

Restoring the Woven Cord

Strands of Celtic Christianity
for the Church today

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— 1 —

The strands of our faith

In March 1992, I set off on a journey that changed the direction of my life. I travelled to the holy island of Lindisfarne, which lies just south of the Scottish border, not far from my birthplace, Edinburgh. Here, during the course of two blustery wet and cold days, I became acquainted with this historic place, researching the lives of Aidan and Cuthbert who had lived here during the Christian dawn of the isles of Britain and Ireland. For me it was like a homecoming. Something about the island and its history connected with a deep longing within me and brought together many different strands of my own faith.

As I explored the Celtic faith of this ancient mission centre, I discovered something that I had been searching for during the past 20 years. I had been searching for an expression of faith in which I could own the various strands that have become so important for me. I discovered a burning and evangelical love for the Bible; I discovered a depth of spiritual life and stillness that I had encountered in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality; I discovered a radical commitment to the poor and to God's creation, and I discovered the most attractive expression of charismatic life that I had yet encountered. Not only this, but I felt connected with my roots for the first time. As a Protestant I had never felt entirely comfortable with finding my spiritual roots in the religious and political protests of the 16th century, particularly as I am good friends with a number of Roman Catholics and have a great respect for their church. I have always felt awkwardness about our history and a pain at our separation. Yet here, in the Celtic church, there are common roots that go back long before our days of separation.

But was this feeling just personal to me? Was my interest in Celtic Christianity just an odd quirk, an indication of midlife crisis? During the course of the ensuing two years, I started to speak publicly about Celtic Christianity and was reassured to discover a widespread and growing interest in the subject. I am now convinced that all this is much more than just an odd quirk. I am in no doubt that the Spirit of God is reminding us of the first expression of faith in these isles to give us inspiration for Christian ministry and mission today. While it had its faults, I believe that the early Celtic church was the nearest thing in our Christian history to a complete expression of faith in this country. After all, no other church has had such impact on this land, steadily converting the country from Druid-led paganism to Christianity. Extraordinarily, many of us have been brought up on the notion of the ‘Dark Ages’, with an implication that little of spiritual worth happened in this land until the Reformation. Nothing could be further from the truth. For Britain, the period from the fifth to the ninth centuries should be seen as the ‘Light Ages’ in which, arguably, a light shone that was brighter than any since.

There is, of course, a real danger of romanticising the Celtic church and overlooking its weaknesses. Also, we should not generalise too much as there were variations within it. For example, there were differences between the Lindisfarne-based mission that began with Aidan and the Iona-based mission that started with Columba, and personally I am more attracted to the Lindisfarne mission.

Christian beginnings in Britain

Some of the Roman legions stationed in Britain were Christians and we have evidence of a Christian presence in this land from the earliest times. In Manchester Museum, there is a pottery shard from a Spanish amphora, inscribed with an acrostic of the Lord’s Prayer in Latin, which is dated at around AD180. The second-century

writer Origen refers to Christians in Britain, and at the Council of Arles in AD314 we even have mention of three British bishops. There is also the Glastonbury legend, which asserts that Joseph of Arimathea visited Britain. The legend claims that Joseph was a tin trader and made regular trips to the West Country of Britain to purchase tin. He knew Jesus as a child and brought him on one occasion to Cornwall, thus inspiring William Blake to wonder if 'those feet in ancient time' walked 'upon England's mountains green'. The story goes that, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Joseph travelled to England again, this time carrying the Holy Grail that contained the blood and sweat of Christ, arriving eventually at the Isle of Avalon, Glastonbury. While this story is usually viewed as a quaint legend, it is not entirely implausible to believe that Joseph was a tin trader, and, as such, he is quite likely to have made journeys to the tin-rich island of Britain. Gildas, a sixth-century historian, speaks of Britain receiving the 'beams of light' of the gospel during the reign of Tiberias. Since Tiberias died in AD37, this speaks of a very early mission indeed. We shall probably never know the truth of all this, but there certainly are hints in our history that the gospel arrived in Britain and Ireland during the period of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Christianity that came with the Roman legions seems to have had little effect on the local population, who preferred their indigenous pagan ways to the religion of the conquering forces. When the Romans abandoned Britain in the early fifth century, they took the Christian faith with them. However, there were embers of faith that were ready to flame up in a remarkable way. The first flames of the early Celtic church appeared in the areas that the Romans had failed to occupy, in particular in Ireland, which they never conquered. For a time, this indigenous expression of Christian life was the only one to exist in Britain and Ireland, until the church in Western Europe, based in Rome, developed an interest in Britain. This interest stemmed partly from concern for the unevangelised tribes of Angles and Saxons pouring into Britain, and partly from

