

Early Irish Devotion to Christ in his Passion

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THERE is a lot of wishful thinking about Celtic spirituality. For years, romantics and deceivers alike have peered into the twilight in search of a congenial religion without much of a Church, with blessing but no judgement, healing but no repentance, personal sentiment but no binding truth, life-force but not sacrifice; a God who does our bidding, but no humans that sin – a religion of birds and trees and stones. It is not that those warm, appealing things are not there; it is that they are only half the story, like the Christ of the Marcionites. I once attended a conference at which a well-known clergyman conducted a “Celtic Morning Prayer”, gathered round a stone he had brought along rather, he said, than “a Roman Catholic candle”. The service was unobjectionable and perfectly orthodox, of course; but its focus on the natural order, water, creation, gave no hint of the atonement, or the asceticism and penitential enthusiasm of Ireland’s early Christian temperament. I tried to explore this dimension with my friend when we were talking later. “Ah, no you don’t,” came the reply. “You can’t tell me anything about Celtic spirituality: I have been on a course.”

Here is a beautiful, ancient and anonymous poem that could be said to capture this outlook:

Round the Tree of Life the flowers
Are ranged, abundant, even;
Its crest on every side spreads out
On the fields and plains of Heaven.

Glorious flocks of singing birds
Celebrate their truth,
Green abounding branches bear
Choicest leaves and fruit.

The lovely flocks maintain their song
In the changeless weather,
A hundred feathers for ever bird,
A hundred tunes for every feather.¹

¹ Translated by Brendan Kennelly in *A Drinking Cup*, Allen Figgis, Dublin, 1970, p. 17 (also given in John J. Ó Riordáin CSSR, *Irish Catholic Spirituality: Celtic & Roman*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1998, p. 24)

Yet note that this is a description of paradise and assumes a real world of woes to go through here, before we are granted admittance to it.

So, in truth, we can make out something deeper in Celtic spirituality than we are often told. Today we keep the Feast of St Patrick and it would not be unreasonable to conclude that what lay in the religious imagination of the pagan Celts was what drew the Romano-British noble back to Ireland, despite his six years in servitude among them as a young man. Indeed he dreamed of the people there calling him to be their guide to holiness. Surely “something deeper” had captivated him to make him return to them to care for the Christian churches already there, further evangelise their society and Christianise its spirituality. John Ó Ríordáin, in his fine *Irish Catholic Spirituality: Celtic and Roman*,² proposes the elements of this distinctive spiritual sensibility that have endured to this day in some way or other:

- Little distinction between this world and the other, and an “at-home-ness” in both
- The need for harmony with nature, even love for its extremes
- Natural spontaneity in people’s religious spirit that is less concerned with organisation
- Knowing and loving the lore of faith – notably the Scriptures
- Devotion to the hero – especially Christ in his Passion and the Mass
- Love for the heavenly company – thus the Christian angels and saints, and pre-eminently the Mother of God
- The notion of *muintearas*, of belonging in the community, but also of family alliance and identity with the king, especially Christ in this life and the next
- Love for the stranger and an awareness of the largeness of the world of people in creation – hence an awareness of the universality of the Church
- A bold sense of joining the hero-king, following him into his battles, his sufferings and even death, if not physically then through self-denial, penance and lamentation
- An urge to go beyond this world, in solidarity with the dead and the past, and out of desire to be close to the heavenly ones – hence the desire to go to extreme places, to wells or on pilgrimage, in search of where the spiritual and material worlds meet.

² Cf. Ó Ríordáin, op. cit., p. 11

And it is worth remembering here what Dr Dee Dyas told us a few nights ago about pilgrimage in the medieval mind – it is not about where you visit; it is about the changed person who returns. Pilgrimage in the “Dark” and Middle Ages was no easy exercise and fraught with risk and danger. So, too, the Christian life, pursuing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, is not a “fantasy” earthly paradise. Both worlds meet; and to live in this world as in the next presupposes – and is formed out of adversity and hardness, as Christ knew well. The Celtic heaven-world is inseparable from the world in which he was incarnate in human nature, suffered and rose again.

As the Christian Church grew in the life of Irish society and in the imaginations of people, these spiritualities took form in a deep and compelling desire, inspired by the Desert Fathers of Egypt, to embrace ascetical monasticism, or a life of heroic penance. There was nothing of the merely Puritan about this self-denial. It was a matter of gladness to monks and nuns to be living not in a dejected, but an ascended state of closeness to Christ and his saints. For the people in general, it was a matter of “blessed assurance” that the monastics, priests and bishops were not just holy people in their midst, but their kinsmen who somehow transcended their community and could thus serve as an immediate encounter with heaven everywhere. So listen again to that Celtic nature idyll for what it is really saying too. Most of the prayers and devotions we are looking at come from the first 500 years of Irish Christianity and owe much to the infusion of Christian faith in the island’s world-view and the forms of classic bardic poetry.

