

In Search of the Saints

**An investigation into
Celtic Spirituality
during the summer of 1995**

*John Burgess
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Celtic Spirituality - the Past and Present

The recent profusion of articles, pamphlets and books about Celtic Christianity and collections of poetry and writings of the Celtic people and in the Celtic tradition witness to the contemporary fascination for all things Celtic. This searching the past for our roots has also become a hobby in the Church. The interest in Celtic Christianity may be a cry from the people that the historic and institutionalised churches are not meeting or addressing their felt needs. They are looking for a “golden age” of Christianity that will speak to them today.

Purpose of the Investigation

My search for Celtic Christianity and an understanding of Celtic Spirituality is part of my concern to discover a relevant model for mission in Britain at the end of the second millennium. I started out with an academic approach only to find that spirituality is something that has to be experienced at first hand. It is difficult to approach it in literature. The search took me to Northumberland, Lindisfarne, North Wales, Lichfield and Cornwall. Unfortunately I was unable to include a visit to Iona in my pilgrimage.

Outline of Conclusions

Having searched for and experienced something of the historic and contemporary expressions of Celtic Spirituality I have developed a great respect for the saints of the Celtic period of British History (normally known as the “Dark Ages”, but really an age of the light of the Gospel). There was probably no such thing as a Celtic Church, but rather an Indigenous church expressed in different ways in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the nations of England. What we know of the Church of the times is found in archaeology, some histories such as Bede and Gildas, but principally from the lives of the saints. Yet what we know of the saints is very minima!. Most of the biographies (if that term can be used) are of 12th century origin, and so stylised and idealised. Yet these saints had a profound influence on the Church in Britain and Europe throughout the centuries.

These biographies imply that the Celtic period was a “golden age” but in reality that was never an historical truth. The “Golden Age” is a projection of the future hope, the ideal, which people are seeking after - a searching for their roots and a relevant spirituality. However the essence of the “Golden Age” is always with us, and Celtic Spirituality can be meaningful. For it to be relevant to the present age, it needs to be able to deal with, not only the romantic aspects of life and faith, but the real issues of gender, ecology, technology and materialism in a world of violence, confrontation and oppression.

I believe that it can and it does. It is an historic spirituality, set in an earthiness of this world and relevant to this century. Whether Celtic Spirituality and the Celtic Church was ever an historic reality is not important, for rather it is the “grail” after which we search and upon whose ideals we can order our lives.

Cuthbert's Heritage

The first impression of Hetton Hall, is that it is a long way from anywhere. The drive from Wooler takes the passenger deeper into the Northumbrian countryside, turning east and south. Just as one is about to despair that a wrong turning must have been made (but there were not any major turnings) and has given up hope of reaching the destination, a bend in the road exposes the notice that beyond the stone wall and gate is the house. Surrounded by trees lying in a small depression in the hillside, just above the valley floor, is a secluded, sheltered, peaceful place, This is Hetton Hall the centre of the Northumbria Community The house dates back, probably to the 14th century and boasts a pleasant walled garden, now called the prayer garden, a barn that has been converted into residences and a small wood in which one discovers “poustinia”^[1] and chapels amidst the undergrowth,

Set in the centre of Northumberland in rolling hills and watered valleys, echoing to the sound of lambs bleating for motherly presence and the call of birds praising their freedom in the treetops, is “Nether Springs”. It is, I was told, coincidence that there is a spring running under the house, but a happy coincidence for the spring is a symbol of life and renewal, some of the major themes of the community. The community is a dispersed community, principally throughout the geographical area of the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, but in practice more widespread taking in much of the “Island of the Mighty.”^[2] Nether Springs is the focus of the community, where community weekends, retreats and courses take place, not principally to enable people to withdraw from the world, but to be equipped to live in it.

Nether Springs was the focus of my journey and the people associated with it helped me along the way, I am indebted to them for their time and hospitality and guidance. The journey was in the tradition of the Celtic Peregrinates being both geographical and spiritual. It was in effect a pilgrimage, I was searching for the Christianity that was lost^[3] and that many people today are rediscovering. My journey north was a journey of discovery; to find people who had experienced Celtic Spirituality and were attempting to live in the tradition, to discover new books and material for my research, to locate the historic places of our marginalised Christian tradition, and to seek the experience for myself I did not find it all but I was not disappointed either.

My journey took me to Columba, Aiden, Oswald and principally Cuthbert, For this is the land of the northern saints, My pilgrimage was to have been a journey back in time, but I was to find that the past was not easy to grasp. The past is like the Grail. It can be sought but never found, and yet in the failure of the search is the reward and the success, for the past is in the present; in people and in places of the present. So in a sense my journey did enable me to experience the saints, and above all Cuthbert, even though he could not be defined or contained.

[1] A Russian word used for a small retreat hut or cell.

[2] An early British name for mainland Britain.

[3] See Shirley Toulson, *The Celtic Alternative: A Reminder of the Christianity we lost*, Century, 1987.

Nether Springs

The first point of call on my journey was Nether Springs and it was to be the base camp also, from which I sallied out to other destinations. The name is taken from Joshua 15: 17- 19 where it is recorded that Caleb gave his daughter Achsah a desert place for her inheritance, The problem with a desert is that it needs water, So she asked her father to supply water to the desert. He gave her the upper and the nether springs, which was understood to be a blessing. So the community house of the Northumbria community is called the “Nether Springs”, the “Upper Springs” being on Holy Island some 12 miles to the north east, It is a place of blessing in a desert land of 20th century Northern England. From these springs the whole land will be watered with the gospel of renewal.

