



# Restoring the Woven Cord

Strands of Celtic Christianity  
for the church today

**Michael Mitton**

*'Restoring the Woven Cord changed my life'*

Pete Greig

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# **Restoring the Woven Cord**

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## **Preface to the third edition**

I write this preface to the third edition after returning from leading a gathering at the beautiful Carmel Guest Farm, near the coastal town of George in South Africa. I was addressing a group that has been meeting for almost 20 years and was set up originally by Eric Pike when he was the bishop of Port Elizabeth. At the retreat, Eric spoke very movingly of how he read the first edition of this book after I met him when I visited his diocese in 1993. It was humbling to hear how my book was one of several that became something of a hinge point in Eric's life and ministry. He told us of how he was delighted to discover an expression of his faith that resonated not only with the rhythms of his own soul, but had strong connections with the culture of the Xhosa people, whom he loved and served so faithfully. He contributed one of the Afterwords that I added to the second edition of this book. The Celtic fire lit all those years ago continues to burn strong in him.

At the Carmel retreat, I gave a series of talks entitled 'Ancient faith, future hope'. The very title excited the group of South Africans who attended. I talked about the expression of faith led by Patrick and others that erupted in Ireland from the fifth century. This was the first recorded mission outside of the Roman empire, and by and large those early evangelists proclaimed a message of faith that was delightfully free of the trappings of power, wealth and influence that were stifling the life of the church in Europe. This gave them an

opportunity to plant the faith humbly in a way that respected local culture, rather than using a colonial model that imposed something foreign. Today, while the dominant culture of Christendom collapses, Celtic spirituality commends itself as one that is truly authentic and humble, and respects the life and values of the local people, while at the same time offers the claims of the gospel with clarity and challenge. It was this that excited that group of South Africans who, though they live 6,000 miles away from the locus of those stories, nonetheless feel an affinity with the likes of Columba, Brigid, Hilda and Cuthbert. Apart from anything else, this reassures me that Celtic Christian spirituality does not just belong to Ireland and the British Isles, but has relevance to many communities across this globe.

Nearly 25 years on from when I wrote this book, the Celtic fire shows no sign of abating in my heart, and I see it burning bright in the hearts of many others. My good friend Russ Parker and I regularly take people from Britain and overseas on pilgrimages to the sites of ancient Celtic stories. Often in bleak and wild locations, we struggle up slippery hillsides to rocky ruins and time-worn wells, and there we tell the stories and lead prayers. Here there is a fascinating mix of an ancient story with the eternal story of Jesus, and the present story of the pilgrim's life. Frequently I witness such a mix bringing healing, renewal and new direction to the pilgrim's life. We never cease to be amazed by what takes place in these ancient locations of faith, where the stories of the saints seem to be as alive as ever.

It has sometimes been pointed out that many of the people who get excited about Celtic Christianity, including authors like myself, are not from Celtic origins. At one level, this could disqualify us from claiming to write with any sense of authority on the subject. But we are those who look with envy to our Celtic friends and recognise that they have in their heritage something we have missed. And one of the great gifts of Celtic spirituality is generosity – the likes of Patrick and Brigid, as they were forming faith around the smoky peat fires of Ireland, were preparing missionaries who would spread out across a

post-Roman Europe, not sharing an Irish faith, but a faith that could adapt to and settle in any culture.

It is my conviction that it is the Holy Spirit of God who continues to draw our attention to these ancient stories of faith. It is not a fad in the church that is passing. Neither is it an escapist and nostalgic hankering after heydays of old. It is a truly biblical, dynamic remembering that kindles hope for the future. It has become more fashionable of late for some writers to discredit the notion that the emerging church in Ireland and Britain from the fifth century onwards was the inspiring expression of faith that some of us claim it to be. Such writers offer helpful warnings that we do no service to these saints of old if we simply shape them to suit our own particular enthusiasms. In my view, the records that exist give us pretty hard evidence that this early church had many genuinely inspiring qualities that have much to offer us today.

