

# Celtic Lent

40 days of devotions to Easter



David Cole



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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 637 2  
First published 2018  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0  
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

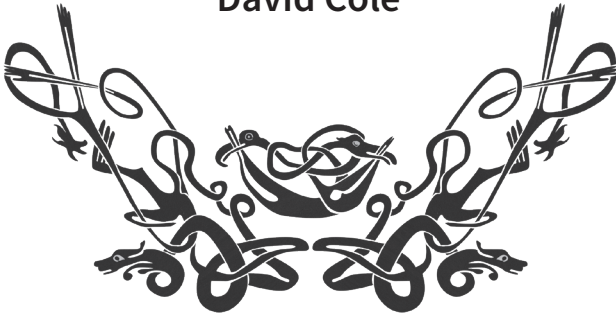


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# Introduction



Lent is a significant part of the Christian calendar. It is a period where we endeavour to lessen our intake by fasting and giving things up, and to increase our focus on things divine, with particular attention paid to the coming crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the Celtic Christians, this was a deeply significant part of their year, a time which they took seriously with their fasting and focus.

What is commonly referred to today as Celtic Christianity is the expression of the Christian faith from the Irish and British churches, and those kingdoms throughout what is now England and Scotland. These churches were influenced by this style and expression of the Christian faith rather than the expression of the Christian faith that was more prominent in the Latin church growing out of the Roman Empire. Much of the kingdoms of the Angles and, to some extent, the Saxon kingdoms were heavily influenced by Celtic Christianity.

Although there was only one 'church', there were distinct differences at that time between the practices of this Celtic tradition and the Latin, or Roman, church (not to be mistaken with the modern Roman Catholic church) in certain theologies and ways of expressing the Christian faith. This enables us to suggest that there was a 'Celtic Christianity'. Despite the distinct differences within the Celtic churches themselves, there were enough similarities within the cultures and people, and so therefore the churches as well, for us to be able to say that Celtic Christianity certainly was a distinct expression of the Christian faith found in Britain, Ireland and some of northern Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In this book, designed to take you through Lent with daily devotionals from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, we will encounter some of

that distinct expression and some of the teachings and theology found in the works, writings and monastic Rules of the Celtic saints. We will also discover some of the more modern expressions and inspirations of Celtic Christianity that flow within current streams of Christianity.

For the largest section of our journey towards Easter, we will weave together days of discovery and adventure in Celtic Christianity with excerpts from Celtic saints' teaching relevant to Lent, as well as stories of their lives, ancient and modern. The Celtic saints wrote numerous Rules and apostolic-style letters, as well as greater pieces which we will be dipping into. We will also look at different aspects of Celtic theology relevant to Lent. This will include aspects of eucharistic liturgies we have, such as the Stowe Missal; the theology of the whole of creation being reconciled back to God through the work of the cross (as found in Romans 8, for example), which was deeply engrained in Celtic Christianity; and modern teachings and writings on Celtic Christianity. For Holy Week itself, however, we will be illuminating specifically the story of *The Dream of the Rood*, a seventh/eighth-century Celtic/Anglo-Saxon saga of the cross of Christ.

There will also be a chance each Sunday to reflect and contemplate something specific to allow God to reveal even more deeply the things we are unfolding.

As you use this book to help guide you towards resurrection in this season of Lent, I pray that God will challenge and encourage you, build up and dismantle things within your heart, soul and spirit, so that through the inspiration of an ancient aspect of our spiritual heritage, you will become closer to God and grow more and more in the divine character as you allow yourself to be transformed.



# Ash Wednesday to Sunday





## Ash Wednesday



This is a day to remember the reason that Christ had to come to die on the cross. Lent begins with a direct focus on the end – the crucifixion – and the need for our reconciliation with God because of sin in life. Ash Wednesday focuses on the punishment God gave to Adam and Eve in the Judaic/Christian creation story, and the statement from Genesis 3:19 that we, as humans, came from dust (or ashes) and will return to the same.

In an ancient Irish story of the creation of Adam, which survived as part of ‘imaginative reworkings and complementary additions to the canon’<sup>2</sup> of scripture, Adam is made not just from the dust of the earth, but from seven different components: earth, sea, sun, clouds, wind, stones and the light of the world. These correspond, in the same order, to: his body, blood, countenance, thoughts, breath, bones and soul (also connected to the Holy Spirit, or the divine image within us). These, in turn, relate to personality traits within human beings.

