

20 April, 2008
5th Sunday of Easter, Earth Sunday
Fr. Richard L. Green

We've sprouted.

Normally we don't have trees in here, but this being Earth Sunday, it just seemed appropriate somehow. It's one of those commemorations that seems in some ways just to be kind of a modern thing that the church is latching onto - to get on the bandwagon. And that may be so for some. But for Anglicans, with our spiritual roots in the British Isles and in the Celtic church, that's just not the case.

The old religion in the British Isles was a Nature mysticism that saw the divine in all of creation. And because the church was competing with them, there was a lot of malignment of that religion. It was called demonic and satanic and that sort of thing.

The fact of the matter was that though slow, the transition from the old religion to Christianity was martyr-less. Unlike the Continent. Unlike the most of the rest of the world, in fact. That many who heard the teaching of Jesus said, "Oh, yeah. Why don't you tell me something new?" That those teachings were already something that was present in their own religion.

In 410, a very significant date, because it was when Rome fell to the Visigoths. And at about that same time was Pelagius, who had been falsely declared a heretic by the church and still was greatly maligned because of the influence of Augustine of Hippo and his preoccupation with what he called original sin (which probably says more about his sexual proclivities than anything else). As the Roman troops were leaving Britain, Pelagius was going home. They might well have crossed paths.

Pelagius was one of the greatest teachers of his time in the church. And what he taught was (which was what came into such direct conflict with Augustine of Hippo) that if we are created in fact in the basic image of God then at our nature we are good. Now that image is a bit distorted, scratched up, bumpy, but that our basic image is good and that evil is a distortion of our basic image. Now, Augustine basically says [that] God creates us evil. I tend to go with Pelagius, myself.

So when the troops left Britain there was about a 200-year window in there in which the influence of Rome was not there. Now, Christianity probably came with that Roman occupation. That probably makes the most sense. The Joseph of Arimathea story and all that stuff is a little bit, you know, conjectural at best. But probably among those who came as part of the occupation were Christians.

When they left, they left the indigenous people of Britain and Ireland to their own devices and their own cultural context with very little influence from all that Roman original sin, Greco-Roman Platonous theology and all that stuff. And so what happened was that a very distinctive interpretation, a very distinctive expression of how to live out

a life in Christ arose. It was in that 200-year period that you get the likes of Patrick and Minion, Columba. Of Aidan, Cuthbert, all of these people who are sort of the flowering of Celtic Christianity.

And if we want to look for some of the evidence of what some of the basic tenets were of that spirituality, turn in your hymnals to page 370. Hymn 370 contains within it St. Patrick's Breastplate, which is verse 6. But the whole is pretty much called St. Patrick's Breastplate and it is an invocation of the powers of the Almighty as protection, okay? So in verse form, after having invoked the strong name of the Trinity, the power of faith, of Christ's incarnation, of his baptism and all that, of all these divine powers being invoked as protection, verse 4 says,

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth [clearly does not live on the West coast], the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.

Why in the world would Patrick be invoking the forces of Nature in the context of divine intervention if Patrick didn't believe that God was present in those forces? That they are just something *other*. That they contain within them that divine presence, that divine power. And not just here on Earth, but the stars in heaven – it's all part of God's presence among us.

The Celts, as they became Christian-ized, recognized – contrary to much of the Roman theology of the day – that Creation is not fallen. Creation is of God. Creation is God's presence. They looked to Christ in scriptures and in their direct experience of the risen Christ as part of this manifestation of the divine in the world.

They looked also to the created order as an example, like Christ, of God's manifestation in life and the world. So that everything you see, everything you perceive with your senses, everything, even the things that we think we've made? We don't make anything. We rearrange, we transform a bit, but we don't create the elements. We don't create out of nothing; we take God's basic building blocks and maybe pull them apart and stick them back together again. Aidan plays with Legos and he takes those things apart and he makes them into all kinds of different things. He doesn't make Legos.

