

### 3 ♣ Listening for God in All Things: *Carmina Gadelica*



While Eriugena was making his Celtic contribution to the thought and spirituality of the Holy Roman Empire, the last outward vestiges of the old Celtic Church in Britain were rapidly disappearing, with a few exceptions here and there, notably on the island of Iona. In Scotland a late conformity to the Roman mission was given its greatest boost by the marriage of Margaret to King Malcolm in 1061. St Margaret, of an English royal family, brought with her a passionate commitment to the uniformity of the Church Catholic and therefore a determination to bring into line the remaining pockets of opposition to conformity. The rebuilding in stone of St Oran's chapel on Iona, the greatest bastion of resistance to the Roman mission, speaks of the extent of her success, although, even after Queen Margaret, Culdee chapels were dotted around Scotland. The Culdees, Celtic monks in the eremitic tradition, had gradually banded together into loosely structured monastic clusters and can be regarded as the last tangible remnant of the old Celtic Church.

Probably the final sign of formal conversion to the Roman mission in Scotland was the building of the Benedictine monastery on Iona in the thirteenth century. The island's last Celtic monks were either expelled or absorbed. At this point the Celtic mission can be said to have ceased to exist in any structured religious form. This is not to say, however, that its stream of spirituality came to an end. The Roman mission may have built the strong stone Benedictine Abbey on Iona, the site of the old Celtic mission, but the spirituality of the latter and its distinct way of seeing was to live on among the people of the Western Isles.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a civil servant from Edinburgh named Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) began to record the prayers that had been passed down for centuries in the oral tradition of the Hebrides and the west coast of Scotland. For generation after generation, parents had been teaching their children prayers whose origin stretched back beyond living memory. These prayers, usually sung or chanted rather than simply said, were recited as a rhythmic accompaniment to the people's daily routine, at the rising of the sun and at its setting, at the kindling of the fire in the morning and at its covering at night. They were chanted individually while sowing the seed in the fields and collectively by women weaving cloth together. These prayers were used in the most ordinary contexts of daily life and not within the four walls of a church on Sunday, but Carmichael detected in many of them a liturgical character and tone. He believed they had come down in the tradition of the old Celtic Church, and the chanting that accompanied them was reminiscent of its ancient music.

Although the Celtic mission had been outwardly

suppressed, its tradition of prayer and spirituality lived on, almost like a spiritual resistance movement, among the people of the Western Isles and, as we shall see, its prayers were cherished and developed, often under the most adverse pressure and even persecution from the established churches. It is interesting to note (bearing in mind the Synod of Whitby and the Celtic mission's claim to the authority of John), that the references in these prayers to St John are with affection. He is called 'John of love' or 'John the Beloved', sometimes even 'foster-son of Mary' or 'foster-brother of Christ', foster-ship in the Highlands being regarded as one of the closest and most tender relationships.

The most striking characteristic of Celtic spirituality in these prayers is the celebration of the goodness of creation. It is not surprising that in the Western Isles there should have been a sharp awareness of the earth and sea and sky. The people's livelihood depended entirely on the elements. Carmichael describes how they spoke when they met on the paths or in one another's homes, sometimes for gatherings called 'ceilidhs' where the old stories, songs and prayers were heard again and again. Their conversations were often about the skies, the effects of the sun on the earth and the moon on the tides, or the ebbing of the sea and the life in its depths. In all of this, Christ was referred to as 'King of the elements', 'Son of the dawn' or 'Son of the light'.

The prayers in the Carmichael collection, known as the *Carmina Gadelica*, meaning simply 'the songs and poems of the Gaels', can seem romantic if we forget the harshness of the conditions under which they were forged and handed down. The sea was frequently dangerous and took the lives of many islanders, and much of the terrain was inhospitable. When crops failed

there was terrible hardship and famine. Nevertheless, creation was regarded as essentially good. One of the prayers of blessing, for instance, reveals how, before a journey or a parting, the people would pray for guidance and protection for one another, almost by invoking creation's graces:

The goodness of sea be thine,  
The goodness of earth be thine,  
The goodness of heaven be thine.<sup>1</sup>

Not only was creation regarded as essentially good, despite its harshness and destructive potential, but there was also a sense of God's grace being released through love of the elements:

The grace of the love of the skies be thine,  
The grace of the love of the stars be thine,  
The grace of the love of the moon be thine,  
The grace of the love of the sun be thine.<sup>2</sup>

The people believed that the grace of healing had been implanted within the goodness of creation, too. There is a story of a woman from the Island of Harris who suffered from a type of skin disease and was exiled from the community to live alone on the seashore. There she collected plants and shellfish and, having boiled them for eating, washed her sores with the remaining liquid. In time she was cured. She saw the grace of healing as having come to her through creation and so she prayed:

There is no plant in the ground  
But is full of His virtue,  
There is no form in the strand  
But is full of His blessing.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu who ought to be praised.