unease that the British Celtic church was becoming wayward, not least in its custom of selecting a different date for Easter from the Western church. Thus Pope Gregory in Rome commissioned Bishop Augustine for his famous mission to the English. Augustine and his 40 missionary monks arrived in the south of England in AD597 and set up base at Canterbury. As we shall see from time to time in the pages of this book, the relationship between the British and Roman churches was not easy. Both churches had strengths and weaknesses and both were genuinely concerned to bring the light of Christ to these lands. There was room for both but, in time, the Roman church felt that there could be only one church, united in celebrating Easter on a common date in line with the rest of Western Europe, and it therefore sought to absorb the British church into this wider network.

By the end of the sixth century, the Roman church was flourishing in a collapsing but generally Christian empire. It seems that, soon after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the Christian church started to become extraordinarily worldly, in stark contrast to the very vibrant and charismatic faith that had seen it through the terrible years of persecution under the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius. Once it had become part of the establishment, it was inclined to espouse the values of the earthly kingdom rather than the kingdom of God.

By contrast, in the East, thousands were reacting strongly against this worldliness and nominalism; they moved to the deserts, where, led by such people as Anthony and Pachomius, they set up monasteries that became oases of spiritual life and wisdom. These were the first expressions of monastic life in the Christian church. These Christians were attracted to the wilderness because of the many biblical examples of the desert journey, in particular that of Jesus after his baptism in the Jordan. The culmination of his 40-day ascetic experience was a fierce contest with the devil. The desert monks and nuns felt similarly called to these hostile wastelands, which were graphic illustrations

of the spiritual wasteland of nominalism and worldliness in the church. Here on behalf of the church they did battle with Satan, pleading with God through prayer, fasting and holiness to have mercy on the church, restoring it for mission to a needy world. Both the communities and the thousands of individual hermits played a key role in the spiritual survival of the church, for not only did they act as spiritual warriors but their lives also formed models of commitment, depth and transparent holiness.

Martin, Bishop of Tours (AD371), was the first Westerner to become influenced by the Eastern monks, and founded a monastery called Marmoutier—literally meaning ‘the place of the big family’. It was here that Ninian was profoundly influenced and the story of the Celtic church in Britain gets under way. With Ninian and Columba in Scotland, David, Samson and Illtyd in Wales, Patrick and Brigid in Ireland, and Aidan, Cuthbert and Hilda in England (to name only a few), the Celtic fire began to grow into a blaze with monastic groups springing up everywhere.

By the time the Roman mission arrived in Canterbury, the Celtic church was looking to the East rather than the West for its inspiration. In fact, for a time, the Roman mission was effective only in the south: the centre, the north and the rest of Britain and Ireland were unreachable owing to the ravages of Anglo-Saxon invasions and frequent outbreaks of plague. It was only with the settling of the Saxons that the Roman church began to see the possibility of establishing one church in Britain, celebrating one Easter. The Roman church eventually persuaded the Celtic leaders to gather for a synod where it could all be thrashed out. Thus, in 664 both sides met at Whitby. There the increasingly powerful Wilfrid, who was forming dioceses and monasteries based on Roman models, was far more competent at arguing his case than the typically humble Celtic leaders. In many respects it was at this council that the spiritual fate of our land was decided. The Celtic church lost against the powers of Rome. The community-based church committed to poverty could not stand against the

hierarchical and centrally organised church that had such effective links with secular power. But the Celtic fire still burned for many years after Whitby. In fact, it has remained alight in the ‘Celtic fringes’ through the ages and is now showing every sign of being rekindled across the land, and indeed across the world today.

