

A Thin Place

Sermon by John McClive August 16, 2009

Scripture: John 17: 20 – 26

Let us pray:

God, help us learn how to be still,

And aware of your presence,

Within, and all around

Amen

The title of my sermon is “A Thin Place.” What does that mean?

In the Celtic tradition, “Thin Places” were an opening into the magnificence and wonder of God’s Presence.

1600 years ago, the Celts had this wonderful metaphor about how the veil separating heaven and earth is thinner at special moments and we are more aware of the “Spirit Within.” Westminster is a “Thin Place.”

We feel the presence of God here in so many ways, like when we hear the beautiful music of our choir or soloists, truly a gift from God. Music can take us to places that words and thought cannot. During Communion, we come closer to each other, physically and spiritually. During Baptism and Memorial services we reflect on the Gift of Life. We are moved by the poetry of our worship service and prayers that encourages us to listen for feelings deep inside.

Since antiquity, poetry has been the spiritual language of bards, important leaders in the Celtic settlements that valued their communal spirit and relationships with people. The poetry in the opening of the following prayer must have inspired early Celtic Christian missionaries to “lift the veil” by connecting Jesus with the people they were serving¹:

“O Christ you are a bright flame before me
You are a guiding star above me
You are the light and love
I see in other’s eyes”.

In Westminster, in silence, opening our hearts to the meaning of our unique stained glass windows and chancel symbols, we can join the continuum of people throughout the ages who listened for the “Heartbeat of God,” close to the title of the book many of us read prior to our pilgrimage to Iona in June 2004. It was written by Rev. Dr. J. Phillip Newell, former Warden of the Iona Abbey, who has played a leading role in the re-birthing of Celtic Spirituality that has emerged from the lost Celtic Christianity that began when St. Patrick brought the light of God into the “The Dark Ages” almost 1600 years ago. St. Patrick lead monks who built schools, churches and monasteries from where they made extensive and successful missionary journeys throughout Ireland, helping the underclass improve their lives, and converting chiefs and bards to Christianity The reason, according to George Hunter² was:

“The Celtic Christians usually evangelized as a team; by relating to the people of a settlement; identifying with the people, engaging in friendship, conversation, ministry and witness.”

There is a wonderful parallel between then and what Westminster is doing now with WEDI and the ENERGY program.

The monks spread the gospel with love, not weapons. The Spirit of Jesus as expressed in today’s scripture lesson powered them.

“Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world will believe that you have sent me.”

¹ *Celtic Prayers From Iona*, by J. Phillip Newell, page 57

² *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* by George G. Hunter III, page 47

Another Irish monk, St. Columba, 100 years later, established a monastery on the tiny island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. It became the center for evangelizing the Picts in what is Scotland today. Then St. Aidan established a mission at Lindisfarne, the Holy Island off the northwest coast of England. But Viking raids, beginning in the ninth century, destroyed it all and Celtic Christianity ceased to exist as a structured religion. It was displaced by the more authoritative Roman church in Scotland starting in the 12th century. However, as Rev. Newell said³

“This is not to say that it’s stream of spirituality came to an end. The Roman mission may have built the strong stone Benedictine Abbey on Iona, the site of the old Celtic mission, but the spirituality of the latter and its distinct way of seeing was to live on among the people of the Western Isles.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a civil servant from Edinburgh named Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912) began to record the prayers that had been passed down for centuries in the oral tradition of the Hebrides and the west coast of Scotland⁴. For generation after generation, parents had been teaching their children prayers whose origin stretched back beyond living memory. These prayers, usually sung or chanted rather than simply said, were recited as a rhythmic accompaniment to the people’s daily routine, at the rising of the sun and at its setting, at the kindling of the fire in the morning and at its covering at night, while sowing seeds in the fields and collectively by women weaving cloth together”

After serving as Warden of the Iona Abbey, Rev. Newell created a book of prayers entitled *Celtic Benediction* patterned after those Hebrides chants. I will use them to help us **feel** the meaning in the Windows of Westminster.

In 1938 Rev. George MacLeod, one of the giants of the modern Church of Scotland, led the effort to rebuild ruins of St. Columba’s ancient abbey into the spiritual center it is today. In *Listening For the Heartbeat of God*, Rev. Newell presented four elements of⁵ MacLeod’s mysticism that were in the hearts of early Celts. They resonate with many people today.

First - A conviction of the essential goodness of creation

Second - The image of God in humanity

Third - The everlasting pattern in Celtic Art, the threads of heaven and the threads of earth inseparably interwoven

Fourth - All life at its heart is vibrant with God’s Life.

Let me now combine portions of ancient prayers from Newell’s *Celtic Benediction* with my feelings about the Windows of Westminster:

First - The essential goodness of creation⁶:

“I watch this morning
For the light that the darkness has not overcome
I watch for the fire that was in the beginning
And that burns still in the brilliance of the rising sun
I watch for the glow of life that gleams in the growing earth
And glistens in sea and sky”

When I look at the windows, I connect with Blessed Creation from the sun, the “life force” from the beginning of time

³ *Listening For the Heartbeat of God* by J. Phillip Newell, page 40

⁴ *Carmina Gadelica* by Alexander Carmichael

⁵ *Listening For the Heartbeat of God* by J. Phillip Newell, page 86

⁶ *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell, Page 2

Second - The image of God in humanity⁷

“When it seemed there was no hope
I have seen your light in the eyes of a child
When it seemed there was no joy
I have heard your delight in the voice of a friend
When it seemed that life was stale
I have smelled the freshness of sunlight on my skin
When all seemed emptiness
I have touched your presence in the hand of a stranger”

In the bible stories of the windows I hear the continuous voice throughout the ages telling stories of people struggling to connect hearts to God.

