

A Twitch upon the Thread
Homily for a Celtic Eucharist

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost—29 October 2017
Revd Martin Johnson.

Deuteronomy 34.1-12; Psalm 90.1-6,13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2.1-13; Matthew 22.34-46

My speech—may it praise you without flaw:

May my heart love you, King of heaven and earth.

My speech—may it praise you without flaw:

Make it easy for me, pure Lord, to do you all service and to adore you.

My speech—may it praise you without flaw:

Father of all affection, hear my poems and my speech. Amen.

... The words of a 12th Century Irish poet.

Hear O Israel, the Lord your God the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Today we heard this crucial text.

The first part is known as the *Shema*, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord your God the Lord is one.' It is the centrepiece of Jewish prayer life. The Jews hope to say the *Shema* as their last words, and parents teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night. Our reciting of it takes us back to our Jewish roots, to very core of our faith — belief in one God. In the second part Jesus is quoting first from the book Deuteronomy and then from the Book of Leviticus. We are reaching back to the ethic of these ancient people and finding in it an ethic for our own lives. It is an enduring thread which Christians from earliest times have endeavoured to grasp and live.

Today we are reaching back into our Christian roots, to the church of the ancient peoples of the British Isles our spiritual forebears; people that have become known as the Celts and in doing so we are rediscovering that thread. Theirs was an ancient spirituality and we can detect something of its antiquity by the issues brought to the Synod of Whitby that was called in 664AD at Whitby Abbey and presided over by Hilda the formidable Abbess. The two issues that predominated seem on one level to us to mere trifles, but they were incredibly significant to those Celtic people. They were method by which Easter was calculated and the style of the monastic tonsure, (the haircut of the monks, in other words). We'll hear no more complaints about modern synods!

Why were these issues so contentious? They were so because they involved the very foundation of the faith and practice of that early Church. The Celtic people celebrated Easter at the same time as the Jews celebrated Passover and the monks wore their tonsure in a particular way—the front of their head was shaved not the crown, because like the Jews the Commandments and the *Shema* were to be kept 'as a symbol on your forehead.'

The text then that we hear every time the Eucharist is celebrated links us with those ancient Christians and through them to the Jewish people of the 1st Century. Like so much of the practice of the early Church our recitation of the *Shema* and summary of the law was lost in our liturgical practice only to be reinstated in the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* and it has been continued on from there into the Australian prayer books of 1978 and 1995. So, we are slowly rediscovering the wisdom of the ages which so often gets lost and forgotten. I read this recently

from a British scholar of the Ancient Church: ‘I discovered a burning and evangelical love for the Bible, a depth of spiritual life and stillness a radical commitment to the poor and to God’s creation; and the most attractive expression of charismatic life that I had yet encountered. ... 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.’¹

This is I think a wonderful statement of this ancient spirituality. As a curate, I was fortunate in that one of churches in the parish in which I was serving was dedicated to St Aidan, a little church at Swanpool. I think in him we can find the embodiment of this spirituality. He was sent out from the monastic community of Iona in Scotland to North Eastern England to lead in the restoring of the English people to Christianity. He set up a monastery on the Island of Lindisfarne. He travelled everywhere on foot. Giving away a horse that the King had given him. (Much to the annoyance of the King) He encouraged believers and invited unbelievers to accept the mystery of faith. He cared for the poor. He rebuked the rich and powerful when they oppressed the poor. He encouraged learning from and meditation upon the Bible. Towards the end of his life he gave himself completely to prayer and contemplation. He died in the year 651AD. Some call him, “The Apostle to the English” he is perhaps our Father in faith in this Anglican tradition. He is a part of that thread that links us to our forebears. The Celtic people have left us fine ornate stone crosses, with their distinctive never-ending patterns placed over the circle representing the world. They wrote wonderful manuscripts and I recall once coming to Canberra to see the Book of Kells. They created fine thread with which to create tapestry for their churches and homes. For these ancient peoples, fine thread became a symbol of their relationship to God and with their roots; strong and yet easily broken by sin. It is for us now to keep these threads intact. They too link us to God, through our wonderful tradition, we break them at our peril.

“A Twitch upon the Thread” is the title of Book II of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. A devout member of the Flyte family—the main characters of the novel—is bemoaning the fact that members of the family have turned their back on the faith. She says: ‘But God won’t let them go for long, you know. I wonder if you remember the story Mummy read us the evening Sebastian first got drunk. Father Brown said something like “I caught him (the thief) with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.”’

Celtic spirituality is an authentic spirituality, it is of God and we are connected to it by a long a delicate thread. Though we find it difficult sometimes to find that thread because of its antiquity we can feel its twitch if we are open to it, it is a burning and evangelical love for the Bible a depth of spiritual life and stillness a radical commitment to the poor and to God’s creation; and the most attractive expression of charismatic life.

Let us always be open to that thread in our lives and feel its twitch. Amen.

1. Michael Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today*. Revd edn. (Abingdon: BRF, 2010), 13–14.