

# Celtic Saints

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# Celtic Saints

*40 days of devotional readings*



David Cole





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# Introduction



This book is one of three which cover the three Celtic Lent periods during the year. Having many things in trinity, or triads, the Celts held three periods during the year as Lenten fasts. In the penitentials of Gildas, a sixth-century Welsh historian (see page 78), when speaking of how a priest who has committed a certain sin must act during different ecclesiastical seasons, he states, ‘During the three forty-day periods he shall increase his penance as far as his strength allows.’<sup>1</sup> In the study notes to this, Oliver Davies says that these three 40-day periods refer to ‘the forty days before Christmas and Easter and after Pentecost, which were periods of fasting for all’.<sup>2</sup>

My other books, *Celtic Advent* and *Celtic Lent*, cover the first two of the three, and so this book is designed for the third of these ancient Celtic Lent periods. In this period, the focus is on the lives of the saints with the express purpose – in this Pentecost season as the Holy Spirit is celebrated, empowering the people who make up the church – of inspiring you to live a holy life, just like the saints in this book lived.

Before we begin, a word about Celtic Christianity.

‘Celtic’ is a term which has become quite common in modern parlance, and can often be, as J.R.R. Tolkien once said, ‘a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come.’<sup>3</sup> When speaking historically, it usually refers to the people groups who inhabited Britain, Ireland and north-west France before and during the time of the Roman military occupation. The Celts were a community- or clan-based society, who were rural and close to nature and the rhythms of the land. In *The Gallic Wars*, written in the first century BC, Julius Caesar states, ‘The whole of Gaul is

divided into three parts; of these one is inhabited by the Belgae, a second by the Aquitani, and the third by a people called *Celts* in their own language and Gauls in ours.<sup>4</sup> The term, however, does not seem to have been used much during or immediately following the Roman occupation; it is never mentioned by Bede, for example, in any of his writings. Although it can be slightly ambiguous to readers today, it is also a helpful term, as Oliver Davies explains in *Celtic Spirituality*:

‘Celtic’, though potentially misleading, remains a useful term in its inclusivity, and is generally to be preferred to ‘Irish’, ‘Welsh’, or even ‘insular’, which – though entirely appropriate in many contexts – are too exclusivist... [The use of the term ‘Celtic’] does maintain the principle of an affinity of language, supporting some kind of affinity of culture between the Celtic-speaking areas, reinforced by extensive cultural contact based on close geographical proximity.<sup>5</sup>

So the term ‘Celtic’ can be useful today to help identify a certain collection of peoples and tribes and kin. Even though there may have been differences in their specifics, there are enough similarities to enable us to see a connection – which, if true for the people, would also follow when speaking of ‘Celtic’ Christianity. Although there were, historically, differences between the Irish, Pictish and Brittonic churches, again there are enough similarities to enable us to see a connection. As Thomas O’Loughlin states in *Celtic Theology*:

In Ireland itself, Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656) was gathering and publishing other materials. His *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates* of 1639, while not using the words ‘Celtic Church’, can be seen as putting the concept into circulation that in the early medieval period there were distinct churches in these islands, distinct from one another and from Rome.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to Celtic Christianity, we are speaking of a distinct style and expression of the Christian faith which reflected the life

and community of these 'Celtic' people groups. Being close to nature and the rhythms of the land, they were also close to the Spirit of God within the surrounding creation, with little or sometimes no influence from the church and hierarchy that was growing out of the old Roman Empire.

As mentioned above, the Celtic Christians of the first millennium AD had three specific times in the year when they would spend 40 days in spiritual preparation. However, these were not the only times at which the Celtic saints set aside a period of 40 days in preparation. Before Brendan set out on his most famous voyage, for example, he spent a 40-day period in prayer and fasting (see page 28 for more details). Aidan (see page 18) spent 40 days wandering the island now known as Lindisfarne praying with his monks, spiritually preparing the land, before they physically prepared the land and built their monastic centre and went out on mission.

The concept of the number 40 representing a time of preparation is reflected in Jewish stories and practices, such as the account of Jesus going into the desert for 40 days before he began his ministry. It would have been a normal mindset for a Jew to think of 40 days of preparation before a major new beginning – hence our 40-day Lent and the three ancient Celtic 40-day periods, following the Jewish example.

So, although this book slots in well as the third book for the Celtic Lent following Pentecost, unlike *Celtic Advent* which is specifically focused on Christmas and *Celtic Lent* which is specifically focused on Easter, this book can also be used in any period of preparation, following the Jewish and Celtic Christian understanding. It could be used as a 40-day preparation for any significant event or as a general 40-day consecutive meditation, with no special event at the end.

You could also come back to the book throughout the year, reading about each saint on their feast day (the day they were 'born into glory', as the Celtic Christians would say – the day their earthly



bodies stopped and their soul was transferred to the spiritual realm/heaven). The saints are presented in alphabetical order, but a list in the order of their feast days is included at the back of the book.

Each of the following 40 readings offers a short biography of a Celtic saint, some scripture, a prayer and a meditation. Some of the biographies are longer than others, as much more is known about some saints than about others. None of them is less important than any other, however; it is simply that different amounts were written down about them. We know, for example, a great deal about the saints who had influence within the Northumbrian kingdom and much of what is now England, as Bede wrote extensively about them, but he did not write much about the saints in Wales, though other good *Lives* exist for them. Ireland has some good histories on certain saints, but other information has been lost, much of it during raids and invasions, such as (but not only) at the time of the Vikings.

I hope the following 40 readings will be an inspiration for you, drawing you into a closer and more intimate relationship with God. I hope they deepen both your understanding and your heart, and I hope that the lives of the saints recorded here will cause you to want to become more Christlike in the actions you take every day.



