

Irish Celtic Christianity

with a focus on Kells



Market Cross, Kells, Co. Meath, (outside old Courthouse)

Inspiration for Today

by Paddy Monaghan

Introduction

Kells is the most historic town in Co. Meath, made famous by the world renowned Book of Kells. It is 60k north west of Dublin. I had the privilege of growing up in Kells, where my father owned Monaghan's Pub and Grocery shop from the 1930's at the top of Carrick St. This little Booklet briefly tells the story of Kells' Christian heritage, my own story and how they interconnect. Many a time as a boy I played handball, hurling and football for Kells.

I remember also playing on the historic Market Cross, then in the centre of the town. It didn't mean much to me, except to play games on. It was only in 1970, on Summer work in New York as a 19-year-old UCD student, that I learned to value this Cross. I met some Irish Americans who had saved up to visit Kells in particular and see the Cross whose significance I had been oblivious to as a child. I returned home determined to have a careful look at it for the first time.

It was 2 years later, while I was studying at UCD that I came to truly value the town I grew up in and the incredible Christian heritage that Kells and in particular, its famous Book has left us. This is why I find Irish Celtic Christianity so inspirational today. I joke with new acquaintances that my ancestors wrote a famous book, that Trinity College took it and now won't give it back to Kells.



The Book of Kells



Paddy on Market Cross, outside the old Courthouse, Kells

Early Kells

The Annals of the Four Masters mentions Kells as having been a seat of kings from before the Christian era. Old and Middle Age Irish tales describe Cenannas na Ríg, ‘Kells of the kings’¹, as a royal stronghold surrounded by a rampart. It was built upon a ridge which rises to 100 metres above sea level.

Christianity may have been introduced into the area by St. Patrick. His church was said to have been established on the left bank of the River Blackwater, on the east side of the present town, in what is now the Headfort demesne. Another local connection with the national saint is St. Patrick’s Well in Carlanstown.

The history of Kells itself begins with Diarmait Mac Cerbaill – High King of Ireland from 539 AD until 558 AD. The Dun of Kells, granted, according to the Book of Lismore, to St. Colmcille, was one of his strongholds. St. Patrick was believed to have visited him there. Colmcille prophesied that Kells would be the most outstanding of all his foundations.

Kells and Christianity

Columban Abbey

By the beginning of the ninth century the Columban Abbey was developing rapidly. The Annals of Ulster for 804 AD shows the Columban community of Iona was transferred to Kells which became the principal Irish Columban foundation. From 808 AD to 813 AD a new church was built. Kells was called the “splendour of Ireland.”¹

Kells Monastery was a large complex, surrounded by a circular wall. There was an open space with a cross outside the entrance. A low wall separated the monastic area from the secular area. Inside was St. Colmcille’s House, the Round Tower, the High Crosses, scriptorium, classrooms for students and huts in which the monks slept. One historian estimated that the monastery housed between 300 and 500 monks, plus other ancillary staff.

By the tenth century, education and the work of highly skilled craftsmen were important features of life. At this time, in Ireland as elsewhere, only a small number of monks were priests. Teaching in the monastic schools was centred on the Scriptures.

Kells had a troubled history in the twelfth century. There are many references in the Annals to raids and burnings, being burned twenty-one times and plundered seven. In 1117 the abbot and community were killed.

¹ https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/ihta_04_kells_text.pdf

Life in the Monastery

There were three communal buildings – the refectory or dining room, the chapel and the library, which housed the scriptorium. The monks lived in individual cells but sometimes there were two or three to a cell. They slept in their habits. Fishing was very important, as were prayer, study and manual labour. Each day the canonical hours were recited. The Eucharist was celebrated on Sundays and feast days. They partook of one meal a day – in the evening. Wednesday and Friday were fast days, except when a guest arrived. The monks did not work on Sundays and holy days but instead devoted themselves to prayer and worship.