Nether Springs is a monastery, but not one that is readily recognised. The picture of the great Benedictine abbeys and monasteries of Europe has no place in this community, That picture is one of intricate detail dominating the whole canvas. The scape of Nether Springs is painted with broad strokes and only hints of the detail underneath. The Northumbrian community is one that would have more in common with the Celtic communities of the 6th century, having a family atmosphere, and concerned not with rules and order, but life and freedom, Certainly the community is not constrained by history or time. The daily offices were normally said each day, but they do not take precedence over everything, They have their place in the community alongside all other commitments, They were not always said perhaps illustrating the Celtic principle that the work of the hands, the giving of hospitality, prayer and meditation are all of equal importance and equally actions of the Spirit.

The Community rule, which is very brief and characteristically “Celtic” does not attempt to lay down a dogmatic approach to life. The rule claiming to be Celtic, takes an informal approach and relies on experience rather than dogma. The document provided to new members consists for the major part of quotations from books and sayings of the members of the community. As such it is hard for an analytical mind to get a grasp on what the rule “really means”, But the claim would be that it means many things to many people. The focus is on commitment to each other and God and on experiencing the “rule”. The key words of Availability and Vulnerability illustrate this well. The commitment of the community is not to emulate the Celtic saints, or the desert fathers, but to live by similar principles in the contemporary context and it is this that is expressed by the rule and the key words.

A dozen people sitting around a large table on wooden benches suggests an austere lifestyle, and that the fare might be sparse. My initial fears were unfounded as I gained the experience of the hospitality of the community. Kenneth MacLeod collected the following “Rune”:

I saw a stranger yester'en
I put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the
listening place, and in the sacred name of the Triune
He blessed myself and my house, my cattle and my dear ones, and the lark said
in her song
Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.^[4]

The hospitality of the community was not confined to food and a bed. The people exhibited the “rule” of availability within the confines of the house, and without. Intercession and

[4] Quoted in Northumbria Community - *A Way for Living*, Nether Springs Trust, undated.

mission form important aspects of being available to God and others. The Daily Offices are dominated by prayer and intercession. The members of the community live in the villages around and endeavour to become part of those societies. Mission is undertaken in meeting people in work and life, as Aidan is said to have done through his “walkabouts”

As Aidan walked along he stopped and spoke to whoever he met, whether high or low: if they were heathen, he invited them to embrace the mystery of the faith and be baptised; and if they were already believers, he strengthened their faith, inspiring them by word and action to be good and generous to their neighbours.^[5]

The community encourages the members in their gifts of song and dance, counselling and care, preaching and evangelism, which are used for outreach to the community. Using traditional dance and folk song, evangelism is not only undertaken at special church events, but is infiltrating the Folk dance and song societies of England.

The peace of the prayer garden, the song of nature, the availability of the community committed to mission was an inspirational base for my journey into Cuthbert’s heritage.

Holy Island

The “Upper Springs” of the Northumbria Community has nothing to distinguish it from the outside. It is a rather small stone terraced cottage, one of a number to be found on Lindisfarne (Holy Island). It looks the same as any other, and that is what it is supposed to be. It is a cottage that blends in with the other residences. It is unpretentious, small and humble, and yet it is the “Great within the small”^[6]. Here also the pilgrim is welcomed.

Holy Island has been the destination of pilgrimage for Christians intermittently for over one thousand years. Today it is an island of pilgrimage mainly for the Tourist. It too is a rather insignificant island, beautifully bleak and sadly dominated by the Castle. Its fame arises from two interlocking phenomenon. It is only an island half of the time, for when the tide is low the island is part of the mainland joined by a causeway, That is perhaps one reason why Aidan chose the island as his base for mission to convert the Northumbrians Aidan is the second phenomenon, for it was he who founded the monastery that initiated the great English Celtic Christian tradition alongside that of the Irish, Scots and Welsh that is seeing a revival today.

Most historians take the Island of Lindisfarne back to Aidan, but it is possible that its religious history goes back much farther. Island centres, together with hillsides and woodlands were favoured by the ancient Celts and the Druidic tradition. Did Aidan take over an ancient religious site and Christianise it? Is Lindisfarne a very ancient sacred place where worship has been offered over many millennium?

A founder member of the Northumbria Community and resident of the “Upper Springs”, Andy Rains believes that it might have been for it is considered by many to be a “Thin Place”. Thin places are recognised as geographical locations where earth and heaven come close to each other, They are places of contact between the spiritual and the material, where God is felt and spiritual awareness is heightened. Such a place is Holy Island and it is said that it is

[5] Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Penguin, London 1968 p 148.