The conflict in the early Christian era in Britain and Ireland was between Celt and Roman. Let’s be absolutely clear that, when we talk of the Roman church, we are not referring to the modern-day Roman Catholic Church. We are talking about a church of 1000 years before the Reformation. The Roman church of the Middle Ages has influenced most of the Western church, Catholic *and* Protestant. In this book we are interested in how the indigenous church of Britain and Ireland expressed its faith before it become absorbed into the wider Rome-based church, and we shall see that in many ways we can still discern in the life and witness of our church today, in every denomination and church stream, characteristics of the Roman church that are now being challenged by the growth of Celtic Christianity.

Strands of faith

The Celts were great lovers of art and they loved intricate patterns. Such artwork can be found in the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, whose illuminations are based on wonderful and intricate strands that are interwoven to form the most beautiful patterns, full of vitality and meaning. We see the same in other expressions of Celtic Christian art that have survived to this day, such as the engraved high crosses found in Ireland and parts of Britain, which were covered with interwoven designs.

These patterns clearly depict the Celts’ love of wholeness and say something very important to the church today about how these people lived their Christian lives. They had discovered the many different strands of our faith and woven them together in a most

effective cord for ministry and mission. A strong cord needs many strands, but the weakness of the church through the ages is that it has tended to focus on only one or two strands at the cost of losing others. Since the collapse of the Celtic church, it seems that one generation after another made the discovery of a lost strand and, holding it up, said, 'This is the main cord'; then, rather than weaving it in to the whole, each generation dropped the others and made a rope out of only one strand, which of course will never have sufficient strength. Thus, for example, we have evangelical discoveries of justification by faith at the Reformation; we have catholic discoveries about worship and sacraments in the 19th-century Oxford Movement; we have liberal discoveries about social justice and radical witness to the poor in the 20th century; we have pentecostal/charismatic discoveries also in the last hundred years. All these have been good and necessary discoveries, but usually each group has discovered only one or two strands of the whole cord, and has forged its identity by denouncing the other strands, thus rendering the cord weak again. In the Celtic church we find a community of faith that was refreshingly free of prejudice and open to welcoming many strands into the cord of faith.

We need to study the early Celtic church in the spirit of its Christian life—with total openness to the wind of the Spirit, who may well draw our attention to strands of our Christian faith that we have too easily ignored or discarded. It is no use, for example, delighting in the love for creation without taking due note of the early church's understanding of dark powers that could despoil creation. Similarly, it would be wrong to delight in the miraculous stories of healing without studying the believers' commitment to community, the context for the healing ministry. We will need to explore with a great sense of openness.

My hope is that this book will help us discover some very important strands of our faith that were so clearly evident in the Celtic church. Of equal importance is the weaving of the strands together in our personal walk with God and in the life of the

church. I have not identified all the strands, but I have chosen 14 that I happen to think are important for us to consider at this time. They are in chronological order of the saints associated with them, which I hope makes clear that there is no preference for one strand over another. Each chapter is simply a snapshot of the early Celtic church, to give some idea of how that church experienced this particular strand of Christian faith.

In this book, when I refer to the ‘Celtic church’ I normally mean the Celtic church that existed in Britain and Ireland roughly from the fifth to the ninth centuries AD. I am aware that, for many Christians today who live in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland, the Celtic church is not in the past but is alive and well in the present. Although there are some references to the modern Celtic church, I am mainly concerning myself with the early church in this book.

