

The Celtic Year

*A rhythm of prayer and meditation
for the eight points of the Celtic year*



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Introduction



Everything in nature works in rhythm. Everything has a natural cycle, including us; we work in rhythm just as much as the rest of the natural world. There are those rhythms which are obvious, like the seasons, when we can watch the trees and flowers change in dramatic ways right in front of our eyes over the months of the year. And there are more subtle rhythms and cycles, such as how the stars shift in the sky each night, and how the sunrise and sunset move backwards and forwards along the horizon throughout the year.

Much of our modern western world has become completely detached from the turnings of the earth, from the cycles of the seasons to the astronomical as well as earth-based phenomena of time. Most of the ancient and indigenous cultures of the world were, and still are, interwoven with these turnings, not just because they were more agrarian-based cultures, but because they understood their intrinsic relationship with the natural world for the sustaining of life both physical and spiritual.

The Celtic people of northern Europe, from at least the Neolithic Age right through to the first half of the first millennium AD, were no exception. The rhythms of the natural world formed the basis of their entire life, spiritual and physical, as well as their calendar. Just like every culture and every age, the ancient Celts had a year-long calendar. The Celtic year had seasonal changes and other focal points which were both physically and spiritually significant.

This book reflects and tries to reconnect the reader to these cycles of the earth in relation to the sun, moon and seasons.

The Celtic year as expressed in this book is established by combining pre-Christian and post-Christian Celtic¹ systems of timekeeping, based on information from the Gaulish Coligny calendar, notes from Julius Caesar's *The Gallic War* and information taken from Bede's book *The Reckoning of Time*.

The Coligny calendar is a Gaulish lunisolar calendar, which means it combines both moon phases and the time of a solar year. The earliest version which archaeologists have found fragments of was made around the second century AD and used by Celtic peoples to define the beginning and length of the day, the week, the month, the seasons, quarter days and festivals. It has a five-year cycle and is probably the most significant historical evidence for there being an ancient Celtic calendar. It is written in Latin and in the Gaulish language.

Julius Caesar's *The Gallic War* is a pseudo-historical² document chronicling his time in Gaul and his attempt to invade Britain during the first century BC.

Bede was a monk and historian in the kingdom of Northumbria who lived and wrote in the early eighth century. His most famous writing is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in which he lists a large number of other books he has written. One of these books, *The Reckoning of Time*, is a large volume of computations of the seasons, days and months and of Christian festivals, and it includes a fair amount on the cycles of the moon. Bede writes about how these things were computed by the Egyptians and Greeks in antiquity and by the Celtic and English (Anglo-Saxon) nations both before and after their Christianisation.

The Celtic year

The Celtic year has eight points, which are the four season changes, the two solstices and the two equinoxes. So this book is divided into those eight sections.

In *The Gallic War*, when talking of the timekeeping of the Druids and the peoples who follow their teaching, Julius Caesar says: ‘They designate measurements of time not by days but by nights; in observing birthdays and the first of the month or the year they make the day follow the night.’³ That is, the Celtic day, like the Jewish day, began at sunset or at night. And Bede tells us that ‘summer and winter begin with the evening or morning rising and setting of the Pleiades, [and] the commencement of spring and autumn when the Pleiades rise and set around the middle of the night’.⁴ Following the same thought process, that the day came out of the night, the seasons also began with darkness, and winter was the start of the year. The days, the seasons and the year were symbols that we travel through darkness into light.

The four seasons of the Celtic year are Samhain (‘sar-when’ – winter), Imbolc (‘im-bolk’ – spring), Beltane (‘bell-tain’ – summer) and Lughnasa (‘loo-nasa’ – harvest or autumn, now more commonly called Lammas). They are mentioned in early Irish literature, which is the oldest vernacular literature in western Europe. The earliest existing examples of the seasons written in the Irish language are in Ogham⁵ inscriptions dating from the early fourth century AD. As Ireland was not invaded by the Roman Empire, we can assume that these season descriptions from the fourth century AD were the same ones that had been used for centuries before by the Iron Age, and perhaps even Bronze Age, inhabitants of both Ireland and Britain. This way of setting up the year would have continued in Ireland through the early centuries AD, so when Irish saints came and planted their monastic centres, such as Columba going to Iona in the sixth century and Aidan going to Lindisfarne in the seventh century, they would most likely have brought this way of computing the year with them – just as many people when moving to other countries of a different culture bring their own calendars with them and continue to use them.