What is also undoubtedly true is that the early church in Ireland and Britain was built of ordinary, fallible, mortals who made plenty of mistakes. I have tried my best to include stories in this book that have a historical basis, and generally the saints discussed in these stories come over in a good light. However, I have no doubt that those ordinary mortals also got lots wrong. Clearly, some of them were still misogynist, some were interested in power, they annoyed each other and they had their fights. But the fact that they got some things wrong does not take away from the fact that they got a great deal right, and it is those right things that still shine bright for us today.

Critics of Celtic Christianity often accuse writers like me of romanticising the stories. I think this term is usually used to imply that we in some way attempt to enhance or even fabricate the story to idealise it and make it more appealing. I try to be as accurate as I can about the stories, but I can't deny romance comes into it, and it is the romance of love. I read Patrick's confession and feel a strong affection for this man struggling with his poor Latin to convey his

love of Jesus and his horror of slavery. I open the pages of Bede and delight to read about the Irish Aidan who displayed such love for the English people among whom he walked. I stand in the location of the fire pit at Kildare and feel great admiration for Brigid who, even allowing for the many legends, still stands as one of the great leading lights of this early church. I long that my heart never hardens to the beauty of these stories of old that inspire me in my witness for Christ today.

We are discovering new things about these ancient days all the time, and we may yet discover that we have got some bits of our history wrong. But within many of us, it seems, there lies a deep longing to discover an expression of faith that looks like the one we think we have discovered in the early Celtic church. It is that longing that we should safeguard, for such longings as these spur us to build the kind of church that is true to the gospel of Jesus. My hope and prayer is that readers of a book such as this will not end up in a place of wistful nostalgia, but will be renewed with a fresh and empowering vision of the kingdom of God.

When we take pilgrims to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, we like to walk with them the two-and-a-half-mile pilgrim pathway from the mainland to the island, following the straight line of the tall waymarks. As we walk towards the island, we are reminded again of Aidan, who was the first to make this island a mission base. After one such walk, I wrote a few lines which might set the mood as we set out to explore the Celtic way through the stories related in this book.

And it was hope  
that led him to take yet more steps  
in the slippery clay.  
The north-east breeze  
summoned up prophecy  
from centuries before him  
about centuries after him.  
He, caught in the middle  
between mainland and island,  
knew he had come as priest;  
kneeling he wept  
with the seagulls and seals  
till the turning tide bade him on.

Later, the salt water concealed his footprints  
while he, safe on his island,  
gripped his staff and raised his burning torch  
and for a time  
the whole land was ablaze  
while estuary angels flooded inland  
and the seas of blessing  
left their rich sediment.

For a time the earth knew it was loved  
and breathed well.





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## The strands of our faith

In March 1992, I set off on a journey that changed the direction of my life. I travelled to the holy island of Lindisfarne, which lies just south of the Scottish border, not far from my birthplace, Edinburgh. Here, during the course of two blustery wet and cold days, I became acquainted with this historic place, researching the lives of Aidan and Cuthbert who had lived here during the Christian dawn of the isles of Britain and Ireland. For me it was like a homecoming. Something about the island and its history connected with a deep longing within me and brought together many different strands of my own faith.

As I explored the Celtic faith of this ancient mission centre, I discovered something that I had been searching for during the past 20 years. I had been searching for an expression of faith in which I could own the various strands that have become so important for me. I discovered a burning and evangelical love for the Bible; I discovered a depth of spiritual life and stillness that I had encountered in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality; I discovered a radical commitment to the poor and to God's creation, and I discovered the most attractive expression of charismatic life that I had yet encountered. Not only this, but I felt connected with my roots for the first time. As a Protestant I had never felt entirely comfortable

with finding my spiritual roots in the religious and political protests of the 16th century, particularly as I am good friends with a number of Roman Catholics and have a great respect for their church. I have always felt awkwardness about our history and a pain at our separation. Yet here, in the Celtic church, there are common roots that go back long before our days of separation.