I have called the book *Restoring the Woven Cord* because it is my deep conviction that the Celtic church challenges us to rediscover the strands of our faith and find ways of weaving them together in our personal lives and the life of our churches. Those who know much more than I do about weaving and rope work will tell me that you cannot technically weave a cord. Well, I know, but I think of it more poetically than literally! We need the strong cord with its many strands; we need the interweaving to take place in our own lives.

Each chapter has four ingredients, as follows.

Story and reflection

Story was most important to the Celtic church. They taught by means of stories, songs, poems and pictures. Pre-Christian Celts had very little interest in writing, which is one reason why it is difficult to research their history. But their oral tradition was strong and they delighted in storytelling, which they viewed as an

imaginative way of communicating truth. Each chapter of this book therefore has one leading story from the Celtic church, and I will use this, along with various other stories, to discuss the theme of the chapter. You will find that my main resource is the Venerable Bede, which reflects my admiration for him. My special interest is in the early Celtic church in Northumbria and this is why I regularly return to stories from this church. Also, because Bede wrote such a thorough account of Cuthbert's life, this particular saint features more regularly than others. I am sorry that only two female saints appear in the main stories. This is simply because most of the stories we have are about male saints, but, as we shall see in Chapter 11, this does not at all reflect the Celtic church's estimation of women, which was very high. The story in each chapter provides a basis for the theme that I explore in the pages following, where my aim is to connect the understanding and experience of that particular theme in the early Celtic church with our world today.

Bible reading

There is a Bible reading that connects with the theme of each chapter. This can be used as guidance for the application section.

Application

This section contains three questions that will help to apply the theme of the chapter to your situation. You can use these questions for your own reflection or as starter questions if you are using the book for group study.

Prayer

All the prayers are kindly provided by The Community of Aidan and Hilda, written either by Ray Simpson or myself (apart from Columba's in Chapter 7). I hope that each prayer will lead into further prayers as you take the themes of the strand and weave it into your own life and witness.

Drawing

Each chapter includes a drawing by Lindsey Attwood. Lindsey has produced these drawings after prayerfully considering each theme. You can use them for your own prayer and meditation, following the Celtic way of hearing God through picture as well as word.



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Prayer

Patrick

There is some speculation about the dates of Patrick's life and ministry, and such is the weave of historical fact and legendary tale about the life of this great missionary that it is hard to discern firm details of his life. However, there is a consensus that he was clearly a very great evangelist and pastor, and he is one of the few early Celtic Christians who have left us a written record of their own life and ministry.

It is generally believed that Patrick was a British Celt, born sometime around the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries in the north-west of Britain. It was common in those days for people to go to other lands and grab a few healthy young lads to take home as slaves. Thus it was that a group of Irish slave traders captured Patrick when he was 16 and he came into the possession of a chieftain named Milch. He was put to work herding cattle in County Antrim, and here, rather like the prodigal son, he 'returned with a whole heart to the Lord my God'. It was here on the slopes of Slemish, near Ballymena, that Patrick experienced an extraordinary surge of prayer, as he records in his *Confession*:

But after I had come to Ireland I daily used to feed cattle, and I prayed frequently during the day; the love of God and the fear of Him increased more and more, and faith became stronger, and the spirit was stirred; so that one day I said about a hundred prayers, and in the night nearly the same; so that I used even to remain in the woods and in the mountains;

*before daylight I used to rise to prayer; through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm; nor was there any slothfulness in me, as I now perceive, because the spirit was then fervent within me.*¹

Patrick tells us that one night, during this intense period of prayer, he had a dream that he would return home. He duly escaped and caught a boat to France, where he trained as a priest. He then returned to Britain, when he had a further prophetic dream. In this dream he saw a man coming from Ireland who gave a letter to Patrick entitled 'The Voice of the Irish'. As he read the letter, he heard the voice of many Irish people beckoning him to come and walk among them. This dream was his call to Ireland and, following his consecration as bishop, he arrived in AD435, probably at Strangford Lough. Throughout the next three decades he engaged in the most vigorous and effective evangelistic work and, when he died in 461, he left behind him thousands of baptised Christians and many communities that were blossoming into life.





