priscillian and his followers. His fame spread throughout western Europe and influenced, among other things, the evangelisation of Britain.

- **Benedict of Nursia** (480-547) whose 'rule' for his monastery at Monte Cassino was to become both the inspiration and the pattern in the western monasticism, in the way that Basil's did in the east. It commended earlier monastic traditions, and blended strictness without austerity. It was built on stability; the monk lived in the monastery, gave absolute obedience to the abbot who was elected for life and was spiritual master and head of the community. Obedience led up the ladder of humility. There was sleep, clothing, food and prayer; there was work, worship and study. Benedictine monasteries saw themselves as unchanging in a world of flux; gateways to heaven, replicas of heaven upon earth. They were a major contribution to the birth of shape of Europe following the collapse of empire. Many of the greatest figures of the early Middle Ages were Benedictine.

Reading & Resources

- P Bamm *'The Kingdoms of Christ: The Story of the Early Church'* Thames & Hudson 1959
- H Bettenson (ed. & trans.) *'The Early Christian Fathers'* 1956
- H Bettenson (ed. & trans.) *'The Later Christian Fathers'* 1970
- M Borg *'Jesus: A New Vision'* SPCK 1993
- FF Bruce *'The Spreading Flame'* Paternoster 1958
- FF Bruce *'Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit'* Paternoster 1977
- H Chadwick *'The Early Church'* Pelican 1993
- O Clement *'The Roots of Christian Mysticism'* New City 1997
- N Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Temple Smith, 1970
- J Comby *'How to Read Church History'* [Vol 1] SCM 1985
- J Comby *'How to Read Church History'* [Vol 2] SCM 1985
- M Deansly, *A History of the Medieval Church*, Methuen, 1947
- C Euan, *The Reformation of the Heretics: The Waldenses of the Alps*, Clarendon, 1984
- Eusebius *'The History of the Church'* Penguin 1965, 1989
- G Evans, *The Mind of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, Oxford, 1983
- E Ferguson *'Early Christians Speak'* Biblical Research Press 1981
- E Ferguson *'Backgrounds of Early Christianity'* Eerdmans 1993
- RL Fox *'Pagans and Christians'* Penguin 1986
- RT France *'Jesus the Radical'* IVP 1989
- RT France *'The Evidence for Jesus'* Hodder 1986
- WHC Frend *'The Rise of Christianity'* Darton Longman & Todd 1984
- WHC Frend *'Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church'* Blackwell 1965
- GF Hawthorne [Ed et al] *'Dictionary of Paul and His Letters'* IVP 1993

J Hill '***The New Lion handbook: History of Christianity***' Lion Hudson 2009
 JND Kelly '***Early Christian Creeds***' Longman 1972
 JND Kelly '***Early Christian Doctrines***' A&C Black 1977
 S Neill '***A History of Christian Missions***' Pelican 1964
 T Lane '***Lion Concise Book: Christian Thought***' Lion 1986
 KS Latourette '***A History of Christianity***' Harper 1953
 KS Latourette '***The First Five Centuries***' [History of the Expansion of Christianity Vol.1] Zondervan 1970
 K S Latourette, '***The Thousand Years of Uncertainty***' (History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. 2), Zondervan, 1970
 W Meeks '***The First Urban Christians***' Yale 1983
 NR Needham '***2000 Years of Christ's Power-Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers***' Grace Publications 1998
 NR Needham '***2000 Years of Christ's Power-Part Two: The Middle Ages***' Grace Publications 2000
 R Payne '***The Holy Fire: The Story of the Early Centuries of the Christian Church in the Near East***' St Vladimir's Seminary Press 1957,1980
 W Ramsey '***St Paul: the Traveller and Roman Citizen***' Hodder & Stoughton 1935
 R W Southern, '***Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages***, Penguin, 1970
 J Stevenson '***A New Eusebius***' SPCK 1957
 J Stevenson '***Creeds, Councils and Controversies***' SPCK 1966
 T Ware '***The Orthodox Church***' Penguin 1997
 K Ware '***The Orthodox Way***' St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995
 HB Workman '***Persecution in the Early Church***' Oxford (1906) 1980

Video '***Jesus of Nazareth***' directed by Zifferelli
 Video '***The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church***' Gateway Films
 Video '***A.D.***' Gateway Films
 Video '***An Empire Conquered***' [Persecutions] Gateway Films
 Video '***Peter and Paul***' Gateway Films
 Internet <http://www.christianity.net/christianhistory>