Colmcille 521 -597

The name Colmcille occurs often in Kells today, eight places being named in his honour: St. Columba's Church, St. Colmcille's House, St. Colmcille's Church, Iona Hall, Scoil Cholmcille, Colmcille's Well and Gaeil Colmcille. In addition, the Book of Kells was composed in his honour.

As a monk he received the name Columba meaning 'dove'. It seems that Colmcille was tall and striking, powerfully built and with a dominating personality. He was a man of obvious ability with the skills of a poet and scholar as well as being a natural leader. He was regarded by contemporaries as a visionary, author of astonishing predictions and insights, a worker of miracles, a spiritual father of awesome authority.

He founded monastic communities in Derry and in Durrow. At the age of 43 he moved to the island of Iona, which is situated off the west coast of Scotland. Iona became the centre of Colmcille's work and he died there thirty-three years later in 597.

The manuscripts that Colmcille wrote were held in high esteem in Ireland. The only manuscript attributed to Colmcille extant today is a Psalter, the so-called Cathach, now in the Royal Irish Academy. Of the 300 books attributed to him, none survive today. He opened the way for the Irish missionary movement, which was to be the glory of the Irish Church.

Celtic Christian Spirituality

The early Celts tended to be eloquent, quick-tempered, with a love of music and the arts. Organisation was not a high priority – relating to people in a personal way took precedence. These characteristics shone forth when they embraced Christianity. The Celtic Christians also had a deep love for Scripture, the word of God.

The Cathach -the Psalter of St. Columba

Besides the Book of Kells, the Cathach is another treasure from the monastery at Kells. It enshrined a late sixth century copy of the Psalms thought to have been written by St. Colmcille. It is the oldest Irish manuscript and is now in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. It dates from the 6th century, was written in Latin but only 58 leaves of it have survived. A shrine for the Cathach was made in the 11th century. It is now in the National Museum and its maker's name carved on it - Sitric Mac Maec Aeda, a Viking monk in Kells.



The Crozier of Kells

The Columban monastery was noted for its metalwork and the Crozier of Kells is a good example of this. It is now in the British Museum. It is four feet four inches high and the ornamental work dates back to the 9th – 12th Centuries.



St. Ciarán

St. Ciarán was probably a native of Tailteann. It appears likely that he was associated with the Columban monastery of Kells. He was an administrator, a scholar and a scribe, who compiled a life of St. Patrick. Unfortunately, this work has not survived. His name is honoured in St. Ciarán's Well, a holy well which is in Castlekeeran, 6 kilometres outside Kells off the Oldcastle Road on the right.

Book of Kells

By far the most outstanding relic from our ancestors in Ireland is the Book of Kells, which towers above all surviving manuscripts of the same era from the point of view of decoration. The Annals of Ulster describes it as ‘The Chief Relic of the Western World’.

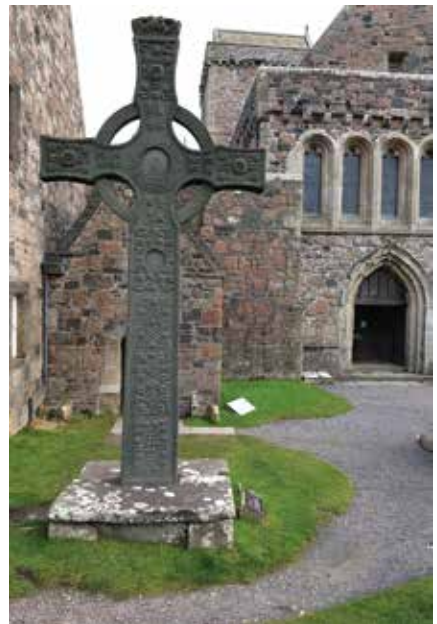


Lavishly decorated text that opens the Gospel of John

The Book of Kells contains **678 illuminated pages** while the two remaining pages contain no illustrations. This illuminated manuscript of the **Four Gospels in Latin is made of Vellum or calf skin**. Approximately 150 calf skins were dressed and cut to leaves measuring 330 x240 mm in a monastery scriptorium, probably in Iona, as an **Altar Book to honour the 200th anniversary of St. Colmille’s death** - he died in 597 AD.