The prayer life of the early Celtic church is worthy of the admiration of Christians of every tradition. In this church we find hermits leading austere lives of fasting and contemplative prayer. We also find Pentecostal-style enthusiastic prayer. Perhaps the Celtic church, more than any other, was true to Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians to 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests' (Ephesians 6:18, NIV).

The hermit and ascetic life

Possibly the clearest witness to the vital role of prayer was in the life and ministry of the hermit. It is no surprise that a church so closely connected with the Desert Fathers should see such a flourishing of eremetical life. St Anthony, the first and most renowned Desert Father, who lived to be over 100 years old despite his austere life in the Egyptian desert, was greatly loved and admired by the Celtic church. The ancient high crosses of Monasterboice in Ireland are carved with the images of two saints—Anthony and Paul of Thebes, both Desert Fathers. The Celtic church found such people a great inspiration and, although the climate of northern Europe was very different from the hot deserts of Egypt, the principles of desert spirituality could be applied. Martin Palmer writes:

In many parts of Ireland, Wales and Scotland you can find tiny chapels of the remains of hermitages in the most remote and desolate places. Quite often these places will bear names such as Dysart, Disserth or the like. These words are all corruptions of the word desert. And they were so called because in the Celtic monastic tradition, to go to a remote place for spiritual retreat was to go into the desert. The idea of going to the desert is a direct link back to the Coptic monks.²

Some would seek these deserts for short periods of time. For example, it seems to have been the custom of Celtic bishops to go to a 'desert' during Lent in fasting and prayer. Thus Cuthbert and his successor on Lindisfarne, Eadbert, would go to the island now called 'Cuddy's Isle', a little tidal island a few metres from Lindisfarne. Here they, and many after them, would spend short or longer periods of time in prayer and quietness. For Cuthbert, it was the precursor to a more prolonged solitary life, as he eventually felt called to go to an island further out to sea, Farne Island, which Aidan had used as a place of retreat. Cuthbert lived on this island for almost ten years before he was persuaded to return to the mainland and become a bishop. Bede tells us that Cuthbert went to Farne Island for 'solitary contemplation and silence'. He was not alone all the time; it seems that he had regular visits from the Lindisfarne community. Members of the community would go over to help him build his dwelling and his chapel, and to prepare the land so that he could grow his own food. It seems that Cuthbert actually became more and more remote on Farne Island, eventually building a high-walled, open-roofed dwelling for himself, and even blocking up the window so that when monks came to visit him he could not see their faces. All he saw was the sky, as he kept his gaze towards heaven.

Such asceticism was common in the Celtic church, though we do not have many records of some of the most bizarre forms of ascetic behaviour that took place in the East. The ascetic life, lived out in some remote and, frankly, fairly hostile places encouraged a sense of doing battle in the wilderness, following the example of the Lord, but the close proximity to the forces of nature also had the effect of quickening the spirit in prayer. Patrick's early experience of praying in the bleakness of winter is an example of this. His contact with the cold frosts made him more sharply aware of the cold hearts of his captors and, by contrast, the compassionate and warm heart of God. Cuthbert's hours spent praying in the cold sea may seem absurd to those who are accustomed to saying their

prayers in the comfort of a fireside armchair, but there is no doubt that the experience fuelled a fire within him which quite probably literally warmed him up.

This kind of asceticism is a form of fasting. Not everyone in the Celtic communities lived ascetic lives but all would regularly fast. Asceticism widened the arena of fasting to include celibacy and the withdrawal of human comforts. Fasting has the effect of making the spirit more alert to God, and there is no doubt that Cuthbert and others were spiritually highly sensitive.