If in someone the part that is the earth is dominant, then that person will be indolent. If it be the sun, they will be attractive and vivacious. If it be clouds, they will be irresponsible and lustful. If the wind dominates, they will be fiery and irascible. If it be the stones, they will be severe, both thieving and grasping. If it be the sea, they will be likable and placid, and will be beautiful. If it is the light that is the strongest, they will know their own mind, and will be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit and divine scripture.<sup>3</sup>

This imaginative expression of different aspects of creation being a part of who we each are, and that we will possibly have one which is

more dominant, is typical of the beautiful creative mind of the Celtic Christians. This particular imaginative expression gives us an even closer connection to the whole of creation. It isn't just the dust or earth that we are created from, but different elements found in the whole of creation, each interwoven within us, plus the inclusion of the Holy Spirit, that is, the divine image within our being. This gives us a much deeper, more interconnected relationship with creation – another very Celtic understanding. All of this, of course, was marred by the incoming of sin into the beautifully, perfectly created cosmos which God had formed with love, which humanity was a part of.

So we begin Lent by reminding ourselves that we were created from part (or parts) of the physical creation, and that our bodies will return to the creation at their end.

## Contemplation

Close your eyes and visualise the creation of Adam. But imagine it as described in the Irish retelling of the story, from those seven different aspects of the natural world: not only the dust of the ground, but earth, sea, sun, clouds, wind, stones and the light of the world as the divine image placed within us. How might this description, if these seven components are metaphorically a part of us, help us feel more connected to the natural world which surrounds us? How much more might we mourn for the coming of sin into creation which separates all things from its Creator?

## Reading

[Adam and Eve] hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'

He replied, 'I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.'

'Who told you that you were naked?' the Lord God asked.

‘Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?’

The man replied, ‘It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.’

Then the Lord God asked the woman, ‘What have you done?’

‘The serpent deceived me,’ she replied. ‘That’s why I ate it.’

Then the Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all animals, domestic and wild. You will crawl on your belly, grovelling in the dust as long as you live. And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’

Then he said to the woman, ‘I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.’

And to the man he said, ‘Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.’

GENESIS 3:8–19 (NLT)

## Prayer

**Great Creator of life, the universe and everything, who fashioned humanity from the created world, I repent of the sin in my life, both those things known to me and unknown. I repent of any actions which have harmed the world from which I am made. I ask your forgiveness, and am reminded, by the ash of this day, that my body will one day cease to function. But I praise you also that, because of your grace and mercy, the essence of who I am shall continue forever. Amen**

## Thursday



The purpose of giving something up for Lent is so that when we reach the Easter weekend and focus on the cross of Christ, we have a small idea of what it is to make a sacrifice. But do we really understand what it means to sacrifice something of ourselves for God?

In the *Cambrai Homily*,<sup>4</sup> a sixth/seventh-century Irish writing, when looking at the passage in Matthew's gospel which speaks of taking up our cross (Matthew 16:24), it says, 'To take our cross upon ourselves means to accept loss and martyrdom and to suffer for Christ's sake.'<sup>5</sup> It then goes on to describe three different types of martyrdom – white, green (or blue<sup>6</sup>) and red martyrdom.

White martyrdom is when one gives up everything they love, be that comforts of home, title or position: that is, giving up one's known life(style). This was to 'die' to your old life and be committed to the life God draws you to. This is what many of the Celtic saints did in giving up their social positions, be it in a royal household, such as Melangell and Hilda, or a position of nobility or in the military, such as Cuthbert and Illtyd, to become monks and nuns.

Green martyrdom was when one committed to spiritual disciplines or exercises, such as fasting or prayer vigils: to give up some form of comfort or nicety to be committed to a spiritual discipline. This could be for a selected period or for life. So, in essence, each of us who gives up something for Lent is practising this ancient Celtic idea of green martyrdom, for a short time at least.

Red martyrdom was giving one's physical life up to death for the sake of Christ and one's faith: the traditional understanding of martyrdom.

‘These three kinds of martyrdom,’ the *Cambrai Homily* says, ‘take place in those people who repent well, who control their desires, or who shed their blood... for Christ’s sake.’<sup>7</sup>

The question is, how far are we willing to go for the sake of our faith? Green martyrdom for Lent is one thing, but what about committing to spiritual exercises for a longer period of time, or even for life? How many of us would be willing to give up everything we know as our current life and take up a new life, perhaps not quite so privileged, for the sake of a call from God – like so many missionaries have done over the centuries, and still do? And finally, when we read that we are to take up our cross – that is, to give up ourselves to Christ – are we willing to risk the possibility of actually giving up our lives as many saints have done throughout history?