Work on the Book was interrupted by a Viking raid, one of five, on the monastery in Iona at the end of the 8th century. One of the scribes was killed and the monks who survived, led by Abbot Cellach, came to the comparative safety of the Columban monastery in Kells and brought with them their unfinished masterpiece. Kells now became the great cultural centre of the Iona tradition.

Several different styles of script appear in the Book of Kells. They are derived from the monasteries of the north of England and Europe. Three or four scribes were involved in the work of writing. The letters would be enough in themselves to make the Book of Kells a great work of art. The scribes are very human – they made many mistakes, misspelled words, left blank pages and even wrote the same word twice.



Replica of St. John’s Cross outside Abbey Church in Iona today.

Book of Kells Illustrations

Colours were made from natural dyes from pigments possibly obtained in Egypt and probably mixed with the white of an egg. Goose quills were probably used to write. Many artists decorated the highly ornamented text of each page with the most intricate colourful designs. The Book contains six major decorated pages two for St. Matthew's Gospel, and one each for the other three Gospels. The sixth decorated page is the Eight Circle Cross.



Example of the small illustrations in one initial in the Book of Kells

Outstanding features are the full page illustrations of Christ, of the Evangelists and of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The magnificent 'Chi-Rho' is characterised by a delicate interweaving of many lines in each pattern. **One expert traced as many as 158 interlacings in the space of one quarter of an inch square.**

Later History of the Book of Kells

The Book was stolen from the sacristy of St. Columba's Church in Kells in 1007AD and was found three months later in a field off the Oldcastle Road on the left of the lane going down to St. Colmcille's Well. Its golden cover had disappeared forever. There were also about 60 pages of St. John's Gospel missing.

The great Gospel Book survived several Viking raids and burnings of the monastery and remained in the Columban church until Cromwell's cavalry were housed there in 1654, when the Governor of Kells sent it to Dublin for safety. In 1661 it was presented to Trinity College by the Anglican Bishop of Meath, Henry Jones and was displayed in the Long Room of the old library of the College.

In 1953 it was rebound into four separate books and is now in an excellent state of preservation. Each day two of these volumes have a page displayed.

In 1992 the Book was moved to a new chamber in Trinity. Over a million people view the Book each year. It is encased in a protective glass case where humidity conditions are controlled by special crystals and temperatures are maintained at 18 degrees Celsius.

Facsimile copies of the Book are on display in Kells in the Old Courthouse, St Ciaran's Community School, St. Colmcille's Church and St. Columba's Church. A smaller copy is on view in the Headfort Arms Hotel.

Battle of the Boyne and Orange Order

The Battle of the Boyne in 1690 had important consequences for Meath, not least being the consolidation of the Protestant ascendancy power over Roman Catholics. Because Kells was a monastic Irish settlement, Irish was the original tongue of the town. It was only when the Cromwellian Plantation occurred that Irish culture received a death blow in the area.

The Orange Order, founded in 1795, had one lodge in Kells – Lodge 642. Tradition has it that rebels were hung from the Market Cross of Kells in the Rising of 1798, causing the fracture of the Cross.

The Great Hunger – 1845-1849

The Irish Famine or the Great Hunger as it has been called had a profound influence on Irish history and on the Irish mind. We have only to think of the tide of emigration and the sense of hopelessness it engendered in Irish people. A census carried out in 1841 shows Kells had a population of 6,839, of whom 4,326 were in the town. The decrease in population in the Kells area was 38% by 1851, obviously due to the Famine.

It was providential that both the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers came to Kells before the Famine and set up schools in 1843 and 1844 respectively.

In 1844, Edward Stopford was appointed Anglican Rector of Kells. When the Famine was at its height he often spent eight hours a day helping with relief. In 1847, the Sisters of Mercy visited, cared for and instructed the sick and dying in the Workhouse.