[6] See The song Great in the Small by John Bell (Iona Community.)

not only experienced as “Thin” by pilgrims, but by tourists as well. There is no empirical explanation for what makes one place “Thin” and another not, but the suggestion is made that it is due to the presence of prayer and holy lives. Such ideas sound strange to the Protestant but that the holy can invade the material is not unbiblical.^[7]

Does one sense that Holy Island is different, and perhaps Holy, simply because of one’s expectation, or because it is a Thin Place? Do tourists come to Holy Island because they too recognise it as a Thin Place, out of their own experience? For as there are Thin Places there must also be “Thin Times” - times when people feel that they are in the presence of God; times of special spiritual experience. Recognising that the map of peoples lives is dotted with Thin Times as much as the map of the land is marked with Thin Places develops a new understanding of mission. Mission becomes enabling others to recognise, appreciate, understand and express their spiritual experiences in their own context and culture. Mission must be meeting people “where they are” and not imposing an expression of faith defined by church doctrine and ritual.

Holy Island is the symbol of Celtic Spirituality, of a Thin Place and a place from which mission has taken place. My journey to that island was one of re-evaluating my understanding of spirituality, folk religion and mission.

Cuthbert’s Isle

The sun was shining and for once there was no sea breeze along the Northumbrian coast. It was in fact the hottest day of the year, so far^[8]. A marvellous day to experience Holy Island. The land was inviting but there were many people (and worse - school parties) doing the tourist route of the Priory and Castle. I craved some isolation and quiet. It was not to be found amidst the tourists. The sea was blue and inviting, empty of human life, but swimming was not an option and I did not have the courage of Cuthbert to stand in the ocean and pray. Instead I found Cuthbert’s Isle.

Cuthbert’s Isle is a miniature version of Holy Island. As Lindisfarne relates to the mainland coast so Cuthbert’s Isle relates to Lindisfarne. One hundred yards off the coast of the Island it also is only an island as the tide flows. Tradition has it that Cuthbert would retire to this marine drumlin for quiet and contemplation. As the tide was still low and I could reach the island without wetting my feet, I decided that this was to be my next destination.

To be alone with the task of contemplation, prayer, meditation and reading the scriptures, is to follow in the traditions of both the Desert Fathers and the Celtic Saints. The desert in Britain is far more conducive than that of North Africa for it is a wilderness, not of sand and heat, but of the isolation in mountain tops, caves, forests and islands. The traditions of the Celtic saints tell of how they sought solitude to fortify them for the fight against evil and darkness and for the task of evangelism and mission among the heathen and the “lapsed.” . Stories are told of the austerity of monastic life, standing in the sea in prayer all night^[9],

[7] cf Elijah, Elisha and Paul’s kerchief.

[8] Such a hot day is normally of note in Britain, but with the exceptionally hot weather this summer it achieves less notoriety.

[9] Told of Cuthbert in Bede: *The Life of Cuthbert* in *The Age of Bede* ed. D.H.Farmer, Penguin, London 1983, p 55 - 56.

sitting, so long, reading the scriptures with outstretched arms that birds were able to build their nests there^[10], and living on nettle soup”^[11].

The traditions of the saints speak much of their eccentric antics and lifestyle, but say little of their great learning and creativity. The Lindisfarne Gospels are one of the rare treasures of Celtic Christian art and learning and have become a great inspiration for modern “Celtic Art”. While most of the libraries of the Celtic monasteries were destroyed by the Viking hoards, it was probably also true that much of the wisdom and learning was passed on through the oral tradition inherited from the Druids. Native wisdom as opposed to Roman wisdom was oral. Does the oral tradition speak more of the heart while the written tradition is of the intellect? Celtic spirituality is earthy and emotional. Celtic theology is derived from the senses rather than the cognitive. So contemplation and a oneness with nature became the basis for Christianity.

Cuthbert so craved isolation that he chose the storm swept islands of the inner Farnes to be his cell as Lindisfarne and Cuthbert’s Isle were too close to the noise and activity of society. Seeking this isolation was not running away from the world, but rather to be more available to God. The cell is the place to find God and to find oneself. In isolation one is able to deal with the issues of the heart and mind and to find a rhythm for life that is simple and “down to earth”. Such was the life of the Celtic monk. To be available to God enables the saint to be available to others. Availability leads to vulnerability, for the cell is also the place of being open to God.

My short solitude on Cuthbert’s isle was to be my cell for part of an afternoon. In the peace and isolation I was able to feel the peace of the presence of God and reflect upon my journey so far.

Cuthbert was recalled from his isolation to become Bishop and once again engage with the world. The Cell is not a place of refuge but of renewal. The Isle remained my cell for a short time only. As I was stirred from my contemplative mood by the cries of the gulls, so I noticed that the tide had turned and Cuthbert’s isle was again surrounded by the sea. My cell was isolated, yet I had to return to the world. Wading through the sea, water above my knees in the end I followed more closely the privations of Cuthbert than I had wanted to do. Did I hear a saintly voice laugh?

Cuthbert’s Cave

A short distance from Hetton Hall to the East is a ridge of sandstone. The view from this ridge takes the eyes along the Northumbrian coast of sandy beaches to Holy Island. In the lee of the ridge facing inland is a cave known as Cuthbert’s cave. Looking west down a small sloping valley, today it is surrounded by a small copse of pine. The National Trust declare that this is a site where Cuthbert’s body was laid temporarily on its way to Durham. Thus the cave has been named after the Saint. I suspect that it could also have been a hermit’s cave for it is ideally suited to be a cell. It is also considered to be a “Thin Place”.

