

*Transcript of a talk given today for a Baptist Union of Great Britain webinar.*

I've become very weary of the term *unprecedented times*, not least because they are not unprecedented or unpredicted. I have recently returned to a book I first came across in the late 1970's. *A Distant Mirror The Calamitous 14th Century* is a narrative history book by the American historian Barbara Tuchman. The book tells the story of the crisis of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and the suffering experienced throughout Europe.

Every century has had its notable, world changing events; from the advent of castles and defence systems in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, to law and order and judicial systems in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, from markets and minting in the 13<sup>th</sup>, the Great Famine in the 14<sup>th</sup> century including the Black Plague, to the Renaissance through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup>, the 19<sup>th</sup> century communications discoveries, to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries technological revolution and a 21<sup>st</sup>-century, no doubt characterised by pandemics, global economic recessions, famine, terrorism and war. The idea that what we are facing is unprecedented is nonsense. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, *History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new.* Eccles 1:9

There is nothing new under the sun and the world has known things like pandemics before and there are lessons to be learned from such experiences.

Today we are looking at the Celtic saints who for people like Lesley and me and, hundreds, possibly thousands of folk like us associated or influenced by the Northumbria Community and other expressions of Celtic spirituality, there are some parallels with our times and those of our Celtic mothers and fathers in the faith from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The context both then and now was one of a significant changing world. A world that lived through the decline and collapse of the Roman Empire. Celtic spirituality was forged on the anvil of struggle and cultural change and I sense that we are on a journey of discovering what faith looks like in a changing Post Christendom society.

For us today, we are witnessing a diminishing of Western democracy, the emergence of populist movements, autocratic, authoritarian dictators and governments and the rise of China as the world's major superpower.

There is no going back to normal. We are entering a new era. As people think about the post war years, history, I believe, will record the *post-pandemic world* that began in 2020.

The Celts response in the midst of change was the same ethos that was found within desert monastic spirituality, the primary influence upon the Celtic Saints, and that response was to first, to seek God. Let's response in the midst of change

For the desert fathers and mothers it was a withdrawing to the desert to seek God, to pray, reflect, find wisdom, ask *how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land*, and to discover a way for living in the new world context.

So in relation to where we find ourselves today, the Celts would encourage us to seek God.

Seeking God in the place of the *cell*, the place of exposure to the love of God and to a deeper encounter with ourselves. The call to solitude, to more silence than the frenetic activity that has so dominated too much of our contemporary western society. The call to listen, to wait, watch and wonder.

Inevitably given any crisis, our first response was a classic trauma response; to do something, be brave, heroic, to be rescuers and while there is a place for practically responding to the

obvious needs, to miss the deeper call is to miss the significance and signs that are found in the midst of any crisis.

I think the Celts would be horrified by the amount of *noise* that has been generated by the current crisis. It seems as though everybody has an opinion, something to say, post on Facebook, host a webinar, comment on Twitter, with our 24/7 news coverage and no shortage of armchair commentators and critics. Pastors who instead of preaching once a week have become overnight amateur, (some very amateur!) radio presenters, finding an outlet for their many words, and who have become unwittingly, like priests administering daily mass, not the eucharist but daily messages, podcasts, talks and prayer liturgies.

I am mindful of those words of W. H. Vanstone in his book, *Loves Endeavour, Love's Expense – The Response of being to the Love of God* that in a swimming pool all the noise is usually found in the shallow end. It's quieter in the deeper end. It's in the subsurface, landscapes of the heart, that we touch the deeper truths about ourselves and the world we live in. It's where wisdom, as opposed to the accumulation of information, is found.

I think the Celts would remind us that our first call is to seek God and to wait upon him in that deeper place.

In that place of seeking, in the context of learning *to sing the Lord's song in a strange land*, it would entail an awareness of loss, lament and repentance.

Contemplation engages the heart and mind in prayer and reflection and exploring the depths not only of the human heart and the impact of happenings upon our own lives but gives the space to discern and critique what's happening in the world. Not only events and happenings but what's going on in the psyche of the nation. I sense when I pray that there is a great deal of frustration, anger and anxiety that is fuelling responses and reactions to what we are living through.