## The 40 Saints



## Brendan the ‘Navigator’



### **FEAST DAY: 16 May (d. 575)**

Born in the Munster region of Ireland, Brendan grew up in monasteries and planted more when he was a grown man. He was known as a very spiritual man and the spiritual father of almost 3,000 monks.

Brendan embodied the Celtic spirit of adventure: he loved the sea and went on various voyages. Perhaps the most famous was his journey to what is now known as America, nearly 1,000 years before Columbus arrived there. Brendan was inspired to take this incredible adventure after listening to the story of Barinthus’ sea voyage to ‘the island which is called the Promised Land of the Saints’.<sup>20</sup> Brendan took aside a small company of monks to seek their advice. He was determined to make the journey to this Promised Land of the Saints, but asked for their thoughts first. We are told that ‘Brendan and those who were with him completed a 40-day fast in three-day periods before they set out’.<sup>21</sup>

The voyage was certainly an adventure. It was not always easy, but presented many dangers. Often the monks found themselves lacking food and drink, with no land in sight. One of the islands they approached sent fear running through Brendan, as he could hear the sound of bellows and the pounding of hammers. One of the savage-looking inhabitants saw the boat full of monks and, with some tongs, threw a massive red-hot piece of slag at it. Brendan urged the monks to row away from the island, but before long the situation got worse:

All the inhabitants of the island ran down to the shore, each carrying yet more pieces. Some tossed them at the servants

of God... They ran back to their forges, setting them on fire, and soon it appeared that the whole island was one big furnace while the sea boiled like a cooking pot... Even when the island was no longer in sight the wailing of the inhabitants still reached their ears and the stench of the island still filled their nostrils.<sup>22</sup>

There were also some wonderful encounters and moments of God's grace and protection, because 'God wished to show [Brendan] his many wonders in the great ocean'.<sup>23</sup> On one occasion, when they had been at sea for 40 days since their last harbour, 'they saw a creature of immense size following them at a distance; it blew spray from its nostrils and cut through the waves at high speed as if coming to devour them'.<sup>24</sup> Three times the monks raised a cry to God to save them, and Brendan encouraged them to have faith in God.

Another sea monster... rushed to meet the first [and]... immediately attacked it. The old man [Brendan] said to his brothers, 'See, my sons, the wonderful deeds of our Redeemer. See how the beasts obey their Creator. The matter will soon be over, and you will not be harmed by this battle in any way, but it will be remembered as having been to the glory of God.'<sup>25</sup>

The second monster tore the first into three pieces, then swam away. Some days later, the monks arrived at an island. At the place where they harboured their boat, they found one-third of the sea monster, and sat together and ate it. Brendan returned from his successful voyage, back to his home, where he was welcomed with great joy.

The journey that Brendan took has been proven possible,<sup>26</sup> and the documentation that charts the journey has been shown to describe real physical places; for example, 'tall pillars of glass towering out of the sea' are recorded on his journey when he would have been passing glaciers and icebergs.

**Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home?  
Shall I turn my back on my native land and my face towards  
the sea?**

**Shall I put myself wholly at the mercy of God?**

**Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach?**

**A record of my final prayer in my native land.**

**Shall I take my tiny coracle across the wide sparkling ocean?**

**O King of the glorious heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon  
the sea?**

**O Christ, help me on the wild waves!**

Prayer of Brendan

## Meditation

Spend a few moments simply resting. Breathe gently and slowly. Become aware of the constant presence of God which envelops you and permeates you.

Life can be an adventure, and our journey with God is an adventure. Let us face our adventures with the same passion that set Brendan apart from others, and with an excitement that God is drawing us on in life.

What is your inner journey like – the one you are on in your life? How much do you allow God to take control of it? Are you on a self-driven journey or are you on a divine adventure?

We all face times in our lives when we must ‘put out to sea’, leaving the comfort of the known, our ‘native land’, to face the unknown and venture into what may be turbulent waters. Are you willing to trust God as you join his adventure?

Spend time with God now, dwelling upon these questions.

## Scripture

This is the history of the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. Noah walked with God. Noah became the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. God saw the earth, and saw that it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.

God said to Noah, 'I will bring an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them and the earth. Make a ship of gopher wood. You shall make rooms in the ship, and shall seal it inside and outside with pitch. This is how you shall make it. The length of the ship shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. You shall make a roof in the ship, and you shall finish it to a cubit upward. You shall set the door of the ship in its side. You shall make it with lower, second, and third levels. I, even I, do bring the flood of waters on this earth, to destroy all flesh having the breath of life from under the sky. Everything that is in the earth will die. But I will establish my covenant with you. You shall come into the ship, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. Of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ship, to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Of the birds after their kind, of the livestock after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every sort will come to you, to keep them alive. Take with you of all food that is eaten, and gather it to yourself; and it will be for food for you, and for them.' Thus Noah did. He did all that God commanded him.

GENESIS 6:9-22

## Blessing

**May you be willing to set out on the path to which God calls you.**

**May you know the adventure and protection of a life with God.**

**May you be willing to do all that God asks of you, even if you cannot understand it or have no control over it.**



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Simon Reed, author of *Creating Community* (BRF, 2013)



The life stories of the Celtic saints are inspirational. They demonstrate great and unassuming faith, often in the face of insurmountable difficulties.

In *Celtic Saints* David Cole draws us to relate our own life journey and developing relationship with God into the life story of the Celtic saint of the day. A corresponding biblical text and blessing encourages and motivates us to transform our lives for today’s world in the light of such historic faith.



Award-winning author David Cole is an international spiritual teacher and retreat leader and the Deputy Guardian for the Community of Aidan and Hilda. He is the founder of Waymark Ministries, which creates opportunities for people to engage with the Christian message. His books include *Celtic Advent* and *Celtic Lent* (BRF, 2018).

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