The oldest known photo of an Irish Famine survivor was taken by photographer John Gregory Grace in 1853

Kells Workhouse

Every vestige of the old workhouse is gone. It was situated on the Moynalty Rd, where O'Growney Terrace is now located.

Only the burial ground of the old union Workhouse remains – the Pauper Graveyard at Lloyd. The Workhouse was built under the 1837 Irish Poor Law Act. Jails were built for criminals and workhouses were built and run on prison lines for paupers. It opened its doors in 1842 with accommodation for 600 inmates. At the time of the Famine in 1847 there were 1,100 people in the Workhouse. I never knew till recently that the house I grew up in – Monaghan's Pub and Shop at the top of Carrick St - was built on the Famine Workhouse grounds.

The Fever Hospital

It was erected on the west side of Fair Green in 1829, where Supervalu is now. Those who died there were buried in the Pauper's Graveyard at the Tower of Lloyd, where the bodies were brought by horse and cart.



Troops at Kells Workhouse in 1870. The Workhouse was demolished in the 1960's.

Places to Visit in Kells today

St. Colmcille's House

The 10th Century stone building is small but massive. It has a high pitched roof and was part of the monastic foundation. An opening in the ceiling gives access to the croft above. Two small windows, one on the east and one on the south light the main room. The original purpose of the building is not known but it was probably an oratory possibly with residential rooms above. Some think that St. Colmcille's House may have been the scriptorium, where books were stored, studied and written and that the small rooms above served as store rooms for manuscripts and other writing material.



Round Tower

Like other round towers in Ireland it was built in Ireland between 900 and 1100 AD. It was probably built to defend the monastic church, to store treasures, to watch for invaders and, in times of peace, to serve as a belfry.

It was built of stone from the inside with a series of wooden floors and ladders. It's about 29 metres high and tapers towards the top. Apart from the missing conical roof, the Tower is quite perfect. The small doorway is raised, some distance from the ground.

Inside may be seen the stone ledges on which the floors of the different storeys rested. At the top there are 5 windows – a departure from the normal type which has four openings facing the four cardinal points. These five windows have either square, round or triangular heads, remarkable that in all 3 shapes of window heads found in Round Towers, all occur in this tower. The reason for the five openings is probably to be found in the fact that the town was formerly approached by five roads, from Navan, Cavan, Oldcastle, Athboy and Ardee, for which five gates were made in Anglo Norman times.

St. Colmcille's Well

It is situated off the Oldcastle Road. The lands surrounding it belonged to the nearby St. Mary's Abbey. People still meet at this well for prayer and worship on St. Colmcille's feast day with Kells Silver Band in June.

Kells High Crosses

During the 9th and 10th centuries the Viking invasions disrupted monastic life and Irish art. However, sculpture in stone continued to flourish and, for nearly 200 years, figure carving in stone was the chief form of creative activity in Ireland. Some of the finest examples are the high crosses of Kells. The design of all the crosses was based on a system of measurements and proportions which were consciously and precisely planned.

They were erected as symbols of Christ's victory over death and were decorated with panels of scripture scenes. People could gather around them for instruction, for prayer and for meditation.

There are four highly significant sandstone crosses in Kells and also the base of a fifth. Three stand in St. Columba's churchyard. The fourth and best known – the Market cross – is in front of the old courthouse.

1. The Market Cross

It is generally regarded as an ancient termon cross, marking the boundary of the town. It probably once stood at the entrance to the monastic city and probably dates from the middle of the 9th century.