And surely any waiting upon God at this time has to call us to lament and repent of those things that we've either ignored or failed to see. For example, the poisoning and polluting of the planet. How deep an irony that as we have been locked down, trying to cope with a virus that inhibits our ability to breathe, the rest of creation, the planet has breathed easier. For the abuse and exploitation of the planet – Lord have mercy. For our failure to recognise the key workers in our society, those we are dependent upon, not just the obvious medics but the care workers, the 1.6 million who work in the care sector, many of whom are on the minimum wage, some on zero hours contracts, most without Social Security benefits, those who work the land, pick and pack and distribute the fruits of the harvest, the delivery drivers, the refuse collectors, many like modern day slaves – Lord have mercy upon us.

The endemic racism, not only on the other side of the Atlantic but in the hearts, homes, attitudes and policies here in Britain. The blindness to white supremacy, privilege, opportunity and power wielded often by the few and rarely for the benefit of the many – Lord have mercy.

These and other evils, sins and wrongdoings we need to repent of and change our hearts, minds, attitudes and actions to address injustice and right wrongs that we have committed, intentionally or unintentionally.

It has been said that Celtic spirituality, with its down to earthiness, encouraged adherents to play *the five stringed harp*, not a musical instrument but the employing of all our senses; *seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting* – deploying not only information of the mind but intuition and the deep feelings in the heart to discover and discern what is happening in the world. e.g. listening. I observed Midsummers day with the birdsong in early morning dawn, yet the day after and since, it's quieter, the birdsongs have disappeared. Creation knows the summer is passing. For the Celtic saints, it was out of that place of contemplation, seeking God, out of lamenting that there emerged a reimagining of a different way of living.

Like the prophetic tradition, there is the acknowledgement of sin and wrongdoing, waywardness and the need to repent, a renewal of love for God and his ways and a commitment to walk in them and out of that comes a reimagined future. Hope is born, a way for living is found.

There is no return to normal, there mustn't be a conformity to the prevailing culture, which is wayward and contrary in a whole host of ways to the ways of God's Kingdom. As Baptists it should be second nature to us to be nonconformists, as the Celts were, not for the sake of being odd, which some Baptists seem to excel in doing but rather nonconformity for the sake of the gospel, living out and sharing God's Good News, as Bede the historian said of the Celts, *They lived what they believed*. Thomas Merton said when commenting on the Celtic saints, *We cannot do exactly as they did but we must be as thorough and as ruthless in our determination to break off all spiritual chains, to cast off the domination of alien compulsions and find our true selves; to discover our inalienable spiritual liberty and use it to build on earth the kingdom of God*.

It's the contemplative calling, that is foundational to Celtic spirituality, seeking God, the *one thing necessary*. Whatever the season, whatever the circumstances, seek God. Embrace intentionally the rhythm and patterns, habits and practices, appreciate the value of things like a Daily Office, eg. *Celtic Daily Prayer*.

And it is out of that calling of seeking God, upon that foundation, that the Celts actions and engagement with the world was shaped and formed.

So, for example to seek God, a God who loves the world, who in his mercy reaches out to a broken, bruised and wayward world, inevitably should lead those who love God to love their neighbour. For the Celts this found expression, in their welcome and hospitality towards friend and stranger. They also passed on the skills that they learned within their communities; cultivating the land, looking after the animal stock, fishing, weaving, construction and educating.

The fruits of Celtic spirituality as the Good news of Christ impacted and transformed lives was that things like tribalism, nationalism, sectarianism, sexism were dismantled and the discovery of kinship, friendship, community was realised.

In every monastic settlement, community, small or large there was welcome, as one would *welcome Christ in the strangers guise*, wherever a person known or unknown, friend or stranger would come from. There were few demarcation lines and no exclusion zones or people who suffered discrimination.

In periods of plague, Celtic communities would often be the only place to which the suffering would find a place of welcome and healing. Celtic communities had the equivalent of our

hospital wards or hospices. When the contemporary world abandoned those in distress, the Celtic monks would welcome or journey into plague villages and hamlets, often at the cost of their own lives, to share and care in the name of Christ.

You don't get an impression that the Celts primary concern was for their own well-being. There is no record of counsels, meetings, papers or proposals to discuss how they could get back to normal, how they could safe distance, how they could keep their buildings open.