Bede tells us that each season is for three cycles of the moon,⁶ and that winter begins at the start of November, spring at the start of February, summer at the start of May and harvest or autumn at the

start of August.⁷ He also tells us that each season has a midpoint to mark its turn from waxing to waning.⁸ The midpoints of winter and summer are their respective solstices, while the midpoints of spring and autumn (or harvest) are the equinoxes. Bede also quotes Pliny the Elder as saying:

The sun itself has four turning points: twice when the night is equal to the day, in spring and autumn, when he arrives at the midpoint of the earth in the eighth degrees of Aries and Libra, and twice when the proportions [of the day and night] are reversed: in winter, in the eighth degree of Capricorn, when the days grow longer, and in summer, in the eighth degree of Cancer, when the nights grow longer.⁹

Bede also states, in his chapter entitled ‘Equinoxes and solstices’, that Christians observed these things.¹⁰ This means that there was a celebration based on the turning and cycles of the sky and the earth every six weeks.

The Celtic wheel

These eight points of the year, six weeks apart, make up the Celtic ‘wheel’ of the year, which continues to turn year after year. We will work through these seasons and celebrations in this book in the order in which they fall as the wheel turns, starting with winter, in November. Next will be the midpoint (the winter solstice), then on to spring, then the spring midpoint (the equinox), and so on. You can use this book on a rolling yearly cycle for these eight points.

Within the year there are also, obviously, other Christian festivals. In winter there is Christmas; for this you can weave the 40 daily readings from my book *Celtic Advent* (BRF, 2018). In the spring there is Easter; for this you can weave the 40 daily readings from my book *Celtic Lent* (BRF, 2018). In the summer there is Pentecost; for this you can weave the 40 daily readings from my book *Celtic Saints* (BRF, 2020). These

three sets of 40 days were also observed by the Celtic Christian communities throughout the year as three sets of 40-day fasts to focus and centre their lives on a natural rhythm, along with the eight points of the natural year. More instruction and information for each of the three 40s is given in the introduction of each respective book.

With these four books, your year can be filled with Celtic Christian celebrations and contemplations in a continual flow.

In this book

In this book each of the eight points has the following sections.

A liturgy

This liturgy can be used for a short church service or other gathering where songs may be added throughout, or by individuals to use alone while being aware that they are part of the universal body of Christ. Each of these liturgies has an **invocation** to begin with; a **Celtic verse**, which is taken from other Celtic writings, either ancient or modern; a reading from a **psalm**; a focused pause for **centring**, allowing participants a moment to realign themselves with the Divine Presence; some prayers of **intercession**; another **reading** from either the Old or New Testament; a short **contemplation** to think about; and a **closing prayer**.

The reading from the Psalms in the liturgies is presented so that it can be read collectively and alternately between two people or sets of people with pauses in the verses. This is a traditional monastic way of reading the Psalms, where one side of the room will read the odd-number verses, and the other will read the even-number verses. Around the middle of each line is an asterisk (*), where the readers pause for the length of about a single breath, and then carry on.

Daily devotions

There are seven devotions, one for each day of the week, each with a **Bible verse**, a **pause for thought** and a **prayer**. These can be used as a repeated focus for the six weeks, or at any time on the allotted days within that point of the year. In Celtic tradition each day has a focus: Monday is creation, Tuesday is incarnation, Wednesday is the Holy Spirit, Thursday is community, Friday is the cross, Saturday is the saints and Sunday is the resurrection/new life. The seven devotions for each of the eight points follow these daily focuses.

Prayers and blessings

The final section in each chapter is a collection of Celtic prayers and blessings. These will be a mixture of writings from other sources, both ancient and modern, and my own pieces. These can be used at any time as single and individual prayers, but also placed within the liturgy or in any of the daily devotions if so desired.



Introduction



The season which comes at the end, or ends, of our modern western calendar is where the Celtic year begins. It is the season of darkness and seeming death, when the trees are bare, flowers stay underground and creatures either hibernate or spend much more time hunkered down. It is a time when we ourselves still feel the primal aspect of our inner selves and desire to hunker down and spend time wrapped up in the warm in front of fires and eating nice food. It is one of the settled seasons, like summer, rather than the transitional seasons of spring and autumn.

In winter we may find ourselves busy in preparation for Christmas and all that the great celebration of the birth of Christ brings for those in the Christian faith. But at the same time we need to ensure we follow the natural rhythm of the earth, of the divinely created and ordained seasons, and take some rest.

The following liturgy and devotions, prayers and contemplations, will draw us into a deeper sense of that settledness and rest.

Liturgy



Invocation

Creator of the seasons, as the cold and dark of winter begin to surround us, we ask that you set in us the firmness of the roots of the trees. As they draw the goodness from the earth to sustain them, may we draw on your goodness – the Ground of Being. Set in us the trust of hibernating creatures. As they sleep deeply and soundly, trusting that the sustenance they have within them will see them through the winter, may we trust that the sustenance you place in us is sufficient for us.