But was this feeling just personal to me? Was my interest in Celtic Christianity just an odd quirk, an indication of midlife crisis? During the course of the ensuing two years, I started to speak publicly about Celtic Christianity and was reassured to discover a widespread and growing interest in the subject. I am now convinced that all this is much more than just an odd quirk. I am in no doubt that the Spirit of God is reminding us of the first expression of faith in these isles to give us inspiration for Christian ministry and mission today. While it had its faults, I believe that the early Celtic church was the nearest thing in our Christian history to a complete expression of faith in this country. After all, no other church has had such impact on this land, steadily converting the country from Druid-led paganism to Christianity. Extraordinarily, many of us have been brought up on the notion of the 'Dark Ages', with an implication that little of spiritual worth happened in this land until the Reformation. Nothing could be further from the truth. For Britain, the period from the fifth to the ninth centuries should be seen as the 'Light Ages' in which, arguably, a light shone that was brighter than any since.

There is, of course, a real danger of romanticising the Celtic church and overlooking its weaknesses. Also, we should not generalise too much as there were variations within it. For example, there were differences between the Lindisfarne-based mission that began with Aidan and the Iona-based mission that started with Columba, and personally I am more attracted to the Lindisfarne mission.

## Christian beginnings in Britain

Some of the Roman legions stationed in Britain were Christians and we have evidence of a Christian presence in this land from the earliest times. In Manchester Museum, there is a pottery shard from a Spanish amphora, inscribed with an acrostic of the Lord's prayer in Latin, which is dated at around AD180. The second-century writer Origen refers to Christians in Britain, and at the Council of Arles in AD314 we even have mention of three British bishops. There is also the Glastonbury legend, which asserts that Joseph of Arimathea visited Britain. The legend claims that Joseph was a tin trader and made regular trips to the West Country of Britain to purchase tin. He knew Jesus as a child and brought him on one occasion to Cornwall, thus inspiring William Blake to wonder if 'those feet in ancient time' walked 'upon England's mountains green'. The story goes that, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Joseph travelled to England again, this time carrying the Holy Grail that contained the blood and sweat of Christ, arriving eventually at the Isle of Avalon, Glastonbury. While this story is usually viewed as a quaint legend, it is not entirely implausible to believe that Joseph was a tin trader, and, as such, he is quite likely to have made journeys to the tin-rich island of Britain. Gildas, a sixth-century historian, speaks of Britain receiving the 'beams of light' of the gospel during the reign of Tiberias. Since Tiberias died in AD37, this speaks of a very early mission indeed. We shall probably never know the truth of all this, but there certainly are hints in our history that the gospel arrived in Britain and Ireland during the period of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Christianity that came with the Roman legions seems to have had little effect on the local population, who preferred their indigenous pagan ways to the religion of the conquering forces. When the Romans abandoned Britain in the early fifth century, they took the Christian faith with them. However, there were embers of faith that were ready to flame up in a remarkable way. The first flames of the early Celtic church appeared in the areas that the Romans had failed to occupy, in particular in Ireland, which they

never conquered. For a time, this indigenous expression of Christian life was the only one to exist in Britain and Ireland, until the church in western Europe, based in Rome, developed an interest in Britain. This interest stemmed partly from concern for the unevangelised tribes of Angles and Saxons pouring into Britain, and partly from unease that the British Celtic church was becoming wayward, not least in its custom of selecting a different date for Easter from the western church. Thus Pope Gregory in Rome commissioned Bishop Augustine for his famous mission to the English. Augustine and his 40 missionary monks arrived in the south of England in AD597 and set up base at Canterbury. As we shall see from time to time in the pages of this book, the relationship between the British and Roman churches was not easy. Both churches had strengths and weaknesses and both were genuinely concerned to bring the light of Christ to these lands. There was room for both but, in time, the Roman church felt that there could be only one church, united in celebrating Easter on a common date in line with the rest of western Europe, and it therefore sought to absorb the British church into this wider network.

By the end of the sixth century, the Roman church was flourishing in a collapsing but generally Christian empire. It seems that, soon after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the Christian church started to become extraordinarily worldly, in stark contrast to the very vibrant and charismatic faith that had seen it through the terrible years of persecution under the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius. Once it had become part of the establishment, it was inclined to espouse the values of the earthly kingdom rather than the kingdom of God.