When people today ask when will the church be open again I want to proclaim loud and clear that the church was never closed. In fact the church has been turfed out of buildings and into the neighbourhoods and world and in many quarters the church is alive and well and serving the Kingdom in the world, not locked up in some holy huddle or religious cul-de-sac. The Celts would remind us that it is not about preserving or conserving but proclaiming and sharing the Good news. They began with the Kingdom and the Good News which then shaped the faith communities; churches and monasteries that were formed and established. To begin with church is the wrong starting place and to think first about what the church needs is for us the wrong starting place. Lockdown has provided a great opportunity to think again about what being disciples of Jesus and the church is in a changing world. Many of those things that we, for various reasons, of have been reluctant to let go, have gone with lockdown and perhaps God is asking us not to restore them but to discover the new things that he is wanting to do in and through us.

I'm part of the Fresh Expressions Pioneering Development hub which gives me the opportunity to meet with other pioneer ambassadors and coordinators of other denominations. When we met recently somebody had the image of the church being like a bike that has had its stabilisers removed; for some churches, the stabilisers are their building and meeting together as a congregation and it's as though God has removed the stabilisers. I've been out this morning trying to teach and encourage my 2.5 year old granddaughter to learn to ride her bike without stabilisers, to discover the freedom of new ways of riding that are not dependent upon those external stabilisers and support mechanisms. Likewise, we, as the Celts had to do, have a great opportunity to learn what it is to be disciples and communities of faith, whether in established, traditional, emerging, fresh expressions, pioneering, missional communities, experimental mission initiatives, with the stabilisers, the structures and supports that we have become so dependent upon, removed. Like the Celts, we are called to, what my Pioneering Ambassador colleague Simon Goddard has initiated, a Missional Adventure. To seize the day, to see the opportunity, of rediscovering something that is there within our Baptist DNA, missionary adventurers, people not trapped by institutionalism, not governed by past protocols or out of date systems but free to be open and responsive to the movements of the Holy Spirit, to take us out of our church buildings.

It was persecution in the early church that caused the church to obey Jesus command to *Go* and his commission to move out of Jerusalem into *Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth* and it's a pandemic that has thrown the church today out beyond its walls and into our communities and discovering, as the Celts did, that the Kingdom of God is to be found in the streets, in the world. When they wandered for the love of Christ they discovered that God was ahead and at work in the life of believer and unbeliever.

Their task, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was to discover and discern God's presence in the world of which church played a secondary, not primary role.

They had little concern for building the church, the kingdom of God was their primary concern. They formed faith communities, churches without walls.

In the early years of Celtic monasticism, if buildings in their settlements were required, they were intentionally constructed in wood. There was plenty of stone around but by building in wood, nothing was made permanent. God was not confined to a building, He could be known and discovered, encountered among friend and stranger, in the midst of every day, ordinary life, in the home, at the hearth, at the roadside, in the workplace, on a hilltop and beside still or raging waters.

Community was a really important component within Celtic spirituality, relationships mattered. As people covenanted together within the love of Christ they lived out their faith, inspired and informed by a monastic rule of life. Organised not on hierarchical grounds or in geographical territories but an organic, spontaneous, haphazard and rather chaotic connectivity between people and places existed within the Celts as they journeyed, formed and founded monastic communities, centres of learning and bases for mission across Europe, shaping the Continent and laying the foundations of the Judaeo-Christian tradition for centuries to come.

Their models of leadership are really interesting; the abbot or abbess of the community were primarily concerned about guarding its ethos, teaching, training and imparting to others a monastic rule of life, discipling.

The bishops were more apostolic figures, missional, taking the gospel and sharing with people everywhere and speaking truth to power. They were risktakers, adventurous, pioneers, apostles more to culture than the church. In both the monasteries and on the road, they brought blessing and benediction to where there had been curses, fear, superstition and malediction. The beauty and creativity they brought through their appreciation of the arts helped bring light and life, transformation to the Dark ages. With the exception of those who are called to an eremitic a life of prayer, (and even those were connected to some community or other) the Celts did not live in cloistered, closed communities but had that wonderful balance and rhythm of solitude and engagement, prayer and action, withdrawal and involvement.

So, in conclusion, what would the Celts do in Lockdown?

They would in the words on the sign by the side of the Main East Coast railway line: ***Stop... Look... Listen...***