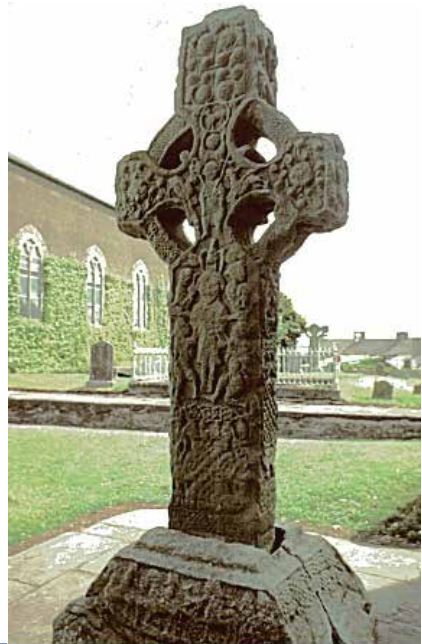
Biblical depictions include Christ in the tomb, Christ Risen as King with shield and spear, Adam and Eve, Cain, Daniel in the Lion's den, the anointing of David, the sacrifice of Isaac, the child Jesus in his mother's arm, Noah driving animals into the Ark, the adoration of the Magi, the miracle at Cana, the miracle of loaves and fishes, the crucifixion, Moses receiving the law, David killing the Lion, and Jacob and the Angels.



2. The South Cross

The Cross of Patrick and Columba Probably dates from the middle of the ninth century, making it the oldest of the Kells' crosses. There is a Latin inscription on it – 'Patricii et Columgae crux'. The Cross is very ornate and closely resembles decorations found in the Book of Kells.

Biblical depictions include the Fall of Adam and Eve, Cain killing Abel, the Sacrifice of Isaac, David the Harpist and Christ in Majesty



3. The East Cross (Unfinished Cross)

Some consider that it was built around 1100AD. It stands some distance to the east of the other crosses in the Church of Ireland church-yard. Very little of the decoration was begun.

Biblical depiction is the Crucifixion, represented with the figure erect and the feet separate. The arms are extended in an attitude of suffering. An angel is on each side supporting Christ.

4. The West Cross (Broken Cross)

This monument is more highly finished than the others. It was carved in the tenth century, a hundred years later than the South Cross. It is very similar to the Monasterboice cross, which helps to fix its date. Only the broken shaft of this cross remains.

Biblical depictions include the Baptism of Christ (Jesus is small and John is big), Adam and Eve in the Garden, Noah's ark (God is shown behind the Ark). There are also some abstract designs which have parallels in the Book of Kells.



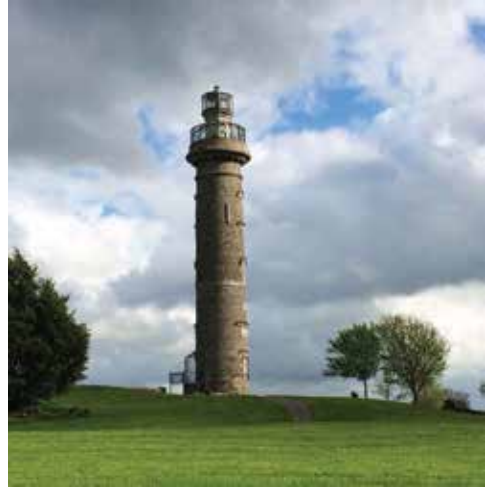
5. The North Cross



Only the base of this cross survives, standing to the north of the Church of Ireland church, not far from the old Tower. It is in the shape of a truncated cone. The surface of the stone is worn, leaving the decoration largely destroyed.

Tower of Lloyd

The Tower of Lloyd was erected in 1791 by the first Earl of Bective. It is built in two sections joined by a stone 'belt.' At the top there is a rounded elevation with a railing around it. The staircase with 201 steps is circular and is lit by windows. On the side facing the town is the Headfort Coat of Arms with the family crest - 'consequitur quodquinque petit' - 'He follows what he seeks'.



Paupers' Graveyard

The ground taken from the town grazing land at Lloyd was granted by Kells Union Workhouse to be used as a burial ground for paupers, subject to a lane being built from the morgue at the back of the Workhouse to Lloyd road so that corpses would not be brought through the town. A second condition was that a proper lane be built from the main road to the burial ground with proper fences and gates.

