

Celtic literature - the cross and salvation

One of the most emotive and most loved symbols of the Celtic Christian tradition is the cross, which incorporates a Latin upright cross with a circle, known as a Celtic cross. Historic examples of it can be found in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Devon and Cornwall. Elaborated crosses are also found in the illuminated Gospels.

The stone cross may have been in the first instance a Christian substitute for the standing stone. Many examples of standing stones incised with crosses and Christian symbols have been found in Britain, and these may represent the first generation of Celtic crosses. Many of these are found in Wales (and now in the Margam Stones museum). The earliest etchings are thought to have been the simple Chi-Rho monogram which later develops into the cross. (Rowe, 1973, p. 1) (Langdon, 1994, p. 3) In Cornwall we find many examples of wayside crosses, which are rather smaller than standing stones, but show another development of the stone cross. These are part of the series of crosses known as wheel-headed crosses, as the basic shape of the cross is a circle of stone on a pillar, and in the circle is inscribed a cross, which looks like a spoked wheel, although a few of these crosses actually have the picture of the crucified Christ in the place of the cross (or is it the risen Christ?) Elsewhere we see the development into the more familiar Celtic cross of a Latin cross superimposed on a circle. There are many explanations of what the symbolism means and what the circle represents, but commonly it is said to either represent eternity or the world. So we have the superimposition of the cross, eternity and creation.

The Celtic Cross then, is a powerful and now popular symbol of the ancient Christian faith in these islands. Therefore you would assume that it would also be very prominent in the literature of the Celtic fringe. This is not so, but it does not mean that it is ignored.

Carmina Gadelica

The cross is not very evident in the material collected by Carmichael, but it is present. Much of the verse is concerned with the invocation of the presence of God as Trinity, the saints and the angels. There is also a focus on the natural world, which is understandable in the context of 19th century Scottish Highlands and Islands although Carmichael claims that the essence of these poems go back to the dawn of time! (Carmichael, 1994, p. 30)

The prayers, invocations, songs and verse have great concern for protection from the elements, evil, disaster and illness and a calling for blessing on the land, animals and the family and on human activity and life. The concept of salvation is therefore very "earthy" and concerned for the present and the immediate future. There is little association with eternity although it is not totally ignored, and there are some prayers for forgiveness. For example:

*Jesu! Only-begotten Son and Lamb of God the Father
Thou didst give the wine-blood of Thy body to buy me from the grave. (240 Jesus the
encompasser) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 212) ¹*

It is in this context that we find mention of the Cross and the death of Christ. The cross, possibly associated with the actual signing of the cross (Carmichael, 1994, p. 300) which is

¹ Rev. 5: 6 - 7, 9; 13: 8; 17:8; 1 Pet 1: 20

mentioned in association with two night-time prayers approaches something of a talisman for protection. For example:

*Be the cross of Christ between me and the fays,²
That move occultly out and in,
Be the Cross of Christ between me and all ill,
All ill-will, and all-mishap. (297 The Cross of Christ) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 278)*

And these poems are clearly asking for blessing as well. The most well known of the prayers is:

*Be Christ's cross on your new dwelling,
Be Christ's cross on your new hearth,
Be Christ's cross on your new abode,
Upon your new fire blazing.
Be Christ's cross on your topmost grain,
Be Christ's cross on your fruitful wives,
Be Christ's cross on your virile sons
Upon your conceptive daughters.
Be Christ's cross on your means and portion,
Be Christ's cross on your kin and people,
Be Christ's cross on you each light and darkness
Each day and each night of your lives. (340 Blessing of a House) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 308)³*

However the cross is also seen as an instrument of healing. There seems to be an element of association or sympathetic healing:

*In Christ the loving,
The Holy Blood of powers⁴
(John)
Closed for thee thy wound,
And congealed thy blood,
As Christ bled on the cross,⁵
So closeth He thy wound for thee. (456 Checking of Blood) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 417)*

The Blood spilt on the cross is the blood that will heal the wound.

But it is not all folklore. We do find some theology in the hymns and incantations. Christ is the "Christ of the Pasch" (161 The Charm of the Figwort) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 151) "Son that died for me" (12) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 44), the priest who died in agony on the cross (68 Christ the Priest above us) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 79) the one who brings forgiveness through the work on the cross understanding the atonement in terms of "ransom" and associated with judgement:

² Fay is a fairy or elf.

³ The cross brings salvation to all creation Rom 8: 18 - 23; Mark 16: 15 .

⁴ Rev. 12 : I I.

⁵ I Pet 2: 24.

*Since Thou Christ it was who didst buy the soul -
At the time of yielding the life
At the time of pouring the sweat,
At the time of offering the clay,
At the time of shedding the blood,
At the time of balancing the beam,
At the time of severing the breath,
At the time of delivering the judgement, (53 Soul Peace) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 68)⁶*

We also find that God "hast purchased my soul with the precious blood of thy Son." (228 Morning Prayer) (Carmichael, 1994, p. 201)

But interestingly, and I do not know why or how, in some prayers of protection, the cross is also associated with the saints (17 p. 47), Mary and Michael (26 p. 52) and the nine angels (26 p. 52, 36 p. 58, 37 p. 59) - whoever they are!⁷

The Irish Tradition

The tradition from Ireland is not dissimilar to the Scottish tradition. Here we also find an emphasis on creation and finding God in the natural world, and looking for protection from the powers of nature and evil around. It is recognised that this God of creation is therefore the God of protection and also salvation - a salvation that comes through the work of Christ on the Cross.