The cave is much older than Cuthbert. Its form and sheltered position suggest that this was a place of “pre-historic” occupation. Sitting in the cave observing the aspect of this easily

[10] Told of Kevin, recorded in Robert van de Weyer Celtic Fire DLT, London, 1990, p 63.

[11] Such is the story of Columba, retold in Van der Weyer op.cit. p. 34.

defended, dry and ancient site there was a feeling that I was in a place where thousands of generations had lived, eaten, worked, played and died. Here was the place of human activity, yet it was also a place of peace. Here was the presence of humanity and also the presence of God. The cave perhaps first used as a home, was to become a sacred site, and now a tourist attraction. The sacred built upon the secular.

Celtic poetry and prayers are undergirded by the principal of the unity of life, with no division between the holy and the profane.

Be Christ's cross on your new dwelling
Be Christ's cross on your new hearth,
Be Christ's cross on your new abode,
Upon your fire blazing.

Be Christ's cross on your topmost grain,
Be Christ's cross on your fruitful wives
Be Christ's cross on your virile sons,
Upon your conceptive daughters.

Be Christ's cross on your serving-maid,
Be Christ's cross on your knee of promise,
Be Christ's cross on your coming generation,
Upon your prospering cattle.

Be Christ's cross on your means and portion,
Be Christ's cross on your kin and people,
Be Christ's cross on you each light and darkness,
Each thy and each night of your lives.^{9[12]}

The world was created by God so God must be present in all his creation and in procreation. Therefore all things are holy. This panentheistic approach to theology, verging on the heretical, is a meeting point between modern ecological concern and Christianity. It also makes Christianity available to all people, for God can be found in the very routine of life, and through the senses and emotions. Christ breaks out of the confines of doctrine and the rules and rituals of the Church and the Spirit once again freely moves among creation,

On my pilgrimage I found Cuthbert, for Cuthbert with his brothers and sisters of the Celtic church are not historical figures, but modern saints and missionaries addressing the issues of today and presenting Britain with a contextualised faith, Christ is no longer confined to the Church and worship is no longer only the activity for Sundays. Life and work, the house and the factory, the hillside and the street become the place of worship and the place where Christ is found.

[12] Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Vision - Prayers and blessings selected from the Carmina Gadelica*, DLT London, 1988 p 132

Chad's Place

The Community of Reconciliation has its centre at Barne's Close, near Birmingham. This was to be my next journey of pilgrimage in search of the Celtic Christian tradition. A weekend exploring Celtic Art, Music and History, with a dozen or so other people turned out to be an opportunity to study rather than experience the meaning of the saints for today, I was therefore joined for this part of my pilgrimage by others who were also searching the Celtic traditions. We were all searching but perhaps our grails were very different. Some wanted to feel the spirit of Celtic music and poetry and art. Some sought simplicity, peace and freshness that is difficult to find in the contemporary Church.

The house and lands of Barnes Close are part of the Chadwich Manor Estate, belonging to the Cadbury family, which makes the location of the weekend very appropriate, for Chadwich means the dwelling-place or farm of Chad^[13]. Although there is no evidence that Chad lived in this area of Worcestershire there are many dedications to him in the West Midlands and so he is associated with many parts^[14]. St. Chad became my focus for this pilgrimage.

A man of the seventh century, Chad together with his brothers, was a disciple of Aidan at Lindisfarne, and so was brought up in the Celtic traditions of the Christian faith. A man of Northumbria he became the apostle to the Midlands, Mercia was a kingdom populated mainly by heathen Saxons, but within the kingdom there were the remnants of the native British population that was traditionally Christian. Those remnants, which may have been a sizeable minority, are recorded for posterity in some of the local place names such as Walsall and Ecclesall^[15]. Chad came to undertake mission where the Church, albeit small, had existed, perhaps for centuries.

He was appointed Bishop of Mercia with his see at Lichfield. He became part of the Roman Mission to England, yet he was a Celt, and the traditions suggest that he remained true to his Celtic Spirituality while accepting the authority of Rome. Chad straddles the time of conflict and change whose battle fought at Whitby racked the British Church and reduced it to a monochrome imperialist organisation, concerned more for order and conformity than for faith. One feels that Chad was concerned for the Church as people not as an institution.

My pilgrimage to St. Chad was to discover how this Celt could reconcile his faith of the Wild Goose with the Religion of the Eagle. The two birds are in contrast. The Wild Goose being a Celtic Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit, representing the freedom to go where it pleases. The Eagle is the symbol of imperialist Rome, of power and domination.

The Conflict of Consecration

Chad was consecrated Bishop to fill the see of York in the absence of Wilfrid the great Romaniser. Wilfrid went to France to be consecrated by Roman Bishops, but took his time in

[13] It needs to be noted that Ekwall (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names*, Oxford 1959) considers the name to relate to Caedel rather than Chad, but the author is notorious for ignoring the place of saints unless forced to do so.

[14] For example Chad Valley near Egbaston.

[15] Walsall means the valley of the Welsh, and Eccleshall means the valley of the Church or Christians (Walsh = Welsh; Eccles from the Welsh Eglwys = church). Note even Ekwall admits to the meaning of Walsall!

returning. Probably thriving on the pomp and ceremony of the Continental Church and his own favour and importance he made the most of his stay and extended it to what must have seemed to have been an indefinite absence for the inhabitants of his empty see. Not wanting to observe the church in his land decline for want of a leader, Oswy appointed Chad to be bishop in Wilfrid's stead. Much of Wilfrid's life^[16] seems to have been taken up with conflicts with his fellow clergy over authority and status. One such conflict was with Chad. Wilfrid claimed his see and even sought the support of the Pope. Chad in humility readily retired.