There is no life in the sea,  
There is no creature in the river,  
There is naught in the firmament,  
But proclaims His goodness.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu who ought to be praised.

There is no bird on the wing,  
There is no star in the sky,  
There is nothing beneath the sun,  
But proclaims His goodness.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu who ought to be praised.<sup>3</sup>

The life of God was viewed as being deep within creation as well as being distinct from it. A prayer of God's enfolding, clearly modelled on the ancient 'Breast-plate' hymn of St Patrick which celebrates Christ in all things, put it this way:

The Three who are over me,  
The Three who are below me,  
The Three who are above me here,  
The Three who are above me yonder;  
The Three who are in earth,  
The Three who are in air,  
The Three who are in heaven,  
The Three who are in the great pouring sea.<sup>4</sup>

These prayers celebrate the presence of God in the elements, but do not confuse God with creation and are therefore not pantheistic, although superficial or unsympathetic observers sometimes reached this conclusion. The prayers distinguish creation from the

Creator, between the Source of life and living things, and express the desire to be true to God:

Grant Thou to me, Father beloved,  
From whom each thing that is freely flows,  
That no tie over-strict, no tie over-dear,  
May be between myself and this world below.<sup>5</sup>

This spirituality was able to unite a distinction between God and creation with a great reverence for creation's elements. The reverencing of creation without deifying it was particularly notable in the people's relationship to the sun and moon. In the Hebrides, until well into the last century it was the custom for men to take off their cap to the sun in the morning and for women to bend the knee to the moon at night. An old woman of Barra explained the practice to Carmichael in the following terms: 'I think myself that it is a matter for thankfulness, the golden-bright sun of virtues giving us warmth and light by day, and the white moon of the seasons giving us guidance and leading by night.'<sup>6</sup>

In the islands, where the need for sunshine for the crops was recognized and the moon and stars were viewed as guiding the fishermen at night, a sharp awareness of the gift of physical light is understandable, but some of the ritual attached to it moves beyond a simple thanksgiving towards the type of nature mysticism the old Celtic Church had accepted into its spirituality. The practice of dancing in the moonlight out in the hills and singing prayers to the moon worried those who did not also recognize in it a form of Christ mysticism. Members of the wider Church felt that it was superstitious to make acts of reverence to the new moon and address it directly while simultaneously making the sign of the cross over the heart. This was

not the sort of behaviour associated with John Knox in Edinburgh, for instance, or Thomas Cranmer in Canterbury, but occasionally such practices did find their way even into England; similar rituals can of course be found in the Celtic fringes of Cornwall, Wales and Ireland. There is a delightful story of a girl from the west coast of Scotland who, on moving to England, continued her habit of bowing to the moon as a sign of respect for the light of God within it. Her father, however, who was an Episcopalian priest, is said to have paid her to discontinue the practice lest the bishop came to hear about it.

A wonderful aspect of this reverence for the sun and moon was the way in which the attention of the person praying would move back and forth, almost like the shuttle of a loom, between the physical and the spiritual. Worshippers gave thanks for the material gift of light while at the same time being aware of the spiritual light of God within creation. Many of the 'sun' prayers, for instance (including the following example) demonstrate this:

The eye of the great God,  
The eye of the God of glory,  
The eye of the King of hosts,  
The eye of the King of the living,  
Pouring upon us  
At each time and season,  
Pouring upon us  
Gently and generously.  
Glory to thee,  
Thou glorious sun.  
Glory to thee, thou sun,  
Face of the God of life.<sup>7</sup>

Such prayers convey a sense of the spiritual coming to us in and through the physical. An old man from Arasaig used to bow and say a prayer to the setting sun and then continue:

I am in hope that the great and gracious God  
Will not put out for me the light of grace  
Even as thou dost leave me this night.<sup>8</sup>