"Though the Children of Eve ill desire the bird-flocks and the salmon, it was the Immortal One on the cross who made both salmon and birds. " (Irish 15th century) (Jackson, 1971 , p. 300)

Which, in our contemporary thought, may suggest that we need to be reminded of our ecological responsibilities and that both creation and salvation come from God, and that salvation is not just a gift for humanity but for the whole of creation (Romans 8.) The relationship between the cross, salvation and creation is found in the Gospel story, when Matthew tells us that darkness covered the whole earth at the time of the crucifixion. This is echoed in an 8th century Irish Poem:

*The Sun concealed its proper light; it lamented its lord. ⁸
A swift cloud went across the blue sky, the great stormy sea roared.*

*The whole earth became dark, great trembling came on the earth;
at the death of noble Jesus rocks burst open.*

*Jerusalem suddenly cast up the dead from ancient burial;
In the hour in which Jesus suffered death the veil of the temple was rent.*

*A fierce stream of blood boiled until the bark of every tree was red;
There was blood throughout the world in the tops of every great wood*

⁶ Rev. 1: 5, I Pet I: 19.

⁷ Ariel, Raphael, Gabriel, Celestina, Faith, Cassiel, Daniel, Sarah, and Michael according to the website http://www.learniet.com/healing_angels.htm and associated with Integrated Energy Therapy.

⁸ Matt. 27: 45, 51 - 54.

*It would have been fitting for God's elements - the fair sea, the blue sky, the earth -
To have changed their appearance, lamenting their calamity.*

*The body of Christ exposed to the spear-thrust demanded harsh lamentation
That should have mourned more grievously the Man by whom they were created.*

Attributed to Blathmacc and quoted in Allchin & De Waal (Allchin A.M. & De Waal E., 1986, p. 30)

We also find poems of protection that invoke the cross. These are sometimes known as "Breastplates" for example St. Patrick's Breastplate, which in the second stanza reads:

*I rise today:
In the power of Christ 's birth and baptism
In the power of his crucifixion and burial
In the power of his rising and ascending
In the power of his descending and judging.*

So calling not only upon the cross but upon the whole work of Christ in salvation, judgement and resurrection.

And from the Religious Songs of Connaught (collected and published in 1906 by Douglas Hyde) we find:

*The protection of the three trees
The tree of the cross
The tree of blood
The tree on which Christ was hanged
And from which he rose again above.*

quoted in Davies and Bowie (Davies O. & Bowie F., 1995, p. 158)

The Welsh Tradition

The interconnectedness of creation and salvation is also a theme in the Welsh tradition. In the following poem (Quoted in Allchin (Allchin, 1997, p. 29) from Marged Haycock: *Blodeugerdd Barddas O Ganu Crefyddol Cynnar*, 1994, p. 104 - 113, translated by Paul Quinn) the work of creation culminates in the cross and resurrection.

*Heaven's blessing to creation's fair kingdom
Is the one who comes like a broad-breasted, mighty wave.
In every land his name is God,
Mighty flood - Mary reared him.
Well it was that you came in flesh ..⁹*

It then continues to speak of the wonders that God created - the sun, moon, sea, fresh water and concludes

⁹ Phil. 2: 5ff.

*We beseech the one who creates, mighty God, Son of Mary -
When on Easter night you harrowed hell
All who were there were freed -
Oh Lord of Heaven, may we purchase the kinship of your kindly pardon.* ¹⁰

We also find prayers for protection in the Welsh tradition. The poem known as Alexandra's Breastplate, is considered to be a Welsh medieval work (according to Davies):

*Let us rise up to meet the Trinity
Following our salvation.
Christ 's cross is bright,
A shining breastplate
Against all harm
Against all our enemies may it be strong
The place of our protection.
(Davies O. & Bowie F., 1995, p. 44)*

But we also find some stronger theology in this 10th century Welsh poem (originally written in Latin and Middle Welsh, mixed together) which rehearses the different aspects of the work of the cross - judgement, mercy, forgiveness salvation and liberation.

*In the name of the Lord, mine to praise, of great praise,
I shall praise God, great the triumph of his love,
God who defended us, God who made us, God who saved us,
God our hope, perfect and honourable, beautiful his blessings.
We are in God's power, God above, Trinity 's King.
God proved himself our liberation by his suffering,
God came to be imprisoned in humility.
Wise Lord, who will free us by Judgement Day,
Who will lead us to the feast through his mercy and sanctity
In paradise, in pure release from the burden of sin,
Who will bring us salvation through penance and the five wounds.
Terrible grief, God defended us when he took on flesh.
Man would be lost if the perfect rite had not redeemed him.
Through the cross, blood-stained, came salvation to the world.
Christ, strong shepherd, his honour shall not fail.*

(Davies O. & Bowie F., 1995, p. 32)

I particularly like the concept that in the Cross God "defended us" presumably from the work of the Devil or Evil. This is the triumphal work of Christ. So God in Christ is creator, saviour and protector. Donald Allchin writes:

"The infinite and eternal accepts the narrow limitations of time and space. The source of life becomes vulnerable to human pain and death, enters into the depths of human alienation and

¹⁰ I Pet. 3: 19

loss. Through his descent into the world, God leads us up into the world of his eternal kingdom, into a total liberation from the burden of sin. But none of this is done without the cost of the five wounds and the perfect act of penance which only the innocent victim can make." (Allchin, 1997, p. 31)

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