Thus in the following anonymous ninth-century poem, at first the theme appears to be “God in nature”, but then it runs deeper. It was once attributed to Abbot Manchin Leith, who died two centuries earlier in 665; so possibly it conveys a yearning for the simplicity and purity of an even then bygone age of self-denying discipleship and withdrawal from the world, all for the sake of being with and like Christ:

I wish, O Son of the living God,
O ancient eternal King,
For a hidden little hut in the wilderness,
That it may be my dwelling.

An all-grey lithe little lark
 To be by its side,
 A clear pool to wash away my sins
 Through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Quite near,
 A beautiful wood around it on every side,
 To nurse many-voiced birds,
 Hiding it with its shelter.

A southern aspect for warmth,
 A little brook across its floor,
 A choice land with many gracious gifts
 Such as be good for every plant.

A few men of sense –
 We will tell their number –
 Humble and obedient
 To pray to the King...

A pleasant church with the linen altar-cloth,
 A dwelling for God from Heaven,
 Then, a shining candle
 Above the pure white Scriptures ...

One house for all to go to for the care of the body,
 Without ribaldry,
 Without boasting,
 Without thought of evil.

This is the husbandry I would take,
 I would choose and will not hide it:
 Fragrant leek,
 Hens, salmon, trout, bees.

Raiment and food enough for me
 From the King of fair fame,
 And I to be sitting for a while
 Praying God in every place.³

The acclamation of Christ as king in this poem takes us further away from any false idea that Celtic religion is about a merely personal spirituality, absorbed in the self's demands, or escapism. "King" in Irish is *ri* and it is the same word as *rex* in Latin, or *raja* in Sanskrit. Our words "royal", "rule" and "regulation" are closely related. But none of these words implied sole, absolute power. In their way, they all presume a community to which the ruler is related (as in the Brehon Code of Law),

³ Translated by Kuno Meyer in *Ériu*, (i), 1904, p. 40 (also given in Ó Ríordáin, op.cit., p.24f)

as an authority which represents the people and their interests, a leader who embodies in his person the hopes and fortunes of those who serve him and for whom he is responsible. It is no accident that our words “king” and “kin” are also bound up with each other in origin. So the sense of a personal bond to Christ as king was inseparable from the sense of his relatedness to the community, his people. Indeed the word for a family group or community in their land in Irish – *muintear* or *muintir* (pronounced “mewnter”) – is believed to be a loan-word from the Church’s Latin – *monasterium*. *Muintearas*, too, denotes a sense of community or belonging, in the way the Church means communion and membership. Thus Mary, at the same time as she is described as Mother of God and Virgin just as the rest of the Church thinks of her, it made even greater sense in the early Irish spiritual mind (if we can put ourselves into it) to see her motherhood in terms of her being related to us and to her Son, within the close-knit bonds of the household, sept and community to which we are all bound in mutual membership. So we can see ourselves as kin to Jesus, the Son of Mary (as he was known at Cana too). This accounts for the depth to which the devotion of Irish Christians entered so poignantly and personally into his troubles and the wounded heart of his Mother – because you know and share them as your own. Let us stay in this frame of mind for a moment. Christ is thus not just the divine Lord and Saviour: he is the hero son of our own King, a king himself. And there is outrage in our *muintear* at the destruction of our hero, our provider and our fair judge, a blow to our own people’s people, struck through our young king and kin:

At the cry of the first bird
They began to crucify thee, O cheek like a swan,
It were not right ever to cease lamenting,
It was like the parting of day from night.

Ah ... though sore the suffering
Put upon the body of Mary’s Son –
Sorer to him was the grief
That was put upon her for his sake.⁴

Because of this intensity of relationship, what is felt in our response to the Lord’s Passion is expressed through entering into the injustice done to the bond between Mother and Son.