When he eventually left Farne Island, Cuthbert's place was taken by Ethelwald. Such places were sanctified by holy people and they became like spiritual watchtowers. If one hermit left, another would come and take his or her place, standing guard in prayer.

In our utilitarian age it is very hard to understand the purpose of the hermit life. We think of Cuthbert, a gifted evangelist and teacher, cutting himself off from his fellow creatures, denying himself all the good things of this world. And yet the Celtic church, with all its love for creation and life, had no difficulty in accepting this ministry. I think the only way of understanding it is to see the ministry as representative. The Celtic church knew that prayer and devotion to God had to be at the heart of its life if it was to witness to God effectively. The hermit was, to some degree, living out this life for the sake of the community and, indeed, for the sake of the wider community. The hermit provided a kind of anchor for a church which could easily have become overbusy, and which was no doubt tempted by materialism in much the same ways that the church is today. It is interesting to read about Fursey (see Chapter 9), who became immensely popular when he preached in Ireland. Bede tells us that 'he could no longer endure the crowds that thronged him', so he abandoned all he possessed, including his ministry, left Ireland and went to East Anglia. Here he built a monastery, but once again, in the face of rising success, he withdrew and lived the rest of his life as a hermit.

The church today would do well to consider this vital aspect of

the life of the Celtic church. We all too easily give in to the seduction of busyness, measuring our value by our usefulness rather than our being. During the 1990s I used to visit the late Brother Ramon, a Franciscan monk who had once travelled extensively around the land, preaching and teaching, but latterly felt called to the hermit life. I visited him in his small hut just beyond the kitchen garden at Glasshampton Monastery in Worcestershire. At the time I knew him, I was travelling a fair bit in the UK and overseas, and there was something immensely reassuring to know that Ramon was there, a human fixed point of prayer and devotion on the lookout in his spiritual watchtower. Brother Ramon, and other hermits like him, are a kind of countercultural movement, offering an alternative way of living to the relentless busyness of so much of our church life. Why do we consider it to be of greater value to have our bishops and clergy attending committees and meetings throughout Lent rather than spending six weeks in contemplative prayer? The Celtic attitude, illustrated so aptly by the life of the hermit, deeply challenges our values.

All kinds of praying

The Celtic hermit would have engaged in praying of all kinds. There were times of aggressive (and probably noisy) battle prayer when the hermits engaged forces of darkness in their praying (as we shall see in Chapter 3). But they also knew the prayer of silence and stillness, which was the foundation of the contemplative life, so treasured by the Celtic church.

The hermit was never an isolated figure. He or she was part of the monastic community. Cuthbert, therefore, when he was on Farnes Island, was still seen to be very much part of the community. In the monastic communities, there was a regular rhythm of prayer and worship. Early on, Aidan set up a pattern of prayer and worship on Lindisfarne that became an easy-to-follow example for

all. Bede writes, ‘Many devout men and women of that day were inspired to follow his example, and adopted the practice of fasting until None on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, except during the fifty days after Easter.’³ They clearly saw themselves as having an intercessory responsibility for the nation. After a victory against the ever-threatening Penda, King Oswy gave twelve grants of land where, as expressed by Bede, ‘heavenly warfare was to take the place of earthly’. This land became the home of a monastic community whose job it was to make constant intercession for the peace of the nation. To turn a battle site into a place of prayer was typical of the Celtic desire to heal the land, turning darkness to light.

The Celtic church seems to have been at ease with formal prayer, and they kept the offices in their communities, but we have many reports of more spontaneous charismatic prayer. One Epiphany, Cuthbert found himself with two brothers on an island off the coast of Scotland. The weather turned bad and they could not get off the island. With no food or water, they realised that the situation was serious. Bede relates Cuthbert’s wonderful response to the crisis:

‘Why do we remain listless and unresourceful?’ he asked. ‘We ought to be thinking over every possible way of saving ourselves. The land is bleak with snow, clouds lour in the sky, there is a gale raging and the sea is a fury of waves, we are dying of hunger and there is no chance of human aid. Then let us storm Heaven with our prayers, asking that the same Lord who parted the Red Sea and fed His people in the desert take pity on us in our peril.’⁴

The storms that caused the waves to pound on the rocks caused Cuthbert to stir to prayer. I can imagine him standing in the waves and crying out his prayers, with his great voice being carried on the gales to heaven. This wind-inspired storming of heaven is truly charismatic prayer! Needless to say, it was not long before they found food, and then the storm settled and they made for home.