Humility seems to have been a gift of the British saints. Aidan preferring to walk rather than ride a horse, Cuthbert preferring the isolation of the Inner Fame to being appointed Bishop and Chad willingly letting go of the Bishopric^[17]. These must be people to emulate in the Britain of today. The Church needs to recover its humility.

The War of Whitby

The famous Synod of Whitby is the frontispiece of the struggle of Celt and Roman Christian. The wild goose lived by the principles of freedom and toleration. This is expressed in so much of Celtic verse that honours hospitality and the welcome of the stranger.

Whether the sun is at its height, or the moon and stars pierce the darkness, my little hut is always open. It shall never be closed to anyone, lest I should close it to Christ himself.^[18]

The Synod of Whitby is only the logical outcome of the meeting at St. Augustine's Oak,^[19] when the Celtic Bishops preferred to seek the advice of a humble hermit than to acknowledge the pomp and power of Rome, Augustine failed to show hospitality, humility and tolerance. The Celts could not reconcile themselves with such an expression of Christianity. In the face of a Religion that was dominated by the theology of power and imperialism, where "might is right", the tolerance and diversity, the openness and freedom of the Celtic Church was bound to be "overthrown",

Yet Rome was not totally dismissive of the Celts. Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, needed a Bishop in Mercia and so he appointed Chad. He must have recognised the value of the Celtic Spirituality and faith, and he must have been sure that Chad was the right person to build up the Church in the Midlands. Chad was bishop for only three years, and yet he is the most remembered and revered Bishop of Lichfield. Bede states that Chad's many virtues included:^[20]

...continence, humility, right preaching, prayer, voluntary poverty ... and was filled with the fear of God ... that if a gale arose he would at once call upon God for mercy and pray him to show mercy on all mankind

[16] see Eddius Stephanus: *Life of Wilfrid* in *The Age of Bede*. op cit.

[17] All stories related by Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Penguin 1955; Aidan p 164, Chad p 207, Cuthbert p 261.

[18] Robert van de Weyer op. cit. p 67 (unattributed.)

[19] The story is told by Bede (History) op cit pp 101- 102

[20] Bede (History) op. cit. p 209 -210.

The Man of Mission

Chad must have understood his task and role of Bishop in the Celtic manner, Being Bishop meant being a missionary, for the task was the conversion and care of the people, not being in authority over them. If the distribution of Church dedications^[21] and place names have any historic value then they must indicate that in the years Chad was in the Midlands he was very active, His was a bishop of a church for the laity, not the clergy; 'of simplicity not grandeur. It is probable that Chad found a small wooden church building at Lichfield and he made this his Cathedral. There are no remains of that structure, for it has been replaced with the Medieval cathedral sporting three great spires. How this contrasts with the Parish Church of St. Chad's a mile away. Traditionally sited on Chad's House, close to Chad's Well, this reflects much more the Man and his mission, He must have been a person of great character and conviction; a person of humility, tolerance and love. The legend of the meeting of King Wulfhade and Chad is traditionally told as follows:

The hart brought Wulfhade to a well,
That was beside Seynt Chaddys cell.
Wulfhade asked Seynt Chad
"Where is the hart that me hath led"
"The hart that hither thee hath brought
Is sent by Christ that hath thee bought,
Wulfhade told his brother Rufine
That he was christened by Chaddys doctrine.
Rufine to Wulfhade said again
Christened also I would be fain.
Wulfhade Rufine to Seynt Chad leadeth,
And Chad with love of faith him feedeth.
Rufine is christened of Seynt Chaddys,
And Wulfhade his brother his godfather is."^[22]

The Well of Salvation

The Celtic mission converted England, but Rome took the power and the control. The faith and spirituality of Chad went underground but never died. My pilgrimage to find St. Chad was completed in the tranquillity of St. Chad's Well. As I looked into the water where Chad once stood and prayed and baptised people like Wulfhade and Rufine, I saw not the saint but empty cans and rubbish. Yet surely the saint was there amidst the contamination. The sacred and the profane mix together at Chad's well. Could this not be the symbol of the tolerance of Chad? The tolerance and unity of the church - not with doctrine or covenants or acts of union, but by the simple life of faith, humility, poverty and prayers will be the means of the conversion of England, today.

[21] According to the leaflet The Story of St. Chad (anon) there are 31 churches dedicated to St. Chad in the geographical area of the old diocese of Mercia.

[22] Quoted in Austerberry J, *Chad Bishop and Saint*, English Life Pub, Derby 1984, p 9.

Melangell's Message

The road became narrower and narrower and we began to understand why a normal coach would not be able to undertake the journey. Squashed into an oversized minibus we had been travelling down some classic Welsh valleys for a couple of hours on route to our destination. We were pilgrims on a journey looking for the golden age of the saints. Many of my travelling companions were from across the Atlantic and were searching for their Celtic roots. I continued my journey in search of the saints,

As the roads became narrower so the valleys become smaller and more remote and eventually we turned into the last valley. This was the end of our journey and surrounding the valley were mountains. There was no exit except by returning the way we had come. We had arrived at Pennant Melangell. So had many others for there were many people on the road that sunny Sunday afternoon. This remote, almost unknown place was crowded with tourists and pilgrims. What were they searching for? Was it their roots? Was it the Golden Age? or were they there out of curiosity or simply for something to do on a summer's afternoon?

