



40 DAYS
with the
CELTIC
SAINTS

DEVOTIONAL READINGS
FOR A TIME OF PREPARATION



DAVID COLE

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The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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Introduction

‘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.’¹ 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.’² 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.³

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 the ‘Celtic’ church. 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.⁴

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.

For the Celtic Christians of the first millennium AD, there were specific times in the year when they would spend 40 days in spiritual preparation. This time of preparation, or ‘Lent’, was implemented not only before the Easter celebrations but also before the Christmas ones. The ‘Lesser Lent’ of the Celtic Advent was observed in a similar fashion, not only as a time of preparation for the celebrations of the first coming of Christ, the incarnation, but also as a time to contemplate the second coming of Christ, ensuring that they were prepared for that too. Celtic Advent, or the Lesser Lent, began on the evening of 15 November, 40 days before 25 December (including Sundays).

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 Chapter 6 for more details).

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 ancient Celtic 40-day Advent, following the Jewish example.

So this book, *40 Days with the Celtic Saints*, can be used in your preparations and as an aid to meditation for the 40 days leading up to Easter, as we would understand Lent to be, but it can also be used for the 40-day Lesser Lent, or Celtic Advent. Alternatively, 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.

Lent is a significant part of the modern church calendar. It helps us to prepare for the important celebration of Easter. Lent begins 40 days (plus Sundays) before Easter Day, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday/morning of Ash Wednesday, and is meant to be a time for us to gain an understanding, through giving something up, of what it means to sacrifice. Then, by the time we get to the Easter weekend and contemplate the death of Christ on the cross, we can comprehend, to a small degree, what it meant for Jesus to give up his life.

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. Ireland has some good histories on certain saints, but other information has been lost. Much of the information was lost 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 Christ-like in the actions you take every day.

Using this book during one of the Lent periods

Lent before Easter

Over the 40 days leading up to Easter, the Celts remembered the suffering and victory of Christ and the work of the cross. The main teaching of the cross of Christ for the Celts was the *Christus Victor* concept, based on verses such as 1 John 3:8, which says, 'To this end the Son of God was revealed: that he might destroy the works of the devil', and Colossians 2:15, which says, 'Having stripped the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them [on the cross].' This is quite different from today's Western Church emphasis on the concept of substitution.⁵ A great example of the main teaching on the cross of Christ can be found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood*. This poem depicts a Christ quite different from the one you are probably used to, in our Western churches.

Although the fullest recording of *The Dream of the Rood* is from the tenth-century Vercelli text, there is evidence to suggest that the poem was part of the Christian tradition long before that. One of these pieces of evidence is the Ruthwell Cross, from the heart of the Celtic Christian lands in northern Britain. The Ruthwell Cross has lines of *The Dream*

of the Rood engraved upon it, and is commonly believed to have been carved in the late seventh century, between the Synod of Whitby and the time of Bede. As words from the poem form part of the cross, the poem would have been included in the Christian oral tradition for some time before that.

To begin your preparation for the Lent of Easter from a Celtic perspective, here are a few lines from *The Dream of the Rood*:

Listen! I will describe the best of dreams which I dreamed in the middle of the night when, far and wide, all men slept.

It seemed to me I saw a wondrous tree soaring into the air, surrounded by light, the brightest of crosses; that emblem was entirely cased in gold; beautiful jewels were strewn around its foot...

I saw the glorious tree joyfully gleaming, adorned with garments, decked in gold; the tree of the Ruler was rightly adorned with rich stones; yet through that gold I could see the agony once suffered by wretches, for it bled... I saw that sign often change its clothing and hue, at times dewy with moisture, stained by flowing blood, at times adorned with treasure...

[Then] I heard it utter words; the finest of trees began to speak: 'I remember the morning a long time ago that I was felled... men shifted me on their shoulders and set me on a hill...

I saw the Lord of Mankind hasten with such courage to climb upon me... the young warrior, God Almighty, stripped himself, firm and unflinching. He climbed upon the cross, brave before many, to redeem mankind. I quivered when the hero clasped me... A rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King, the Lord of Heaven... They drove dark nails into me... I was drenched in the blood that streamed from the Man's side after He set His spirit free...

They took Almighty God away. The warrior left me standing there, stained with blood... They laid Him down, limb-weary; they stood at the [warrior's] head, they beheld there the Lord of Heaven; and there He rested for a while, worn-out after battle. And then they began to build a sepulchre.⁶

Lent before Christmas

The Celtic Christians believed that the incarnation of Christ was not just shown through Mary in the physical birth of Jesus, but that it is happening all the time through the birth of Jesus spiritually within us—not just once at ‘conversion’, but repeatedly, each time we make the choice to walk in the ways of Christ rather than walk our own way.