And so, when looking out at the world, a Celtic Christian would see in everything, God. And every interaction with every thing, an act of worship. An opportunity for prayer. So in the morning when getting up and going over to that pathetic little peat fire and re-stoking that peat fire, there's a prayer for that. Going out to the barn and milking ol' Bessie, there's a prayer for that. Everything over the course of the day is seen, in a

sense, as an act of worship. Because at every turn, at every turn when we allow ourselves, we are engaging God.

So, when we are out, just walking down the street, when we are taking out *the recycling*... it's a ritual act. It's an act of worship. This is about a spirituality. It's not just about cleaning house. What we are now calling the environmental movement. When we put it in our context, it's an act of worship. It's not just making sure we've got a place to live. It includes that. But it is an act of worship, treating God's creation with respect. Without being wastrels. Without being selfish in regard to how we use what God has given to all of Creation, we then are embraced in a form of communion.

After Patrick, several hundred years go by. The Anglos and the Saxons invade. The Roman Church establishes a mission at Canterbury with another Augustine that we try to separate by calling him Augus-teen of Canterbury.

Early 9th century, a man by the name of John Scotus Eriugena, which means 'John the Irishman from Ireland' ('John Scotus Eriugena' just seems so much better than that) grew up to become a theologian. Not a priest, not a monk, but a theologian, which gave him a lot of freedom. He eventually went to what's now France and entered the court of Charles the Bald who later became the holy Roman emperor. I bet he changed his name.

And so he [John Scotus] was probably, in his day, one of the greatest theologians.

It was John Scotus from whom Philip Newell got the title of his book, "Listening to the Heartbeat of God." Because he was very much focused on the gospel of John that we heard a bit from this morning. And the reason he said it was Listening to the Heartbeat of God is that when you're reading the gospel of John, you're hearing the words from (and this was back in the time when people really thought it was John the Divine who wrote it) the one who was laying against Christ at the Last Supper and had his head against his chest to hear his heartbeat. So it's kind of like going to the source.

But that image of listening to the heartbeat of God and how John Scotus said that Christ wears two shoes in walking on the earth. One is the scripture. The other is creation. That when we want to look for God, we look in those two places. We see Christ in scripture, we see Christ in creation.

After those days, more and more influence of the Continental theology (which was very hierarchical and very much focused on the authority issues) and less and less focused on seeing God in Nature and in humanity as more and more the idea of original sin took over, even in Britain. When hierarchy came to be more the focus of the day we began to lose some of that.

But still we were always known as the people of the incarnation. We were the Christmas people. We were the ones who really saw that God made manifest in the feast of the incarnation at Christmas, God's presence with us has always been essential

as part of who we are as Anglicans. But it goes so much deeper than just Christmas. It goes into everything we see. It doesn't go away. It's part of who we are.

This last week, I received something from a parishioner, Herbert Craig, who is relatively new among us. It's printed on page 6 in your service leaflet.

'Walking Among Oaks, a Meditation.' Herb tells me that some of this imagery came out of just a phrase that I had in a sermon about being in a stream. So, from that, the cork was unplugged and this came out. There are a couple of words that I want to...

'umbra' and 'penumbra' ... I understand that, if you think of the eclipse of the sun, the umbra is the darkened, shadowed sun. The penumbra is light which escapes around it that creates the halo, the wreath around it. Those words show up toward the end.

Walking Among Oaks, a meditation

by Herbert Craig

He pours the stream of life
Here the rolling Columbia
There a Jordan eternal

He pours the stream of life
Orbiting planets
Deep history of animate beings and humanity

He pouring the infinite river
Bounding whale and dolphin
Resounding oceans
Eager hands uplifting
Hungering homeward the
Soul

He wreathing body with soul
Umbra of death
Penumbra of life

Behold a mystery
A presence... presence... presence
Ineffable

God is pouring forth a stream of life. We don't wade in it, we are *of* it. And as we go through our days and are so often hypnotized by the flashing lights around us, hypnotized by our desires, hypnotized by our own collective unconsciousness, we miss out on the juicy, warm, fecund, amazing gift that is God present in all things.

Amen.