For me, it was the turning point in my journey in search of the Welsh saints, The valley may have been a dead end, but my search was not, Here I found many truths that I had been searching for and many that I had not. Melangell became, for me, the reality of the Celtic saints and together with some of her contemporaries and near contemporaries helped me to evaluate the place of the Celtic saints for today.

St. Deiniol

This part of my search had taken me to St. Deiniol's Library in Hawarden, North Wales for a course entitled "A Celtic Experience - Churches, Shrines and Saints of Wales", Of all the places in Britain, Wales is probably the only part that can claim a continuous Christian tradition from Roman times, so it was appropriate that I should conclude my search in the Principality. The course included not only lectures and discussions, but visits to places of Celtic interest in Wales. Therefore it was also styled as a pilgrimage, although a rather hectic pilgrimage with little time to absorb the feeling and peace of the places we visited.

St. Deiniol's is named after the Bishop of Gwynedd, and so it was appropriate that the course was located there. He takes us back to the 7th century but Christianity goes back further, for by the time of Deiniol, Wales was probably already under a diocesan structure although much different to that which is experienced today in the Anglican Church. He is remembered for founding a monastery at Bangor in present day Carnarvonshire, which not only became a famous centre for learning, but the episcopal see^[23]. In this brief story we discover an important aspect of Welsh post-Roman Christianity. The Monastery was the mother Church of both the monks and the lay people. It had both functions of being a centre of piety and learning (theological colleges) and a centre of pastoral care for the community (cathedrals). There was no separation of the tasks, and the early saints, such as Deiniol, are remembered for this holistic approach to ministry. In the present missionary situation in Britain this model will suggest that there can be no separation between piety and mission, prayer and outreach, worship and social action.

[23] According to Baring Gould S. & Fisher J, in *Lives of the British Saints* ed. Bzyce D. Llanerch 1990, p 69.

On Pilgrimage

Throughout the course we encountered a number of saints, and tried to understand them through the stories of their lives and their poetry and experience them through the places of worship dedicated to them. Our pilgrimage in literature and topography took us to Beuno, Asaph, Samson, Mael, Solien, Tudclud and Melangell.

Pennant Melangell can be translated as “the head of the stream belonging to Melangell” or “the head of the Melangell stream^[24]”. If the latter is the true translation then it suggests that the valley derived its name from the stream and would imply that the Saint is a fabrication to give meaning to the name, Wales, like Cornwall contains many places whose names are associated with saints, The most popular is St. Mary the mother of Christ, but many of the names are of obscure saints, who are largely unknown and uncelebrated in the Christian Calendar. Because of the rarity value of such saints, and the lack of evidence as to their existence and lives, many would say that they are no more than christianised Heathen gods, and beatified rivers, springs and hillsides. Yet the dedication of so many places of worship throughout the land to these obscure figures suggests their authenticity and the influence that they had on the Christianity of the people

Melangell is one such saint. The small remote, and isolated valley, that was once her “cell” while unknown today was an important centre for pilgrimage in the middle ages. It became a place of pilgrimage, sanctuary, hospitality and learning. Pilgrimage was an important social, religious and economic factor of life in the middle ages. There were no package tours and holidays in those times, but pilgrimages were the next best thing to Cook’s Tours. Bringing wealth and importance to places of worship, they also gave them religious and political power. They were important for the Church and the local churches to increase their importance, and the local rulers benefited from such an institution.

But what of the people? Were they simply oppressed by the church and rulers and through pilgrimages kept in submission? The reformers certainly felt that this was the case, and the destruction of shrines and outlawing of pilgrimages helped to suppress the worst of these excesses. Yet it is said that pilgrimages were never completely stopped. The search for spirituality outside of the confines of the ritual and orthodoxy of the Church have continued in every age, and pilgrimages provided this outlet and search.

As I shared in the evensong that Sunday afternoon at Pennant Melangell, I had sympathy for both the Reformers and the pilgrims. Looking down the aisle one sees the rebuilt shrine of St. Melangell, reputed at one time to have contained her relics. It stands behind the altar and is the focus of the church, Had it been re-erected in the cell behind the East wall that probably stands over Melangell’s grave I might have found it more acceptable, but to make it the centre of the Church and by implication the centre of worship and faith aroused all the Cromwellian tendencies within me. This surely is the revival of the medieval excess of religion. Yet at the same time I could not help feeling that the place was important. It surely is a “Thin place” and people that afternoon had come in search of spiritual experience, Discussion with the “Keeper of the Shrine” after the service confirmed my thoughts that the real ministry of the “shrine” is to the tourist and the seeker, that there they may find something spiritual to take away.

[24] Davies D. *Welsh Place-names and Their Meaning*, Aberystwyth, undated, p 37.