We may have given something up for Lent, but what about beyond that?

## Contemplation

Think about what you have given up in the past for the sake of God, perhaps even just what you have given up this Lent. How much of a sacrifice has it been, really? Look again at the descriptions of white, green and red martyrdom. Contemplate what you might be willing to give up for God from now on, beyond Lent.

## Reading

From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. 'Heaven forbid, Lord,' he said. 'This will never happen to you!'

Jesus turned to Peter and said, 'Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.'

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds.'

MATTHEW 16:21-27 (NLT)

## Prayer

**Lord Jesus Christ, as I contemplate over this Lent period the sacrifice you made at the cross, give me the strength of heart to be willing to give up whatever you desire of me, be that simple things for a short time, the whole of my life as I know it, or even my life itself, knowing that you are with me always. Amen**

## Friday



Many people are dedicated to physical fitness and exercise. I have friends who go out on ‘Park Runs’ each week, and a number who regularly run marathons for charity. These things don’t just happen; they have to be trained for. There has to be some form of fitness regime and focused dedication to be able to stay fit. Some people are very determined to have the fittest body, and so are more dedicated at keeping up with the regime. Other people are happy to have a body which just stays at the level of fitness which is comfortable for them, so they train a little, but not too much. Still others aren’t that bothered at all. The level of physical fitness which you want to achieve and maintain will determine the amount of effort you put in to make it and sustain it, and the amount of effort you put in to your physical fitness will have a direct result on how fit your body gets and stays.

Just as this is the case for our physical selves, so it is the case for our inner and spiritual selves.

Yesterday, we looked at an ancient text which spoke of green martyrdom. Today, we will dip into a modern book on Celtic Christianity which has a chapter on green martyrdom and spiritual fitness.

In *Water from an Ancient Well*, Kenneth McIntosh begins this chapter with a story of a man going into a gym to look around to see whether he wants to join, only to find that no one is working out; they are simply sitting around. In the weights room, people are reading weight-lifting magazines; the same scenario by the running machines with relevant magazines – all throughout the gym. Frustrated by

what he sees, the man speaks to the woman showing him around at the end and says:

‘What on earth is wrong with these people?... No one is working out... What kind of crazy place is this?’ ‘Oh,’ the woman sniffs, ‘You must be looking for one of those old-fashioned health clubs where... they make people feel guilty if they don’t get on the machines... Our members all agree that they are happier not exerting themselves – life’s hard enough without making our muscles do all that unpleasant exercise.’<sup>8</sup>

McIntosh is, of course, using this ridiculous story (which is much funnier in full as he tells it) to parallel the spiritual life without spiritual disciplines, and he says, ‘Contemporary Christianity is often a lot like a non-exercising health club.’<sup>9</sup> In the same chapter, he goes on to say this:

The ancient Celts... engaged in robust spiritual exercises; they weren’t afraid of ‘sweat’. The stories of Anthony of Egypt inspired them... They paid attention when Anthony spoke of *ascesis*, a Greek word that literally translates ‘rigor’ and denotes spiritual discipline. Furthermore – and this had great impact on Celtic spirituality – Anthony insisted that *ascesis* required physical practices.<sup>10</sup>

The Celtic Christians took green martyrdom seriously, partly because this could include the lay people who had everyday jobs, such as the farmers, etc. who were connected with the monastic community; it wasn’t just for the monks and nuns who had committed to white martyrdom as well. We too can commit to this green martyrdom, this idea of practising spiritual disciplines.



## Contemplation

Leading on from yesterday's contemplation, spend time with God now, as if God was showing you around a spiritual gym. What disciplines are you willing to commit to in order to bring up the fitness level of your inner and spiritual self? Remember, the amount of effort put in will directly affect the level of fitness – for example, if you build up to practising an hour of silent contemplative prayer each day, you will have a much greater sense of divine peace than someone who does just a minute of it, or none at all.

## Reading

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27

## Prayer

**Gracious, loving one, you have given me a body to care for, but it is not separate from my soul and spirit. May I see that each are as important as the other. May I be committed to the spiritual disciplines which you draw me to so that I can be as spiritually fit as I can be. Amen**



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