⁴ *The Crucifixion*, anonymous and undated, translated by Kuno Meyer, in Patrick J. Murray CSSP (ed.), *The Deer’s Cry*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1986, p.45

The following is a meditation on this deep understanding between the Virgin Mary and Jesus her Son, known as *The Vision of Mary*:

"Are you asleep, Mother?"
 "I am not, indeed, my Son."
 "How is that, Mother?"
 "Because of a vision I have of thee."
 "What vision is that, Mother?"
 " There came a slim dark man on a slender black steed,
 A sharp lance in his left hand.
 Which pierced thy right side.
 Letting thy sacred blood pour down upon thee."
 "True is that vision, Mother." ⁵

The Passion is thus not Christ's alone, it is Mary's too; and, because of the *muintearas* of the Church, it is ours. Here is Blathmac, son of Cú Brettan, a monk writing in AD 700, lamenting with Mary in *The Passion of Mary and her Son*:

Come to me, loving Mary,
 That I may keen with your very dear one.
 Alas that your Son should go to the cross,
 He was a great diadem, a beautiful hero ...

When every outrage was committed against him,
 When capture was completed,
 He took his cross upon his back-
 He did not cease being beaten.

The King of the seven holy heavens,
 When his heart was pierced,
 Wine was spilled upon the pathways,
 The blood of Christ flowing through his gleaming sides ...

It would have been fitting for God's elements,
 The beautiful sea,
 The blue heavens, the present earth,
 That they should change their aspect when keening their hero ...

The King was patient
 At the crucifixion of his only-begotten,
 For had his good elements known,
 They would have keened sweetly ...

⁵ *Mary's Vision*, in *The Poem-Book of the Gael*, ed. Eleanor Hull, Chatto & Windus, London 1912, p. 243

Blathmac condemns Jesus' original people for breaching kinship ties:

Of shameless countenance and wolf-like
 Were the men that perpetrated that kin-slaying;
 Since his mother was one of them
 It was treachery to a true kinsman.⁶

Beyond the assault on the very fabric of the human relatedness that binds us in common life and destiny, and the injustice of the pains that Christ endures in the name and stead of his people as their hero, defender and saviour, the destruction of the King's Son is seen as a shock to nature, an overturning of the order of things. In his Passion, which draws us all into it, death had risen up from its place in the cycle of life and become a murderer, confronting life's very force and overwhelming the creative energy behind everything in this world and the next. In *The Keening⁷ of Mary* (which takes the form of a traditional women's mourning song from Connaught), through the lament of the Mother of Christ we are all but inconsolable that the Passion is "not as it should be". But it is the dying Son who tells his Mother that this is how things must go, if the young Hero-King is to win his battle with death:

Mary O Peter, O Apostle, have you seen my bright love?
Refrain *M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó ! (My grief, and O my grief!)*

Peter I saw Him even now in the midst of His foemen.
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Mary Come hither, two Marys, till you keen my bright love.
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Two Marys What have we to keen unless we keen His bones?
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Mary Who is that stately Man on the tree of Passion?
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Christ Do you not know your Son, O Mother ? "
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Mary And is that the little Son I carried nine months?
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 And is that the little Son that was born in the stable?
 M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

⁶ *Passion of Mary and her Son*, Blathmac son of Cú Brettan, in Ó Riordáin, op.cit., p. 29f., translated by James Carney in *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan*, Irish Texts Society xlvii, 1964, pp. 3-49

⁷ 'keen' comes from Irish *caoine*, lament.

And is that the little Son that was nursed at Mary's breast ? "
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Christ Hush, O Mother, and be not sorrowful."
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Mary And is that the hammer that struck home the nails through you?
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 And is that the spear that went through your white side?
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 And is that the crown of thorns that crowned your beautiful head?
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !

Christ Hush, O Mother, be not sorrowful.
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 The women of my keening are yet unborn, little Mother.
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 O woman, who weep, by this my death
M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !
 There will be hundreds to-day in the Garden of Paradise!
*M'ochón agus m'ochón, Ó !*⁸

Even as she seeks the little son she bore, Mary's faith beholds the stately Man on the Tree; and it dawns on her that, after all, life and heaven are at work in his death and this goes to the very depth of nature.⁹ In Irish Celtic religious understanding, the idea of *neart* stood for both the force or energy of life and a man's strength. It is not "a" life; it is that which in everything is their binding together. *Neart* is their protection, the restoring of order, the recapturing of the natural power of God's goodness and his blessing in creation. It is the immanence of God, his creative energy.¹⁰

So God's power is made "perfect in weakness"¹¹, and Christ, whose betrayal and destruction risks undermining the vigour and health of his people, is still the bright hero after all. Even in death, he protects his *muintear*; for his enemies fail to perceive that he wins the "combat stupendous"¹² by self-sacrifice for those who

⁸ Also known as *The Keening of the Three Marys*, this is sacred song in Irish, reflecting folk mourning rituals, not the Church's liturgy. It has been variously translated by Douglas Hyde, in *Religious Songs of Connacht*, Gill & Son, Dublin, 1906, and Padraic Pearse. This version, although attributed to Pearse, is different and is given in Patrick J. Murray CSSP (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 95f.