The Story of Saint Melangell

But what do we know of the saint herself? There is only one story about her that is found in the different manuscripts of her life. This is the story of her meeting with the Prince Brychwel Ysgithrog, and is the foundation story of the church and shrine of Pennant Melangell. The story is related as follows:

One day the prince was out hunting in his lands in Powys when he startled a hare. He and his dogs gave chase which brought them into the valley. As they chased the hare up the valley, it disappeared into a thicket of brambles. On entering the thicket, the prince found Melangell, who had been at prayer, with the hare sheltering under the hem of her gown. The prince shouted at the dogs to catch the hare, but they refused to do so, and instead retreated from the saint. He tried again by blowing his horn, but still the dogs refused. One tradition claims that the horn stuck to his lips. The prince was amazed at what was happening and that the saint showed no fear of him. Entering into conversation with the girl, he discovered that she had been alone in the valley for 15 years. At first he was angry with her, but then as he came to recognise her holiness and her readiness to protect the hare from the dogs, he humbled himself and gave her the valley to be used as a sanctuary for both animals and people^[25]

Other traditions add to the story to explain how Melangell came to be in the valley, stating that she was the daughter of an Irish King who had run away from a forced marriage. She found safety in the remote valley and spent the rest of her life in prayer and solitude, later forming a community of women.

There is little doubt that the main purpose of this 12th century story is to give some authority and power to the church at Pennant Melangell and to give some authenticity to the shrine that is there. Yet it is too easy to dismiss the traditions of the saints as simply medieval propaganda. Behind the story is the search for a spirituality. From the early lives of the saints authored by Bede and his contemporaries we are given a picture of the spirituality of the Celtic saints. The medieval traditions present these religious and spiritual ideals to a new audience, and indeed the revival of these traditions and pilgrimages today present them to the twentieth century.

In the story of Melangell we are presented with a male dominated, violent and oppressive society. One in which the man and the secular power embodied in the prince is determined to enforce his will on creation, animals and women. But this idealism of domination is confronted by the presence of a lone vulnerable woman, prepared to stand her ground and protect the persecuted (the hare). It is a story of confrontation between the secular, violent society and the spiritual, and tells of the power of religion and of women in society. Such stories are not new or unique, Gildas tells us of the problems of his day in Britain (and possibly largely in Wales). He tells us of the violence of Maglocunus the “High King” of Britain:

Did you not, in the first years of your youth, use sword and spear and flame in the cruel dispatch of the king your uncle and nearly his bravest soldiers, whose faces in battle were not very different from those of the lions’ whelps? Little

[25] Henken Elissa R, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, D.S. Brewer, 1987, p. 217 - 220 & Allchin AM, *Pennant Melangell - Place of Pilgrimage*, St. Melangell’s Church, 1994 p. 5; reprint of Oliver Davies’ translation of the 17th century manuscript p. 44 - 46.

did you heed the words of the prophet: Men of blood and craft will not live out half their days.^[26]

And of the struggle between the Church and the State Gildas tells the story of Constantine's murder of two princes while they were in the sanctuary of the church:

Then, in the bosom of two mothers he should have respected - the church, and their mother in the flesh - and in the habit of a holy abbot, he most cruelly tore at the tender sides and vitals of two royal youths and their two guardians. Their hands were stretched out not to weapons - though almost no man handled them more bravely than they at this time - but to God and the altar... He tore them. I say, at the holy altar, using as teeth his wicked sword and spear, so that the place of divine sacrifice was touched by the purple cloaks (as it were) of their dying blood.^[27]

Violence, insecurity and crisis is the description of much of history and is true of the time of the Saints. It is also true today in British society. So what meaning have the saints for us?

The Contemporary Melangell

The power of the story is the key to the lives of the saints. Whether like Allchin^[28] we would claim that the essence of the story goes back to the days of the saints, or whether we accept them as medieval literature, what can be seen is that they represent a striving after that which is good and wholesome. It may not be a description of what is, but is a description of what should be. These lives of the saints, like the stories of King Arthur and the Round Table, probably tell us less about the historic figures, and more about the beliefs and intentions of the biographers.

Melangell is the heroine and the example to follow. She is the saint whose spirituality is to be copied and so she represents the ideal Spiritual life and faith,

Melangell is faith and life outside of the institution of the Church and free from the control of secular powers. She represents an independence of spirit, the free spirit of Celtic Spirituality, and one that has so often been expressed in Wales through non-conformity in many spheres of life. She is the "alternative Christianity", not as expressed by Toulson, but the Christianity of the everyday, often expressed and dismissed as "Folk Religion". This alternative is the personal spirituality and piety that can be expressed in diverse ways, that is difficult to control or manipulate, so it is often persecuted by the authorities, How much of the 17th century Witch hunts are due to this?

Melangell represents the ecological concern. She shelters the hare from persecution and destruction. She stands as the guardian of the oppressed and exploited creation. The story tells us that Brychwel declares the valley a sanctuary for both animals and humans, and the continuing tradition is that hares are not killed at Pennant Melangell. Instead when a hare is

[26] Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain* ed & trans M. Winterbottom Philimore, 1978 para 33.4, p33.

[27] Gildas op cit para 28:2 p29- 30.

[28] Allchin A.M. op. cit. p6.

seen it is told to run away for the sake of Melangell. The story of Melangell is depicted on the rood screen in the Church, and the pictures of the story are surrounded by oak leaves and a vine. At one end is the representation of the “Green Man”^[29]. This 15th century scene recognised the ecological issues presented by the story, even if they did not know the modern day word or concept.