This tradition also includes the practice, typical of many of the Psalms in the Scriptures, of seeing our voices as joining the voice of the whole universe in giving praise to God. Ours is but a strain, and in terms of the evolution of the earth a very late strain indeed, in the great song of creation, a song that was sung for millions of years before the advent of humanity. It is a song that continues to be sung by the waves of the sea and the breath of the wind, even while we sleep at night or are distracted from our awareness of God. A common practice in the Western Isles, especially among the old, was to intone their prayers while listening to the sea along the shore, so that their voices might join 'the voicing of the waves' and their praises 'the praises of the ceaseless sea'.<sup>9</sup> As one old woman told Carmichael, she had been instructed since her youth to pray constantly and to see her prayer as joining creation's unending song:

My mother would be asking us to sing our morning song to God down in the back-house, as Mary's lark was singing it up in the clouds, and as Christ's mavis [song-thrush] was singing it yonder in the tree, giving glory to the God of the creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day, and for the joy of life. She would tell us that every



creature on the earth here below and in the ocean beneath and in the air above was giving glory to the great God of the creatures and the worlds, of the virtues and the blessings, and would *we* be dumb! My dear mother. . . . My heart loves the earth in which my beloved mother rests.<sup>10</sup>

Alongside this emphasis on the goodness of creation, the prayers convey a tremendous earthiness. In a blessing for the house, for instance, there is an unabashed asking for 'plenty of food, plenty of drink, plenty of beds, and plenty of ale'.<sup>11</sup> Life was seen as having been created good, very good, and the people had no hesitation in looking to God at times of festivity and fun. Many of the night benedictions, for instance, ask for a blessing on 'the bed-companion of my love',<sup>12</sup> and others for Christ's blessing on their 'virile sons and conceptive daughters'.<sup>13</sup> One of the most lovely, in its uninhibited inclusion of sexual attraction into prayer, is that by Isobel, the fifteenth-century Duchess of Argyll, who prayed:

There is a youth comes wooing me,  
O King of kings, may he succeed!  
Would he were stretched upon my breast,  
With his body against my skin.<sup>14</sup>

Hardly the sort of prayer that we could imagine John Calvin saying, let alone Mrs Calvin.

The emphasis in these prayers on the goodness of earth and the belief that God's dwelling-place is deep within creation is a further reflection and development of the interweaving of the spiritual and the material exemplified by the art of the old Celtic Church, where the patterns of heaven and earth intertwine and overlap.

So to look to God is not to look away from life but to look more deeply into it. Together with this emphasis on the presence of God at the heart of creation, of God being the heartbeat of life, there is also a sense of the closeness, the personal immediacy of God to us, a closeness not only of God but of the whole host of heaven, enfolding the earth and its people with love. Celtic belief does not thereby become a sentimental piety; rather, there exists in it and in its prayers a readiness to give and receive warm affection in relation to Christ and his saints and angels. As well as being referred to as 'King of the Elements', Christ is named as 'King of Tenderness'. God is seen as encompassing us with a gentleness of strength and care:

God to enfold me,  
God to surround me,  
God in my speaking,  
God in my thinking.

God in my sleeping,  
God in my waking,  
God in my watching,  
God in my hoping.

God in my life,  
God in my lips,  
God in my soul,  
God in my heart.

God in my sufficing,  
God in my slumber,  
God in mine ever-living soul,  
God in mine eternity.<sup>15</sup>

The saints and angels were viewed as immediately present, at both the critical moments of life and death and

in the most ordinary times of daily work and routine. They are fondly addressed and regarded as messengers of God's everlasting love for us. Approaching death, one old woman, for instance, prayed, 'O Mary of grace, mayest thou give me thy two arms around mine everlasting soul when going over the black river of death'.<sup>16</sup> Often 'the sainted women of heaven', as they were called, would be portrayed almost as midwives of the life that is to come, stretching out their arms to receive us and to welcome us at the end, and guiding us in our lives:

The love and affection of the angels be to you,  
The love and affection of the saints be to you,  
The love and affection of heaven be to you,  
To guard you and to cherish you.<sup>17</sup>

The saints were always present to guide and to guard, though sometimes with an intimacy that seems almost too close for comfort. Not only are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John viewed in some of the prayers as being at the four corners of our bed, but Columba is on our pillow and Brigid under the covers!