⁹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 4.12

¹⁰ See Seán Ó Duinn OSB, *Where Three Streams Meet*, Columba Press, Dublin, 2002, chapter 6

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12.9

¹² *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, Easter Sequence in the Roman Rite, tr. John Mason Neale

belong to him and to whom he belongs in turn. His Passion, rather than shearing their world from heaven, is their true path to it:

O King of the Wounds, who found death on the top of the tree,
 By the hand of the blind was Thy heart's blood riven from Thee;
 By the blood from Thy wounds flowing down in a pool on the field,
 O bear us to Paradise, Thou, 'neath the shade of Thy shield. ¹³

The *muintear*'s response to the Passion of the "King of the Friday"¹⁴ is forged out of no mere reaction, but the closest bond.

The story and person of Christ, incarnate Lord and redeemer King, strike a deep chord. They fit a deep intuition of affinity, kinship, brotherhood, loyalty, allegiance, affront, obligation, compassion and solidarity towards Christ. So we see the "something" in the early Irish spiritual disposition that Patrick went back to capture. It was the source of the instinct to enter into and be part of what Christ is, what he did, what he endured and what he holds out to us. The deep-seated Irish tradition of penance and asceticism to which it gave rise is not to be confused with life-denying Puritanism or Jansenism, with their miserable suspicion that pleasure is the enemy of spiritual value. Instead it is prompted by sheer zeal for holiness and to be worthy of Christ their king and kin. For instance, individual private confession is rooted in the monastic path to perfection as an aspect of a monk or nun's direction by a spiritual guide; but in Ireland it was demanded by the lay faithful, especially young adults, as training for the soul to fight with Christ in the combat and to be deemed worthy to stand at his side. Far from an organ of clerical control, it was a popular movement. St Paul wrote of making up within his own body what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body the Church.¹⁵ He could have been writing for the disciples of St Patrick.

The theme of what one might call "brave discipleship" is a recurrent theme, of course, throughout the Church's experience, as people seek to live in imitation of Christ's Passion. From St Patrick onwards, Irish Christianity was influenced by the ascetism of the Egyptian desert. The same spirit in each of the poems we are

¹³ *The King of the Wounds*, Hull, op. cit., p. 237

¹⁴ First line of a prayer on lying down to sleep, with arms crossed. Collected in, Hyde's *Religious Songs of Connaught*; cf. Ó Riordáin, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁵ Colossians 1.24

hearing this morning was reflected in new writing during the ensuing centuries. In modern times, too, as Dr Sheridan Gilley has established in a remarkable survey of Irish popular piety in the mid-nineteenth century, the urge to respond to the Christian faith with demanding devotion – intensely personal at the same time as communal – was enduring, even under a new guise to suit conditions in Ireland after the end of the old culture with the famine, and the need to create a new Catholic Irish identity.¹⁶

Incidentally, we see the same intuition in the thought of Fr Paul Couturier, re-founder of the Week of Prayer for Christianity. He realised that suffering was the reality caused by Christian disunity, but also that which draws us together more closely than anything else. He feared we might become inured to the pain of separation, which he saw as an affront to the sovereign will of God, the providence of the Creator and the truth of the Trinity's unity. So he commended prayer to embrace suffering, a self-sacrifice in union with Christ; that the prayer on the night before his Passion might penetrate divided Christians, take possession of them and make demands on them on the course to the sanctification of all and the ultimate union of all in him.

We were thinking about *neart*, the energy with which God protects his people and makes their land prosper. It is also integral to the individual's personal devotion to Christ in his Passion. Fr Seán Ó Duinn OSB observes that this life-force was understood to go out from God to surround us in six directions, which correspond to the three-dimensional cross that is the early Christian's *Chi-Rho* sign – up, down, left, right, back and forth. These are the directions in which, according to Philo and St Clement of Alexandria, God made creation.¹⁷ (Ó Duinn also remarks that the same theme features in the Chandogya Upanishad and the Atharvaveda, perhaps indicating its deep roots in the Indo-European religious mind.¹⁸) With the same power, Christ continues to bind his creation up and dwell in it, as we have so often affirmed in the Lorica or Breastplate of St Patrick:

¹⁶ Sheridan Gilley, *Roman Liturgy and Popular Piety: The "Devotional Revolution" in Irish Catholicism*, in *The Genius of the Roman Rite*, ed. Uwe Michael Lang, Hillenbrand Books, Chicago, 2010

¹⁷ See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI, 16 on the fourth commandment.