With the firmness of the trees and the trust of the creatures, we look to you, Creator of life, to sustain us and keep us.

Celtic verse

In the clear winter skies we pray:

O star-like sun, O guiding light, O home of the planets, O fiery maned and marvellous one, O fertile, undulating, fiery sea, O fiery glow, O fiery flame...

Forgive.

O holy storyteller, holy scholar, O full of holy grace, of holy strength, O overflowing, loving, silent one, O generous and thunderous giver of gifts...

Forgive.

O rock-like warrior of a hundred hosts, O fair crowned one,
victorious, skilled in battle...

Forgive.

Attributed to Ciaran of Clonmacnoise (6th century)¹¹

Psalm

Where can I go from your spirit?* Or where can I flee from your
presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;* if I make my bed in Sheol,
you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning* and settle at the farthest limits
of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,* and your right hand shall
hold me fast.

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,* and the light around
me become night',

even the darkness is not dark to you;* the night is as bright as the
day, for darkness is as light to you.

PSALM 139:7-12

Centring

Holy and gracious One, the winter can be still and calm, or tempestuous and wild; it can be beautiful to behold, or harsh on the eye. In whatever comes, may we be drawn into your Divine Presence fully.

As we spend a moment now centring ourselves and becoming aware of your Presence, whatever our lives are like in this moment, still and calm or tempestuous and wild, whether we see beauty in it or it is harsh to look at, may we know your Divine Presence fully within us.

Pause to enable each to become recentred.

Intercession

God of stillness, ruler over darkness, we pray for those places within our world which are in darkness in some way, whether through human action or natural means.

Lord, have mercy.

God of stillness, ruler over darkness, we pray for those places within our local community which are in darkness in some way, whether through the actions of local people or broader governmental decisions.

Christ, have mercy.

God of stillness, ruler over darkness, we pray for those places within your church which are in darkness in some way, whether through selfish hardheartedness or the political decisions of hierarchy.

Lord, have mercy.

Reading

And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one.

ZECHARIAH 14:7-9

Contemplation

The darkness of winter and the very few hours of daylight can often make people feel down and depressed. But we can take comfort in

the knowledge that even in the darkness of the winter season, God is with us. As the psalm earlier in the liturgy says, 'If I make my bed in Sheol [the shadow of the grave], you are there... If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night", even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.' To God darkness is as light.

Pause to contemplate: what does that mean for us, that to God darkness is as light – both physically in this winter season and spiritually?

Closing prayer

As the darkness of winter surrounds us, may we know your Divine Presence, God of night and day; may we know the comfort of you near us and sustaining us, Ground of all Being; and may we enjoy the restfulness that this season brings. Amen

Daily devotions



Monday – creation

Bible verse

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

GENESIS 1:14–19

Pause for thought

The winter season is filled with lights, whether from clear night skies with a view of the stars and the bright moon or from streetlights or Christmas lights.

The natural lights of creation, both day and night, and artificial lights remind us that God has deliberately set the natural seasons in place, and that winter is a part of it.

How do the lights in this season affect you? How can they help you through the darkness?

Prayer

Creator of the seasons, as the natural world rests in the darkness of winter, as you have ordained it to since the beginning of time, may I rest in this darkness, not in fear or misery but in the knowledge of your presence. Amen



Tuesday – incarnation

Bible verse

‘By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

LUKE 1:78–79

Pause for thought

The winter season is indeed filled with lights, but there is also a spiritual light which is perpetual and shines within us. This inner spiritual light guides us into the way of peace, of deep inner peace and full peace of mind.

How might the Divine Light which shines upon you guide you into the way of peace? What does that mean for your everyday life?

Prayer

Prince of peace, guide my feet into the way of peace: the Divine peace which you offer each of us, deep inner peace and full peace of mind in you. Amen



Wednesday – Holy Spirit

Bible verse

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

MARK 1:9-11

Pause for thought

The account of Jesus' baptism in the gospels depicts the Holy Spirit as a dove. In our modern context, we think of this as a soft white dove, used as a symbol of peace. But the dove that alighted upon Jesus would have been a rock dove from the harsh desert surroundings, not a nice white one from a dovecote.

In recent expressions of Celtic Christianity, the symbol of the Holy Spirit has become the wild goose – not something we find in any ancient texts, but something from the modern mind. However, it does match the concept that the historic Celtic Christians seemed to have of the Holy Spirit. At this time, in the winter, the migratory geese have left the Celtic lands. This is one of the reasons that it fits with the Celtic understanding of the Holy Spirit – because the Holy Spirit 'comes and goes', as it were, on the Holy Spirit's own initiative; the Holy Spirit cannot be tamed.

