

# **First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, Florida**

## **Lenten Luncheons Lent 2007**

### **Reflections on the Cross of Jesus**

**by Huw Christopher, Pastor**

**Tuesday, March 27, 2007**

### **The Celtic Cross**

**Hymn:**

**How Great Thou Art”**

**Stanzas 1 and 3**

Last week as we thought about the anchor cross we saw how it was one of the earliest symbols of the cross that was used in the Christian Church. At the same time we also recognized that it was probably the least familiar form of the cross to us today since its form looks more like an anchor than a cross. We remembered that this was quite deliberate because it was used originally as a secret sign at times when Christians were being persecuted. I apologize that I did not invite the few people who were wearing anchor crosses last week to identify themselves. There were so few who were wearing them because the anchor cross this is probably the least common form of the various crosses we are considering that we see displayed. I know my wife, Rachel, as many of you are aware has a variety of necklaces of crosses but does not have an anchor cross. Today, though, we probably turn to what next to the Latin Cross is the most familiar form of the cross, especially for us as Presbyterians. Because of its association with Scotland the Celtic Cross is often called the Presbyterian Cross. Many people are pleased that they can wear Celtic crosses that they or someone has purchased in Scotland. Such a cross, though, is not confined to Scotland. Growing up in Wales I was

familiar with the stone Celtic Crosses that are to be seen in various places, though, probably like many people there I was not really familiar with their meaning or their history. Some of you have seen the example of the Celtic Cross that I purchased last time I was back in Wales. That particular one is made from Welsh Coal which for many years was the livelihood of the area of Wales in which I was raised. Although Rachel and I have never been to Scotland she has a number of Celtic Cross necklaces that she has purchased in Wales.

The fact that such Celtic Crosses should be made and sold in Wales in Welsh souvenir shops reminds us that the Celtic Cross is by no means the possession just of Scotland. In fact in a series of articles about different crosses that Jeff Allen shared with me it is called the Irish Cross. As such one writer has said that “Presbyterians and Catholics are often startled to learn that the other considers this symbol their own. In our modern multicultural world the ringed cross is as much a symbol of ethnic heritage as it is of faith and it is often used as an emblem of ones Irish, Scottish or Welsh identity.” (Stephen Walker April 17, 1996 in website article on the symbolism of the Celtic Cross) After I had read that comment last Friday I was reminded of it very visible when later that day I was reading the Ninnau, a Welsh American newspaper, which had come in the mail that day where on one page there were two pictures of Celtic Crosses relating to articles about Wales neither of which were particularly religious.

Part of the reason for calling the Celtic Cross the Irish Cross goes back to a legend of how St. Patrick when preaching to some soon-to-be converted heathens is said to have been shown a sacred standing stone that was marked with a circle that was symbolic of the moon goddess. Patrick is said to have made the mark of a Latin cross through the circle and blessed the stone thus making the first Celtic Cross. In this way he was said to have attempted to “bridge the gap” between the worship of the Celtic moon and sun gods and the worship of Jesus as the Son of God. It is also suggested that linking the cross as the symbol of Christianity with the circle as

the symbol of the sun he was giving to those whom he was seeking to convert to Christianity the idea of the importance of the cross by linking it with the idea of the life-giving properties of the sun.

The circle on the cross was also interpreted as not just referring to the sun and the moon, but also to being a symbol of eternity, since the circle has no beginning or ending. As such it is also seen as a symbol of the eternal life that God offers to us through the cross of Jesus.

The fact that the Celtic Cross may originally have been based on circles to the moon or sun goddesses has meant that some people have wanted to question whether the symbolism of the Celtic Cross is originally pagan, therefore, not appropriate for us to use as Christians. Certainly if the Celtic Cross prompts us to worship the sun or the moon as god then it is not appropriate for us, but as both of the hymns we are singing today remind us the Christian tradition does not begin with the cross but with the God of Creation, the maker of the heaven and the earth. As such the emphasis within the Celtic Christian tradition on God speaking to us not just through the cross but also through the world of nature is indeed an important one that has been re-captured in recent years with revival of interest in the Celtic Cross and the whole emphasis of Celtic Christianity. If we see the greatness of God only in the world of nature we see only part of God's greatness. At the same time if we see the greatness of God only in the cross of Jesus we see only part of God's greatness.

The connection between the Celtic Cross and Scotland has been seen with the life and work of St. Columba. He was raised in a noble Irish family and trained in Irish monasteries. His zeal to share and extend the faith prompted him in 563 to leave his native Ireland and to go to Scotland where he and twelve companions established a monastery on the small island of Iona. This monastery later became the center for Celtic Christianity learning and retreat in Scotland and Northern

England. Wherever the mission of the church spread stone or wooden crosses with the circle around the top were erected. Many of them have traditions about the people who first preached in that location. For many people they became roadside shrines where travelers might stop, face east and pray devoutly. Later such designs were used to mark the boundaries of churchyards, which led them to become a common model for Memorial Crosses on the graves of dead Christians.

St. Columba though part of the Celtic tradition was working at a time before the division of the church so would have been considered today a Catholic. Years later, of course, John Knox was to lead the Reformation in Scotland that led to what is now known as the Church of Scotland. As that church spread to this and other countries so it became known as the Presbyterian Church, and the Celtic Cross often seen as its symbol.

In 1938 interest in work of St. Columba and in the monastery on the Island of Iona was revived through the work of the Rev. George MacLeod that led to the Iona Community. Even after his death this community still seeks to provide a source of encouragement to people who seek to give a social expression to their faith in God's love expressed in Jesus Christ. On the home page of their website the Celtic Cross has a prominent place.

As we began our discussion about crosses Carol Homoney shared with Rachel a picture of the Celtic Cross which had been made for their former church, the Union Presbyterian Church in Murraysville, Pennsylvania, by some members of the congregation. The cross is a reproduction of the 10<sup>th</sup> century cross of St. John which stood at the west door of the Abbey of Iona in Scotland. The cross is made of bronze and wood. It stands 8 feet by 4 feet and weighs approximately 200 pounds, and is placed in the front of the church.

It is said of this cross that characteristic of the Celtic Church's reverence for nature, the cross is ornamented with bosses of foilage, a bunch of grapes and

