

Transformed through buried seed

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 March 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 5B (St Patrick's Day)

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

As a pioneer female priest, one of my wife's achievements was becoming the first female Rector of the parish of Stanhope, sometimes known as *'the Queen of Weardale'*, high up on the roof of England. She added to a line going back to the year 1200, including some famous names in church history. For whilst, financially and in other ways, ministry in remoter rural areas is challenging today, centuries ago Stanhope was known as the richest living in the north of England for clergy. This was because, way back then, the Church of England drew tithes from local people, who, in the Durham Dales, were chiefly miners and poor farmers and agricultural workers. Not for nothing was this then a significant contributor to the Dales becoming strongly Methodist.

There is a wonderful little story however about one of my wife's distinguished predecessors, Joseph Butler. Butler not only became Bishop of Bristol and then of Durham, but, alongside helping to develop 18th century economic theory, he is best known as one of the leading theologians of the day: so much so that the Church of England commemorates him annually on 16 June.

Now Butler had been head chaplain to King George II's wife, Caroline. Some while after he had moved to Stanhope, the Queen therefore asked around the royal court: *'does anyone know what has happened to Butler? Is he dead?'* *'No, ma'am, came back the reply by one in the know, 'he is not dead, only buried'.* *'Not dead, only buried'*: what a wonderful phrase, and one resonating both with our Gospel reading and with our reflections on Celtic Christianity this morning.

'Not dead, only buried': of course, that wit at the royal court was almost certainly sharing disdain for the north of England and about ordinary people. Yet, unwittingly, their words touch on the way in which ministries of self-giving are not betrayals of our life but a sharing in the paschal (Easter) mystery by which life is renewed and transformed. *'Not dead, but buried'*: in the case of Joseph Butler, as the son of a Presbyterian draper, coming from a poorer background than most clergy of his day, he needed the income Stanhope provided. Yet it was still a significant commitment to give years of his life to Weardale. Away from the bright lights of the court and later prominence, it was there however that he wrote his finest work, and, perhaps of even greater significance, passed on the faith with its continuing Christian community. For, as Jesus taught in our Gospel reading today, and, more importantly, modelled for us in their life, it is as we lose our life that we find it, and as we are buried, in, and for, love, that we bring life to others.

This week's Gospel reading builds on last week's in centring us on the cross at the heart of Christian spirituality. Last week we were encouraged to refocus our hearts and eyes on God's image in the cross. This week we are encouraged to be formed into that divine image, by living a Jesus-like life: by letting go, not clinging to, our life; by emptying ourselves of our ordinary selves so that we and others may be filled with divine love flowing through us; whatever the cost.

For this is the paschal (the Easter) mystery, that as we die, so we find life, and thereby seed new life for others too: the mystery of the central double symbol at the heart of Christian Faith, that of the lived and living realities of cross and resurrection that are inextricably bound up together. Even when all is lost, the good news of God affirms, we are not dead, but buried, and, as Jesus put it:

'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.'

'Not dead, only buried': this, it seems to me, is at the heart of the lives of the great saints, who, in following Jesus, gave away, their lives, that they and others might truly live. This is certainly a key element in the story of St Patrick, who is celebrated today, particularly in Ireland and among the Irish diaspora. Of course, it is probably impossible to tell the actual history of Patrick, clothed as he is in centuries of myths, legends, and pieties.

However, at least two things are clear about his early life. The first is that this great saint of Ireland was not Irish but British: probably born, depending on your reading of his story, either in what is today south western Scotland, or in England near today's Carlisle, or, just possibly, in Wales. Whatever the case, certainly British. In the light of subsequent history, God, we may certainly say, moved in mysterious ways, and had a sense of humour! Secondly, after returning to his homeland after being taken into slavery in Ireland, Patrick then chose to return: losing his life again to the land and people who had originally taken it from him. Yet not so much dying, as being buried once more, in order to bear much fruit.

On this St Patrick's Day, as we take the opportunity to reflect on the possible encouragements of Celtic forms of Christianity to our own lives, it is good to hold this Gospel passage as a key to them. For, much of historic Celtic Christianity, like the life and work of Patrick, is indeed clothed with myths and lost in the mists of time. We also do well to avoid the traps that some have fallen into of trying to recreate Celtic Christianity as something quite alternative, or even wholly distinct, to the wider Christian traditions of history. The first Celtic Christians were very much people of their own times and shared closely in the orthodoxy, in the best sense of that word, of the wider Church of their day. Yet there are some particular features of these historic Celtic Christian forms of faith which offer welcome encouragement to us.

