

Session One – Lent Course

Introduction: Listening for the Heartbeat of God

The Introduction opens with the story of the Synod of Whitby (664), a decisive moment in the history of Christianity in Britain. Representatives of the Celtic and Roman missions debated not merely church customs, but two ways of encountering God.

The Celtic mission looked to St John, the beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus at the Last Supper. John became a symbol of contemplative listening — “listening for the heartbeat of God.” This spirituality emphasized attentiveness to God’s presence within life itself: within creation, within the human heart, and within ordinary experience.

The Roman mission looked to St Peter and emphasized order, structure, and unity through the institutional Church. Listening for God meant listening through ordained authority and sacramental life.

King Oswy decided in favor of the Roman mission. Though the Celtic stream was pushed to the margins, it never disappeared. Its distinctive mark was a deep affirmation of creation as good and filled with divine presence.

Celtic spirituality invites us to look for God within creation, not apart from it. The world is sacramental — a place of revelation. Lent, as a season of returning to the heart, becomes a time to listen deeply within ourselves, within others, and within creation for the life of God.

Discussion Questions

1. What has most shaped your understanding of where God is found — primarily in the Church, or also in the wider world?
2. When have you experienced something in creation that felt like an encounter with God?
3. What might it mean, practically, to “listen for the heartbeat of God” during Lent?

Chapter 1 – Listening for the Goodness: Pelagius

Chapter One explores the life and theology of Pelagius, a fourth-century British monk whose teaching profoundly shaped early Celtic spirituality.

Pelagius affirmed the essential goodness of creation and of humanity. He taught that every newborn child bears the image of God — radiant and unsullied. Sin obscures this goodness but does not erase it. At the heart of each person remains the divine image waiting to be liberated by grace.

He described sin as a kind of fog or occupying force that clouds our true identity. Redemption, therefore, is not the creation of goodness where none existed, but the freeing of the goodness God has already planted within us.

Pelagius extended this affirmation to all creation, speaking of “shafts of divine light” piercing the veil between heaven and earth. God’s Spirit dwells in all living things.

Ultimately condemned in the wider Church, Pelagius’ vision endured in the Celtic tradition: grace works not against our nature but through it. For Lent, this perspective invites repentance not as self-rejection but as the uncovering of the divine light within.

Discussion Questions

1. How were you taught to understand human nature — as fundamentally sinful or fundamentally good?
2. What difference does it make to see redemption as the release of goodness rather than the replacement of depravity?
3. Where do you see “shafts of divine light” breaking through in your own life or in the wider world?