Reflections 23 October 2020.

**THE CELTIC WORLD**



*Discovering the traditional practices of the Celtic peoples, handed down by word of mouth across centuries has shown how even our present day, complicated lives can still be shaped by time taken to recognise and rejoice in the succession of the times of change, in each day, in every season, year by year, in the pattern of life itself from birth to death.*

In his book, One Foot in Eden, Philip Newell explores the connection between what is deepest in us and the original goodness of creation seen in the Garden. Philip Newell views grace, not as opposed to nature but as releasing God's creativity which was planted within us at birth. Love's wisdom and passion may lie buried under layers of confusion in our lives but they are waiting to be recovered at every stage of the pilgrimage that makes up our life's journey.

The first teacher of note in the ancient Celtic Church, Pelagius, had taught that when we look into the face of a newborn child we are looking into the image of God. Similarly in the great poetic tradition of prayer in the Western Isles of

Scotland, extending well into the nineteenth century, there was the belief that in the birth of a child the image of God is being freshly born among us. This was to speak not simply of what is true of a child but of what is most deeply true for all people and for all creation. God is the Life within all life.

This emphasis on life's essential goodness is not to pretend that there is no evil; the poet Edwin Muir writes, with reference to Jesus' parable of the field that was planted with good seed before an enemy planted weeds in it ( Matthew 13.24):

"And nothing now can separate the corn and tares compactly grown."

In the fields of our lives, he says, "evil and good stand thick around." The deepest truth, however, is the goodness of the field and its corn. The weeds threaten to choke and stunt the good crop. Redemption in this model of spirituality is about freeing the original goodness that is in us from all that harms or inhibits it. The graces of God are planted deep within and need to be released from all that obscures or covers them. They are like treasure hidden in the fields of our lives; the deeper we dig the more of that treasure trove will be found, wrapped though it may be in layers of accumulated darkness.

Christ is the liberator, the one who shows us the treasure that is within our lives and guides us in the way of its redemption. It is a goodness that is to be found again and again in life, in different ways and in the various dimensions of who we are.

Christ leads us not only to the treasure but through painful encounters with the falseness of what is within us as well. These shadows need to be comprehended if we are to glimpse the treasure of God's life at the heart of our lives; the hidden treasure that Jesus points us to is God's life interwoven among our life.

Esther de Waal in her book, Living on the Border, writes of the Celtic world of rituals for every day and every season, so that the passage of time was marked with due reverence and awareness. The day would start by saluting the rising sun, which they hailed as they would a great person returning to their land. When the sun rose over the tops of the peaks, an old man in Arisaig would remove his head covering and bow his head down, giving glory to the great God of life for the magnificence of the sun and for the goodness of its light to the children of men and to the animals of the world.

Inside the house the woman lays the foundations of her domestic duties by spreading the embers of the fire, which has been burning throughout the night, in three equal sections in a circle, putting a peat between them so that each will touch the small boss in the middle that forms the common centre. The first peat is laid down in the name of the God of Life, the second in the name of the God of Peace, the third in the name of the God of Grace, and the circle is then covered in the name of the Three of Light.  Fire, light, warmth - the image of the nurturing and sustaining hand of God and of the need for those same qualities within our own selves, is here enacted as a daily ritual. This custom can easily seem romantic and distant, far removed from the technology of the electric kettle and the means of instant heat that is available to our modern lives. And yet the reality of performing an action with awareness, consciousness of the presence of God, gratitude for his gifts of power or water or light, still remains the same. An action undertaken consciously and with reverence gives meaning to the start of the day and thus to a hallowing of time and its handling with care.

**Living with time**

*The year is the symbol of eternity, for it continually turns round on itself and never comes to rest.... Christ treats our former life as a thing of the past, and gives us the beginning of a new life each day... according to the pattern of his own death and resurrection.*

A reading from a paschal homily of an ancient author, found in a monastic prayer book.