In recent years a very touching ceremony is held at midday on Christmas Day. The local Council joins in a prayer service with local clergy and people at the Paupers' Graveyard and a portion of Isaiah is read every year:



“On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food. On this mountain he will remove the mourning veil covering all peoples. He will destroy Death for ever. The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek” Isaiah 25:6-8

Paddy Monaghan: Encounter with Jesus

A restored personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ was the gospel proclaimed by the early Celtic missionaries such as Colmcille, Ciaran and Patrick. It was through involvement in a charismatic prayer group that I came into this same kind of personal relationship with God – by accepting the same good news of restoration to God through the death and resurrection of His Son.



It was one morning in Jan 1973, while reading my Bible in my bedsit in Rathmines, that the words just suddenly seemed to leap out from the pages at me. It was no longer just “the word of God”, but His love letter to me. I was overwhelmed by the incredible love of God for me personally. I realised that, if I was the only person that ever lived, Jesus would have died for me. That thought blew me away. I said to Jesus, “Come into my life, I repent of all my sin; I want to live for you from this moment on. Just please don’t send me to China!”

I remember cycling into UCD that morning singing the praises of God from my heart. I met a University porter who said to me, “You look so happy you must be in love!” I didn’t stop to explain that I was in love, but with Jesus!

For the next two weeks I prayed sincerely about giving up my Master’s Degree and becoming a priest. God showed me very clearly that that vocation wasn’t the one for me, that I should finish my Masters and work in business, and that this would prepare me for the Irish Mission field.

The early Irish Celtic Christians, like those who gave their lives for him in Kells, also had such a life-changing encounter with Jesus. I thank the Lord for the Irish Celtic church and its spiritual heritage, and the inspiration it is to me and many others today.

The Irish Celtic monks (like those in Kells) focused on:

- Worship and Prayer
- Lifestyle of learning, training and equipping others
- Study of Scripture
- Establishing centres of hospitality
- Adventurous missionary endeavour

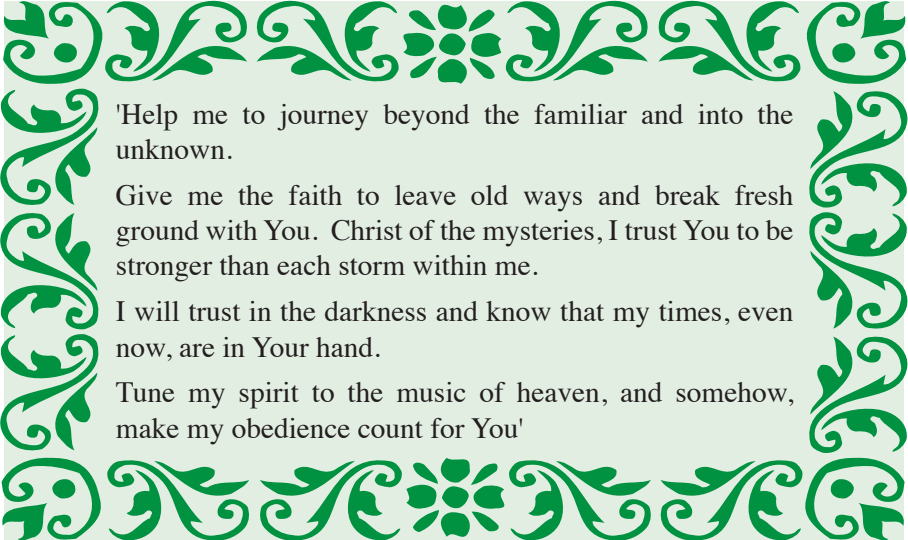
If all our churches were to develop these five characteristics, we would again see an expansion of the Church in Ireland and abroad.