After our worship this morning, we are invited to share in reflection on some of their practical contributions to our spiritual life. For the moment, let me, as a kind of introduction, speak of three underlying themes, each united by the cross and resurrection symbol of our Faith, as they encourage us, with Jesus, to become buried seed. Each of these too, I believe, offers ways to build bridges with First Nations' peoples for those of us who are not Indigenous to this land.

The first key particular feature of Celtic Christianity is its emphasis on celebrating Creation, with Celtic peoples' understanding of themselves as intimately related parts of Creation. Perhaps this is most self-evidently a pathway we might recover which might aid journeys of true and just reconciliation in these lands currently called Australia?

In his recent theological contributions, speaking out of the depth of his own Aboriginal culture and perspectives, the Revd Dr Garry Deverell has certainly challenged us to reimagine Christ as Country. Celtic Christians did not hold such a viewpoint. Yet, reflecting the depth of their own relationship to their indigenous lands and cultures, they do offer us points of connection. For they saw their world sacramentally, as a manifestation of God's presence and beauty.

Waterways and the openings of the earth were therefore sacred sites and, whilst holding the Bible, Old and New Testament, as central and precious to their lives, they understood Creation as it were '*the first Testament*' of the divine. They understood too that life was like Creation, with its rhythms and seasons, in which the pathway to fruitfulness was through the burying of seed, including that of human life and labour.

Secondly, Celtic Christians placed significant emphasis on monasticism as key to the nurture of community life, spiritual life, and the fruitfulness of the world. Again, we need to avoid making too clear a distinction between other forms of Christian development. Celtic Christians also had a place for particular ministries, including those of bishops, seers, and other divinely gifted leaders. Yet their emphasis was far less urban, hierarchical, and institutional than that of Roman, and later forms of Western Christianity.

Indeed, if we look for similarities, it is towards Eastern forms of Christianity, where monastic communities first arose, and whose desert spiritualities helped give birth to, and resonate with, Celtic Christianity. In both, we see reflected the cross and resurrection shaped call to let go of ordinary living in order to gain a deeper living. In both, we also thus find strong emphasis on connecting to the divine through time, place, and deep listening attention as sacred rhythms and pathways, sometimes akin to First Nations' understandings.

Thirdly, Celtic Christians were typically weavers of the diversity of life. We see this in the characteristic spirals, knots, and other expressions of Celtic art, including on Celtic crosses. Core aspects of life and death, light and darkness, self and other, were not held apart as in much of the Western, binary, thinking which has bedevilled our world. This does not mean to say that Celtic Christianity did not do any violence to some inherited traditions it supplanted. Yet Celtic Christians often incorporated into their faith, rather than eradicated, key elements of pre-Christian Celtic beliefs and practices, resulting in unique blends of indigenous traditions and wider Christian insight and practice.

Here again, we may see the expression of cross and resurrection living: as Christian good news was buried in country, thus bearing different fruit to that which was simply imposed on others. This is embodied in the story of the Celtic monks of Lindisfarne who brought Christianity to my native part of England. For the first, somewhat haughty, attempts miserably failed. This changed, however, with the great saint Aidan, who travelled humbly with his fellow monks, loving and learning from the local people and the places in which they moved. Famously, the great Northumbrian king Oswald gave Aidan a horse to help him in his travels. Aidan instead gave the horse to a poor man who needed it, and became known as '*the saint who walked*': a parable perhaps for all who seek to talk of 'mission' as transformation today?

In reflecting on the continuing gifts of Celtic Christianity to us today, on this St Patrick's Day, let me conclude with some words from a mischievous little book by Thomas Cahill, cheekily entitled '*How the Irish Saved Civilisation*'.

Back in 1996, when it was published, it was part of the then surge of interest in Celtic Christianity and of the correcting of historical prejudice against the immediate centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire, which were wrongly called '*the Dark Ages*': from the still sadly prevalent assumption that, without empires, and imperial ways of thinking, the world cannot thrive.

I would not entirely recommend Cahill's book as the best introduction to the actual history of the times, and it certainly underplays the role of Welsh Celtic Christianity in maintaining and developing faith, but it is a lively and corrective read. Cahill's conclusion is certainly telling and apposite.

'In the end', he writes, after reviewing the rich contributions of Irish Celtic Christians, *'we are saved by saints not Romans.'*

It is not, in other words, great constructions of human power, whether of the sword, stone, or the mind, that point to and manifest the ultimate. It is rather through the life of the spirit, humbly incarnate in time and place, open to others and to the presence of God in all Creation.

This is not being dead, but simply buried in love. For, as Jesus said, and lived, it is by dying to our ordinary selves, that we rise again in the fullness of life. Amen.