By contrast, in the east, thousands were reacting strongly against this worldliness and nominalism; they moved to the deserts, where, led by such people as Anthony and Pachomius, they set up monasteries that became oases of spiritual life and wisdom. These were the first expressions of monastic life in the Christian church. These Christians were attracted to the wilderness because of the many

biblical examples of the desert journey, in particular that of Jesus after his baptism in the Jordan. The culmination of his 40-day ascetic experience was a fierce contest with the devil. The desert monks and nuns felt similarly called to these hostile wastelands, which were graphic illustrations of the spiritual wasteland of nominalism and worldliness in the church. Here on behalf of the church they did battle with Satan, pleading with God through prayer, fasting and holiness to have mercy on the church, restoring it for mission to a needy world. Both the communities and the thousands of individual hermits played a key role in the spiritual survival of the church, for not only did they act as spiritual warriors but their lives also formed models of commitment, depth and transparent holiness.

Martin, Bishop of Tours (AD371), was the first westerner to become influenced by the eastern monks, and founded a monastery called Marmoutier – literally meaning ‘the place of the big family’. It was here that Ninian was profoundly influenced and the story of the Celtic church in Britain gets under way. With Ninian and Columba in Scotland, David, Samson and Illtyd in Wales, Patrick and Brigid in Ireland, and Aidan, Cuthbert and Hilda in England (to name only a few), the Celtic fire began to grow into a blaze with monastic groups springing up everywhere.

By the time the Roman mission arrived in Canterbury, the Celtic church was looking to the east rather than the west for its inspiration. In fact, for a time, the Roman mission was effective only in the south: the centre, the north and the rest of Britain and Ireland were unreachable owing to the ravages of Anglo-Saxon invasions and frequent outbreaks of plague. It was only with the settling of the Saxons that the Roman church began to see the possibility of establishing one church in Britain, celebrating one Easter. The Roman church eventually persuaded the Celtic leaders to gather for a synod where it could all be thrashed out. Thus, in 664 both sides met at Whitby. There the increasingly powerful Wilfrid, who was forming dioceses and monasteries based on Roman models, was far more competent at arguing his case than the typically humble Celtic leaders. In

many respects it was at this council that the spiritual fate of our land was decided. The Celtic church lost against the powers of Rome. The community-based church committed to poverty could not stand against the hierarchical and centrally organised church that had such effective links with secular power. But the Celtic fire still burned for many years after Whitby. In fact, it has remained alight in the 'Celtic fringes' through the ages and is showing every sign of being rekindled across the land, and indeed across the world today.

The conflict in the early Christian era in Britain and Ireland was between Celt and Roman. Let's be absolutely clear that, when we talk of the Roman church, we are not referring to the modern-day Roman Catholic Church. We are talking about a church of 1,000 years before the Reformation. The Roman church of the Middle Ages has influenced most of the western church, Catholic *and* Protestant. In this book we are interested in how the indigenous church of Britain and Ireland expressed its faith before it become absorbed into the wider Rome-based church, and we shall see that in many ways we can still discern in the life and witness of our church today, in every denomination and church stream, characteristics of the Roman church that are now being challenged by the growth of Celtic Christianity.

## Strands of faith

The Celts were great lovers of art and they loved intricate patterns. Such artwork can be found in the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, whose illuminations are based on wonderful and intricate strands that are interwoven to form the most beautiful patterns, full of vitality and meaning. We see the same in other expressions of Celtic Christian art that have survived to this day, such as the engraved high crosses found in Ireland and parts of Britain, which were covered with interwoven designs.