¹⁸ See Ó Duinn, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79

Christ before me
Christ at my right hand
Christ behind me
Christ at my left hand
Christ above me
Christ beneath me.

In the ninth century the Church in Ireland underwent a fresh impulse through a renewal movement, known as the *Céli Dé*, or “the Culdees” – the Companions of God. In later reforms they tended to be subsumed in orders of canons regular, but for the moment these communities, which often began in association with the traditional monasteries, were oriented to the pastoral care of the people, especially the poor and sick, and had a particular concern for the worthy celebration of the Church’s liturgy and its music. Closely associated with this was the spiritual care and direction and this included nourishing people’s traditional piety. The spirituality of God’s *neart*, by which Christ surrounds us in the six directions of creation and of his Cross, is taken up in a personal ritual, known as the Shrine of Piety, recommended in the Culdees’ Rule.¹⁹ I suggest that we stand now and make this Irish devotion to Christ in his Passion. With outstretched arms we face east and say the Lord’s Prayer and then, making the sign of the Cross, we say “O God, come to my aid, O Lord, make haste to help me.” We turn to the south and do the same; then to the west and the north. Next we bow with our arms stretched downwards to the strength of Christ from below and last we look up and raise our arms to Christ who is above. Thus we are protected in every direction, bound up in the power of Christ’s Cross, who holds us all in his people, his Body the Church, and in his creation.

By using this devotion we have perhaps seen that the Creator’s binding life-force of *neart* lies at the heart of a profound sense of connection and relatedness to the King’s Son in both his trials and his triumph. Inseparable from this, as we have seen, is his Mother. So wrote a sixteenth century Irish exile in Scotland:

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 80, citing the *Rule of the Céli Dé*

The Virgin Mary suffered as much as the Passion...
 While God's Son was in the grave after it,
 And her cheeks red as embers.²⁰

So here to end is St Colm Cille's *Prayer to the Virgin*. You might almost say it is like an Irish Akathist Hymn. Let us thus recall her place in the Passion of her Son and our salvation, and call upon her mediation in a twofold prayer: for the forgiveness of our sins and to be close to Christ in this world and the next:

Gentle Mary, noble maiden, give us help!
 Shrine of our Lord's body, casket of the mysteries!

Queen of queens, pure holy maiden,
 Pray for us that our wretched transgression be forgiven for Thy sake.

Merciful one, forgiving one, with the grace of the Holy Spirit,
 Pray with us the true-judging King of the goodly ambrosial clan.

Branch of Jesse's tree in the beauteous hazel-wood,
 Pray for me until I obtain forgiveness of my foul sins.
 Mary, splendid diadem, Thou that hast saved our race,
 Glorious noble torch, orchard of Kings!

Brilliant one, transplendent one, with the deed of pure chastity,
 Fair golden illumined ark, holy daughter from Heaven!

Mother of righteousness, Thou that excellest all else,
 Pray with me Thy first-born to save me on the day of Doom.

Noble rare star, tree under blossom,
 Powerful choice lamp, sun that warmeth every one.

Ladder of the great track by which every saint ascends,
 Mayst Thou be our safeguard towards the glorious Kingdom.

Fair fragrant seat chosen by the King,
 The noble guest who was in Thy womb three times three months.

Glorious royal porch through which He was incarnated,
 The splendid chosen sun, Jesus, Son of the living God.

For the sake of the fair babe that was conceived in Thy womb,
 For the sake of the holy child that is High-King in every place,

For the sake of His cross that is higher than any cross,
 For the sake of His burial when He was buried in a stone-tomb,

²⁰ Translated by Osborn Bergin in *Irish Bardic Poetry*, Dublin, 1913, quoted in Ó Riordáin, op. cit., p. 64

For the sake of His resurrection when He arose before every one,
For the sake of the holy household from every place to Doom,

Be Thou our safeguard in the Kingdom of the good Lord,
That we may meet with dear Jesus—that is our prayer—hail! ²¹

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²¹ *Prayer to the Virgin*, attr. St Colum Cille - Patrick J. Murray CSSP (ed.), op.cit., p. 41f, tr. Kuno Meyer & John Strachan