What is your view of the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit like a lovely, fluffy, tame white dove from a safe and contained dovecote, or is the Holy Spirit more like a wild goose or desert rock dove – hardy, a little rough and untameable?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, Wild Goose, may I come to know you as you really are, in the knowledge that you are not containable or controllable, but are part of the ineffable Trinity. Amen



Thursday – community

Bible verse

Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, yours also the night; you established the luminaries and the sun. You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter.

PSALM 74:12–17

Pause for thought

The whole community of creation is made by God and partakes in the salvation of God, that is, becomes reconciled with the Creator through the salvation plan (see Romans 8:19–22). Francis of Assisi used terms like ‘Brother Sun’ and ‘Sister Moon’ in one of his canticles. This reflects the Celtic relationship with creation. How do you relate to the natural world, especially in this winter season, which is made by God?

Prayer

Creator of summer and winter, and all else in creation, remind me of my symbiotic relationship with the earth and all that is on it and in it. Remind me to show care and respect to all creation. Amen



Friday – the cross

Bible verse

It was now winter, and Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication. He was in the Temple, walking through the section known as Solomon's Colonnade. The people surrounded him and asked, 'How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus replied, 'I have already told you, and you don't believe me. The proof is the work I do in my Father's name. But you don't believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'

JOHN 10:22-30 (NLT)

Pause for thought

During this Jewish winter festival Jesus was challenged to prove himself. His response was not what was expected. The work of the Messiah was to reconcile all things back to God, and Jesus accomplished this through the cross (see Colossians 1:20). Numerous Celtic saints were challenged to prove the power of their God. Most of their responses were not what the challengers were expecting. How do you respond to

such challenges? Do you try to find the right apologetics and theology to win a convincing argument? Or do you allow the supernatural work of the cross flowing through all creation to be seen in you?

Prayer

Almighty and all-powerful One, it is not our place to convince others by well thought-out argument, but to create space and opportunity for your Divine Holy Spirit to flow through us and to seep into the hearts of others. Give me the wisdom of Christ to ‘answer’ challenges in the way you desire, not how I think best. Amen



Saturday – the saints

Bible verse

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia – for I intend to pass through Macedonia – and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

1 CORINTHIANS 16:5-7

Pause for thought

At particular times during the winter season, such as Christmas, we travel to and gather with family and friends, perhaps those we haven't seen for some time, maybe even since last winter. The winter is a great time to connect more deeply with our family and friends. Whereas in summer we spend hours outside in the warm air, in winter we more often stay inside or, if going outside, spend less time out and come back into the warm.

How might you approach these times – especially if they are with family members you find it hard to get along with? How might you be the Divine Light shining into the situation?

Prayer

Holy Trinity, Three in One, Holy Community, in this season when I may have to spend time with people I struggle to get along with, remind me of your presence, your Love and Light. May I, through focusing upon that, be an embodiment of your Light and Love, sharing that with all. Amen



Sunday – the resurrection/new life

Bible verse

Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.

ISAIAH 25:3-5

Pause for thought

In winter we may often find need for seeking out a refuge. I live in an area with lots of open countryside, so when I am outside in the winter months and the weather turns, I may need to seek a refuge. This passage from Isaiah, like many we find in the Psalms, refers to God with the metaphor of a refuge. For example, it says, 'When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm...' Perhaps sometimes we might

find this a reality in our lives. Someone or something either is or seems to be against us. When this is the case, when the blast of the ruthless is like a winter rainstorm, turn to God as your refuge and shelter. Just as you might turn to a hillside, cliff edge, or large tree to shelter you from the physical elements of the winter, in our daily lives we can turn to God as a refuge and shelter from the storms of life.

Prayer

Divine Refuge and Shelter, I call upon you now to shelter me from the difficulties in my life that I am experiencing now. Not so that I can escape them or run away, but simply so that I can find some respite in your presence. Divine Refuge and Shelter, I turn to you. Amen



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'David Cole is a careful, wise, skilful writer and guide.'

The Revd Canon Professor James Woodward,
Principal, Sarum College, Salisbury



Following the ancient rhythm of the Celtic year, these prayers, meditations and liturgies will help you focus on the natural flow of life as it changes around you.

Based on the eight points of the Celtic year – the four season changes, and the four midpoints of each season – and moving from winter to spring, summer and harvest, each of the eight sections includes a liturgy for a full service, a week of daily readings, guided contemplation and a selection of prayers and blessings.

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) and *Celtic Saints* (BRF, 2020).



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