These patterns clearly depict the Celts' love of wholeness and say something important to the church today about how these people

lived their Christian lives. They had discovered the many different strands of our faith and woven them together in a most effective cord for ministry and mission. A strong cord needs many strands, but the weakness of the church through the ages is that it has tended to focus on only one or two strands at the cost of losing others. Since the collapse of the Celtic church, it seems that one generation after another made the discovery of a lost strand and, holding it up, said, 'This is the main cord'; then, rather than weaving it in to the whole, each generation dropped the others and made a rope out of only one strand, which of course will never have sufficient strength. Thus, for example, we have evangelical discoveries of justification by faith at the Reformation; we have catholic discoveries about worship and sacraments in the 19th-century Oxford Movement; we have liberal discoveries about social justice and radical witness to the poor in the 20th century; we have pentecostal/charismatic discoveries also in the last hundred years. All these have been good and necessary discoveries, but usually each group has discovered only one or two strands of the whole cord, and has forged its identity by denouncing the other strands, thus rendering the cord weak again. In the Celtic church we find a community of faith that was refreshingly free of prejudice and open to welcoming many strands into the cord of faith.

We need to study the early Celtic church in the spirit of its Christian life – with total openness to the wind of the Spirit, who may well draw our attention to strands of our Christian faith that we have too easily ignored or discarded. It is no use, for example, delighting in the love for creation without taking due note of the early church's understanding of dark powers that could despoil creation. Similarly, it would be wrong to delight in the miraculous stories of healing without studying the believers' commitment to community, the context for the healing ministry. We will need to explore with a great sense of openness.

My hope is that this book will help us discover some very important strands of our faith that were so clearly evident in the Celtic church. Of equal importance is the weaving of the strands together in our



personal walk with God and in the life of the church. I have not identified all the strands, but I have chosen 14 that I happen to think are important for us to consider at this time. They are in chronological order of the saints associated with them, which I hope makes clear that there is no preference for one strand over another. Each chapter is simply a snapshot of the early Celtic church, to give some idea of how that church experienced this particular strand of Christian faith.

In this book, when I refer to the ‘Celtic church’ I normally mean the Celtic church that existed in Britain and Ireland roughly from the fifth to the ninth centuries ad. I am aware that, for many Christians today who live in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland, the Celtic church is not in the past but is alive and well in the present. Although there are some references to the modern Celtic church, I am mainly concerning myself with the early church in this book.

I have called the book *Restoring the Woven Cord* because it is my deep conviction that the Celtic church challenges us to rediscover the strands of our faith and find ways of weaving them together in our personal lives and the life of our churches. Those who know much more than I do about weaving and rope work will tell me that you cannot technically weave a cord. Well, I know, but I think of it more poetically than literally! We need the strong cord with its many strands; we need the interweaving to take place in our own lives.

Each chapter has four ingredients, as follows.

## Story and reflection

Story was most important to the Celtic church. They taught by means of stories, songs, poems and pictures. Pre-Christian Celts had little interest in writing, which is one reason why it is difficult to research their history. But their oral tradition was strong and they delighted in storytelling, which they viewed as an imaginative way of communicating truth. Each chapter therefore has one leading story

from the Celtic church, and I will use this, along with various other stories, to discuss the theme of the chapter. You will find that my main resource is the Venerable Bede, which reflects my admiration for him. My special interest is in the early Celtic church in Northumbria and this is why I regularly return to stories from this church. Also, because Bede wrote such a thorough account of Cuthbert's life, this particular saint features more regularly than others. I am sorry that only two female saints appear in the main stories. This is simply because most of the stories we have are about male saints, but, as we shall see in chapter 4, this does not at all reflect the Celtic church's estimation of women, which was very high. The story in each chapter provides a basis for the theme that I explore in the pages following, where my aim is to connect the understanding and experience of that particular theme in the early Celtic church with our world today.

## **Bible reading**

There is a Bible reading that connects with the theme of each chapter. This can be used as guidance for the application section.

## **Application**

Three questions help to apply the theme of the chapter to your situation. You can use these questions for your own reflection or as starter questions if you are using the book for group study.

## **Prayer**

All the prayers are kindly provided by The Community of Aidan and Hilda, written either by Ray Simpson or myself (apart from Columba's in chapter 7). I hope that each prayer will lead into further prayers as you take the themes of the strand and weave it into your own life and witness.



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