Patrick's fervent prayers, too, must have had a lot of energy behind them. Prayer was often quite physical. People would pray as they walked. Crossing yourself was a regular part of prayer, as was the drawing of an imaginary circle around you in one of the encircling prayers. Some prayer seems to have been very energetic.

Much of the prayer of the Celtic church would have been spontaneous but, in time, certain prayers became part of church and community rituals, and it is these that were passed down the generations to be gathered in Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (see Chapter 13 for more on this collection). Even a brief study of these prayers reveals a great respect for words that challenges the wordiness of some church prayers today, both written and extempore. Many of the Celtic prayers are beautifully and poetically written and are designed to stir the soul and touch the heart. With the Celtic love for creation, many connect with the seasons and with all the various aspects of life in God's created order. Celtic Christians found it as natural to pray during the milking of the cow as they did to pray in church. In fact, it was vital to feel at ease in praying while doing such mundane things as milking your cow, because, if you could not do that, your spiritual and earthly worlds were becoming far too separate. Thus there are prayers for getting up in the morning, for washing and dressing, for working, for resting, for meeting friends, for eating, for tidying the house, for undressing, for going to bed. In this way the Celtic church was returning to our Jewish roots, for in Jewish spirituality there has always been a strong earthiness in prayer. David Adam's book *Power Lines*⁵ is an excellent example of prayers that connect with modern-day work.

Some evangelicals will find the references to the saints difficult in Celtic prayers, but we need to remember how very important the sense of community was to the Celt. As in Jewish tradition, the community always included those loved ones who had died and for whom life had not ended but simply changed. Mary, Brigid and the archangel Michael are particularly popular in

prayers. They all have heavenly tasks to assist our work on earth.

Celtic prayer is always deeply trinitarian. A prayer will often involve all three members of the Trinity (see the prayer at the end of this chapter as an example). Coming into the presence of God in prayer meant coming into the presence of all the members of the Trinity, and the reference to the Three in prayer was deeply reassuring, as the person praying would be made to think of the harmony and unity of the Trinity.

It is sad that, down the ages, different ways of praying have become identified with different churchmanships and denominations. It is my conviction that God is wanting now to break into all of this, so that we can be a united church again, enjoying the fullness of prayer with ‘all kinds of praying’.

Bible reading

Mark 1:32–39: Jesus sets the pattern of finding a desert place for prayer in the face of many demands on his time.

Application

1. How do you feel about contemplative, silent prayer? Is it your natural way of praying? Think about those times when Jesus went to a desert place for peace and quiet. Try spending some time today in stillness.
2. What has been your experience of charismatic prayer? Have you engaged in ‘heaven-storming’ prayer? Next time it is a windy day, why not go out for a walk and pray as the wind stirs you. Feel the moving of the Spirit in you as you pray.
3. You might like to investigate some other Celtic forms of prayer that make use of symbols—try shells, stones, paintings and so on.

Prayer

Before a time of intercession:

Father, in heaven, Jesus came to you at the dawning of the day
in a desert place to be still;
Send stillness to my heart now.

Jesus, you intercede for me at the right hand of the Father;
Help me now to open my heart, mind, body and spirit to you.

Spirit, you are the wind from heaven, that shook the upper
room;
Come to me now, come as gentle breath, come as mighty wind.

Blessed Three,
I come in humility
I come by grace
I come with confidence
I pray in your name
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.