I also feel the Holy Spirit as expressed in today’s lesson:

“Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world will believe that you have sent me.”

Third - The everlasting pattern in Celtic Art, the threads of heaven and the threads of earth inseparably interwoven.⁸

“In the morning light, O God
may I glimpse again your image deep within me
The threads of eternal glory
woven into the fabric of every man and woman
Again may I catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
fashioned in your likeness
deeper than knowing
more enduring than time.”

Look at all the nature elements in the windows: formation of the universe, stars in the sky, pomegranates, Fleur de Lis, mustard seed and fig tree

Fourth - All life at its heart is vibrant with God’s Life⁹:

“Out of the silence at the beginning of time
You spoke the Word of life
Out of the world’s primeval darkness
You flooded the universe with light
In the quiet of this place
In the dark of the night
I wait and watch
In the stillness of my soul
And from its fathomless depths
The senses of my heart are awake to you”

The vibrant colors of the windows awaken my senses to connect with the cosmos

Shifting our focus to the Chancel, it helps to recall how this design came about. In 1903 Westminster rebuilt this sanctuary. The steeple tower and walls remained intact. Oak wainscoting was added to the interior. Heavy steel trusses reinforced the roof and the west wall was replaced by this chancel designed to remind us of worship in a Roman basilica turned into an early Christian church. Rene de Quelin, head of Interior Design at Tiffany Studios, created all symbols including others of the early church on 66 panels around the walls. Colors and design of the Windows enhanced the artwork. The remaining window is on the south side of the Narthex. From 1931 to 1952 the present Gothic Style windows replaced them. Walls were painted gray to suggest stone

⁷ *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell, Page 58

⁸ *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell, Page 62

⁹ *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell, Page 8

walls of a Gothic Cathedral and the symbols on the arch were covered with metallic gold paint that was removed in the renovation of 1992 when the chancel and arch symbols were restored and the walls painted with different colors and design.

Rich with Christian symbolism, the Chancel can connect us with God as we contemplate the meaning of scripture, in silence before the service begins. Above the cross is the Symbol of Christ with the four gospel writers on both sides. The six remaining inside are devoted equally to Trinity and Baptism. The ceiling recalls John 15:5

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit”

My understanding of the Trinity is increased by today’s lesson:

“Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world will believe that you have sent me.”

The martyrdom of Apostles is remembered in symbols around the arch. Dr. Holmes inspired us with these words about them and the symbol of Jesus above¹⁰:

“We do well to lift our eyes to these symbols taken from the deaths of the martyrs to whom this faith was more precious than life, who by their faithfulness even unto death have preserved it for us. The memorials on our walls to the heroes of the faith in past centuries remind us of our membership in this great fellowship of the Christian Church. These symbols should provoke us unto good works by we in our day and generation, as the saints of former ages may witness the good confession. Supreme among these symbols in meaning as in altitude is the Cross of “Jesus Christ, Conqueror.” The height and depth and length and breadth of the meaning of this symbol no one has fully fathomed. It is at once the expression of our faith, the ground of our hope, and the inspiration of our love. How manifold and detailed are its applications to life! In the work and worship of this church may this sign which is written upon the wall, also be written upon the heart.”

Amen

WORDS OF ASSURANCE¹¹

Be assured of God’s love all around and within:

The world is alive with your goodness, O God
it grows green from the ground
and ripens into the roundness of fruit
Its taste and its touch
enliven our bodies and stir our souls

Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE¹²

For the first showings of the morning light
and the emerging outline of the day
thanks be to you, O God

For earth’s colors drawn forth by the sun
its brilliance piercing clouds of darkness
and shimmering through leaves and flowing waters

¹⁰ *Westminster Work* April 1928, Pages 9-10

¹¹ *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell page 28

¹² *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell pages 40 & 77

thanks be to you.

Show to us this day
amidst life's dark streaks of wrong and suffering
the light that endures in every person

Dispel the confusions that cling close to our souls
that we may see with eyes washed by your grace
that we may see ourselves and all people
with eyes cleansed by the freshness of the day's new light.

In the busyness of our days
grant us a stillness of seeing, O God
In the conflicting voices of our hearts
grant us a calmness of hearing

Let our seeing and hearing
our words and our actions
be rooted in a silent certainty of your presence

Let our passions for life
and the longings for justice that stir within us
be grounded in the experience of your stillness
Let our lives be rooted in the ground of your peace, O God
let us be rooted in the depths of your peace

We pray today that we may bring your light into dark places
And help those who yearn for peace in their lives
And among their friends
Strengthen those who work for world peace
Through all religions everywhere
In the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying :
Our Father.....

BENEDICTION:¹³

May the light of God
illumine the hearts of our souls
May the flame of Christ
kindle us to love
May the fire of the spirit
free us to live
This day, tonight and forever
Amen