The Irish Celtic monks first encountered the risen Lord Jesus and everything else flowed from this. This basic requirement was re-affirmed by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, quoting Pope Benedict, when he said: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with a person [Jesus Christ]. A developed and mature Christian faith requires knowledge of the scriptures. We have to know the scriptures, to love the scriptures, to understand the scriptures, to prayerfully read the scriptures. All of us have to learn to take up the scriptures every day.”

It is important to know that God has no favourites. He longs for a personal relationship with each one of us. Like Colmcille, we need to hear him knocking at the door of our hearts and invite him into our lives. In this way we will encounter the living God in his Son Jesus.

The sense of adventure that led Colmcille to establishing the Monastery in Iona, is legendary. So too for many others such as Ciarán, Patrick, Bridget.

This sense of adventure is summed up in the wonderfully inspiring
Prayer of St. Brendan:



'Help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown.

Give me the faith to leave old ways and break fresh ground with You. Christ of the mysteries, I trust You to be stronger than each storm within me.

I will trust in the darkness and know that my times, even now, are in Your hand.

Tune my spirit to the music of heaven, and somehow, make my obedience count for You'

This also has been my experience in the 46 years since I encountered Jesus. Would that all my fellow Irish men and women and all who profess the name of Jesus in Ireland would have this encounter, that we would again experience a revival of Christ-empowered life amongst all our people! What happened before through Patrick, Colmcille etc. can happen again in 21st century Ireland.

A Prayer:

“Send your Holy Spirit Lord and send revival. We ask that you would raise up people like Patrick, Colmcille, Ciarán – once again in our nation. Amen.

Conclusion

We have an amazing Christian heritage in Ireland. In the fifth century Christianity came to Ireland. Irish monks re-evangelised most of Europe when it had lost its way. It is right to honour our heritage and to call young people to again be inspired by it. Our young people need to encounter our Lord Jesus Christ and to heed the call to intentional discipleship modelled in the early Celtic Church. Ireland is full of places where the Irish Celtic Christian church made its mark, such as my home town of Kells.

If you would like to encounter Jesus and begin to develop your personal relationship with God, here is a very simple prayer which you may like to use in taking that step:

“Lord Jesus Christ, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. (Pause to ask His forgiveness for anything that is on your conscience). Please forgive me. I now turn from everything which I know is wrong. Thank you that you died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free. Thank you that you offer me forgiveness and the gift of your Spirit. I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me forever as Saviour and Lord of my life. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

I hope and pray that this little Pamphlet will be an inspiration to you to seek to encounter the living Jesus as Colmcille and the early Celtic Christians encountered Him. Let us believe together for Christian Revival in Ireland. As the old song says:

“God can do it again and again. He’s the same God today as he always has been. Yesterday, now, forever. He’s always the same. There’s no reason to doubt. God can do it again.”

Poem about Kells

“This ancient and historic town
With its famous book of world renown
A work of art, a treasure rare
Has no equal or compare
The Cross of Kells, steeped in tradition
And many Crosses in addition
Its lofty tower, its belfry too
St. Colmcille’s House and Spire view
The Abbey Tower with caves below
Where long ago the monks had to go
The burial place in the Abbey field
Where simply bones lie concealed
This town of Kells has no equal
With its historic past and spire and steeple”

Written by Kells woman – the late Babs McKenna

Irish Celtic Christianity

with a focus on Kells

Edited by Paddy Monaghan, who grew up in Kells, emigrated to Dublin and lives with his wife Anne near Dun Laoghaire. Paddy serves on the Parish Council of Johnstown/Killiney Parish in Dublin and as Secretary of the Evangelical Catholic Initiative (www.evancat.org). He also works part time for Alpha Ireland (www.alphaireland.org).

With grateful thanks to the Christian Brothers in Kells and in particular to local Christian Brother Leo Judge, who wrote “The Story of Kells” in 1993, from which much of the detail here is taken, with permission. Thanks also to my friend Matthew Rudolph, Messianic Jew and leader of Gateways Beyond International, (www.gbcy.org), who is a great inspiration to me.

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