Together with concern for ecology, Melangell also represents the woman. The feminist issues of today can find root in her. Unlike many of her contemporaries, such as Winifred^[30], she confronts the male domination and oppression and subdues it. She has the power that puts violence, oppression and anger in its place. Her valley and spirituality is one of peace and reconciliation

Melangell represents the “Golden Age” of the saints and of the sought after Celtic spirituality. Her faith is simple and her lifestyle is simple. She is the focus of the search for religion, spirituality and faith that is relevant to the contemporary age and people are experiencing in the “Thin Places” of this land. Here is the personal, holistic spirituality that addresses many if not all of the issues of the modern day. Issues that many would claim the Institutionalised Church is unable or unwilling to address.

[29] The “Green Man” is an ancient folk symbol that presumably represents in some form human relationship to creation. However its origin and meaning has been lost in antiquity.

[30] The story of Winifred is that she was pursued by a man who had less than honourable intentions. She ran away from him and when he caught her he cut off her head. Where the head landed and the blood was spilt a spring formed which had healing powers.

The Celtic approach as a model for Mission

The Celtic spirituality presented by the Welsh saints is one that is down to earth and familiar with daily life, It is rooted in the work and experience of life, albeit a life of rural thought and action. It is a spirituality for the people, expressed in terms that the people can understand. It does not negate experience but builds upon the frail, partial understanding of humanity. The church dedicated to Tudclud at Penmacho is believed to stand on a very ancient holy site, The village has a Holy Well which tradition says was used by Tudclud to convert the pagan people of the valley to Christianity. Probably originally dedicated to the water god(Sul?) Tudclud “christianised” the well by using it for Baptism, and then by placing an altar stone over the well and later incorporating it into a chapel building^[31], The people of the valley were converted by respecting their ancient religion and building upon it through the introduction of Christ. The tradition tells us that Tudclud did not believe in confrontation.

My experience in search of the saints on Lindisfarne and in Wales has shown that many people are searching for an authentic spirituality that answers the questions of the late twentieth century. Many feel that they can find it in the popular concept of Celtic Spirituality which is expressed by the Thin place, whether that is a geographical place or a mental place. The Tourist and the pilgrim are both searching. They may be searching in different ways, but both are searching for knowledge, understanding, rest and renewal. Some are searching for meaning in life; many are searching for their ancestral and spiritual roots. For most people these issues are not addressed by the institutional church but many feel that Celtic Spirituality may address them, and provide a goal to their journey of faith.

Yet the popular concept is not the whole. Whatever historic value may be placed on the traditions and stories of the saints, and however “Thin” places and times may be dismissed as imaginations, the experience and content of Celtic Spirituality needs to be understood in its entirety. It does present a model for a spirituality that is concerned with ecological and feminist issues. It does provide a means of dealing with the issues of faith expressed in the reality of everyday life. It can be understood as personal, non-conformist piety providing a Christianity that pervades the whole of life. The Celtic approach to faith recognises that Heaven is close to Earth and that God is close to people.

But to see it simply as this is to gain spirituality through “cheap grace”. The “Golden age of the saints” was also an age of suffering. The piety and holiness of the 5th - 8th centuries did not stop the Viking hords plundering and killing. The monks suffered disease and plague along with the people. Hunger and privation was the rule of the monasteries, The spirituality expressed in the lives of the saints and associated with the Thin places was only achieved through suffering, self sacrifice, humility and generosity to others. How many people today are prepared to live on bread and water, or nettle soup? Would we readily spend the night in prayer in our own homes, let alone in the cold North Sea.? Do modern British Christians really crave the desert places so that they can be alone with God to seek his will?

Celtic Spirituality is not just a privilege of believing in miracles and being close to God, it also is a great responsibility. It is not even a self indulgence of penitence. It is a responsibility for the world. The story of Tudclud starts with his feeling of responsibility for others actions. His father Seitheingwy Said was the keeper of the sluice gate that kept the sea at bay, and

[31] The story is found on the wall of the church at Penmacho.

stopped it flooding the land when the tide rose. One night he got drunk and forgot to close the gate. Consequently the land was flooded and there was great devastation, with much loss of life, both animal and human. His sons full of remorse for their father's neglect dedicated themselves to God and became missionaries in North Wales. As their father had taken life, so they would save lives. Is the modern Christian ready to be responsible for the World?

I set out to find the truth of the Celtic Saints. Did they exist? What were their lives really like? I cannot answer those questions, but I believe that I did find the saints. I am sure that I met Cuthbert and Chad, Melangell, Tudclud and others. My pilgrimage started out to search for the saints of the past, but instead through them I found the present. I was seeking for a spirituality to convert 20th century Britain from its paganism, and I found a model that respects the spiritual experiences of the people however poorly they are expressed and understood. The Celtic Spirituality that I found was not one that can easily be described, analysed and reduced to literature, but one that is experienced and lived in the totality of a life dedicated to God in Christ. The Celtic missionary movement was not primarily about peregrinate, travelling to distant places and lands, but the humility to introduce Christ as the interpreter and interpretation of experience and life. The value of the saints is that they remind us that we need to find for ourselves and allow others to find the space and the time to experience Christ and to be free to express him in our own way as he addresses the issues in our own lives,