Preparation throughout the Lesser Lent also means ensuring that we are ready not only to welcome Christ within ourselves, but also to welcome him when he returns to reconcile all things to God at the end of the age. Over the 40 days leading up to Christmas, the Celts remembered the three comings of Christ:

- The coming of Christ in physical form as a baby through Mary.
- The coming of Christ into our lives in Spirit, through our faith.
- The coming of Christ at the end of the age to reconcile all things to God.

As part of your Lesser Lent preparation for Christmas from a Celtic perspective, contemplate the three comings of Christ within your own context and life.

May your time of Advent be one of preparation for the coming of Christ, not just a consumer-driven rush of partying and purchasing.

Whether at Christmas or at Easter, the Celtic Christians, reflecting the culture they came from, threw great feasts for the celebration days. Don't forget that Lent is about the preparation. Make sure you have the celebration as well!



6

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 3000 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 1000 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'.²⁰ 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'.²¹

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.²²

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'.²³ 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'.²⁴ 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.'²⁵

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,²⁶ 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.



7

Brigid

FEAST DAY: 1 February (d.525)

The feast day of Brigid of Kildare, celebrated just before the Christian festival of lights, is also the first day of Imbolc (meaning something like ‘Ewe’s milk’), the beginning of the Celtic season of spring, passing from the darkness of the season of death (winter) and celebrating the coming of new life. Imbolc is a very feminine festival, with great emphasis on the importance of women in the community.

Brigid of Kildare was well known as an embodiment of the Celtic traditions of both the *anam chara* (she is famed for saying that ‘a person without an *anam chara* is like a body without a head’) and generosity.

When Brigid was a young girl, her father was so afraid that she would make the family bankrupt by giving everything away that he tried to marry her off to a local chieftain. He took her to the chieftain in a beautiful carriage, and left her in it while he went to find the man. As a sign of respect and peace to the chieftain, Brigid’s father left his sword in the carriage. While Brigid waited, a beggar came along, asking for alms. Brigid’s heart burst with compassion when she saw him, but she said she had nothing to give. As the beggar turned to leave, Brigid remembered her father’s sword with its gold-covered scabbard. Calling the beggar back, she gave the sword away.

On the father’s return, he saw that his sword had gone and Brigid explained everything. When the chieftain understood that Brigid would also give away everything he owned, he refused to take her in marriage. Brigid’s father, at the end of his tether, allowed Brigid to leave and become a bride of Christ, which was all she had wanted.²⁷

Brigid was known as a spiritual midwife. Born in Ireland around the time that Patrick died, she is famous for being the person who 'brought Christianity up' in Ireland, after Patrick had brought it to birth there.

Brigid is also known for her great heart towards all who were spiritually open, and her many encounters with such people, including druids. One famous story tells how she nursed a pagan chief to health and taught him about the love of Christ by weaving a cross from reeds. The 'Brigid cross' is a lovely interwoven square cross that many people put in places that are not used over the winter but will be used much in the spring and summer, as a blessing to that place and the earth.²⁸

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.

Brigid was a person with great generosity of heart, who saw the need of all, great and lowly, and desired to give them all she could. She saw the importance of total dedication to God in all she did, and believed that no one, despite what they themselves might have thought, was beyond her help.

How do you express the generosity of God? Does your heart of generosity extend more toward people you know, or those who are Christians, than it does toward strangers and people of other faiths?

Spend time with God now, dwelling upon these questions.

Scripture

He, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbour?’

Jesus answered, ‘A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he travelled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, “Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.” Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbour to him who fell among the robbers?’

He said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’

Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

LUKE 10:29–37

Blessing

*May you know the generosity of God poured out upon you.
May you not only receive God’s generosity, but also be a channel
for it to flow out into the world.
May you express this generosity without distinction, to stranger
and friend.*

The life stories of the Celtic saints are inspirational. They demonstrate great and unassuming faith, often in the face of insurmountable difficulties. In *40 Days with the 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.



Previously a full-time church minister, David Cole is an international spiritual teacher and retreat leader, an award-winning author and an Explorer Guide for the Community of Aidan and Hilda. He is also the founder of Waymark Ministries which creates opportunities for people to engage with the Christian message. David lives in the New Forest with his wife and two children.

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