The mark of Celtic spirituality that had appeared first, and been stressed by Pelagius, was that of the image of God at the heart of the human. There was the conviction, and it features again in these prayers, that to look into the face of a newborn child is to see the image of God. 'The lovely likeness of the Lord is in thy pure face,' is a phrase in one of the invocations of blessing on a child. It was believed that by looking deeply enough into any human face, not just that of a child, we may glimpse the image of God, although often, maybe even usually, it is covered over by marks of sin and confusion.

In the Western Isles there developed a practice of

prayer and blessing at the birth of a child by the midwives, or 'womb-women', as they were called. These prayers clearly reflect the conviction that the life at the heart of each person is begotten of God. As one midwife put it, the newborn child comes 'from the bosom of the everlasting Father'<sup>18</sup>, and so the child was seen as bearing the freshness of God's image. The midwife also used to put water on the baby's forehead as part of the blessing. This was called 'the birth baptism', as opposed to the 'priestly' baptism, the sacrament that would be celebrated later (and sometimes it was much later, because of the large number of islands that a parish priest or minister had to cover). One midwife told Carmichael that when 'the image of the God of life is born into the world' she would put three drops of water on the child's forehead and say:

The little drop of the Father  
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

The little drop of the Son  
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

The little drop of the Spirit  
On thy little forehead, beloved one. . . .

To keep thee for the Three,  
To shield thee, to surround thee;

To save thee for the Three,  
To fill thee with the graces;

The little drop of the Three  
To lave thee with the graces.<sup>19</sup>

In these prayers, as in the early stream of Celtic spirituality, God's gift of grace is regarded not as planting something totally new in essentially bad soil, but as

bringing out or releasing the goodness which is present in the soil of human life but obstructed by evil. Grace is seen as enabling our nature to flourish, as co-operating with the light that is within every person. Thus many of the prayers for grace ask for the development of aspects of our essential, God-given nature. For example, they request 'the grace of health', 'the grace of love' and the grace of wisdom, beauty, voice, music or dancing. One prayer of blessing includes these lines:

A voice soft and musical I pray for thee,  
And a tongue loving and mild:  
Two things good for daughter and for son,  
For husband and for wife.  
The joy of God be in thy face,  
Joy to all who see thee.<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on essential goodness did not obscure a sharp awareness of evil or the need constantly to guard against it. Many of the prayers are in fact pleas for protection:

I am placing my soul and my body  
Under thy guarding this night, O Brigid,  
O calm Foster-mother of the Christ without sin,  
O calm Foster-mother of the Christ of wounds.

I am placing my soul and my body  
Under thy guarding this night, O Mary,  
O tender Mother of the Christ of the poor,  
O tender Mother of the Christ of tears.

I am placing my soul and my body  
Under thy guarding this night, O Christ,  
O Thou Son of the tears, of the wounds, of the  
piercings,  
May Thy cross this night be shielding me.

I am placing my soul and my body  
Under Thy guarding this night, O God,  
O Thou Father of help to the poor feeble pilgrims,  
Protector of earth and of heaven,  
Protector of earth and of heaven.<sup>21</sup>

What is it that happened to this beautiful tradition of prayer, this flowering of Celtic spirituality that bloomed long after the branch of the Celtic Church had been severed? It seems that formal opposition to these prayers began in the sixteenth century. The Scottish Reformation, with its emphatically Augustinian–Calvinistic theology, had little sympathy with the Celtic spirituality of the Western Isles. It was generally felt that the people of the islands were ‘little better than pagan until the Reformation’.<sup>22</sup> The neo-Calvinism of the seventeenth century – particularly that associated with the Westminster Confession (approved by Parliament in 1648 as the authorized ‘Confession of Faith for the three Kingdoms’) which accentuated Calvin’s theory of total human depravity – only increased the antipathy of the wider Church towards a spirituality that celebrated the goodness of creation and God’s image in the human. The ancient stories and legends of the islands concerning Brigid and other Celtic saints were now called ‘lies’ by the established Church.

The evangelical revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued the emphasis on original sin and further widened the perceived division between spirit and matter, between the sacred and the secular. Its Sabbatarianism and its doctrine of election drove a wedge between the so-called holy place of the Church and the holy day of the Sabbath and the rest of life, and similarly between the holy people, the saved ones, and

the rest of humankind, the damned ones. It was a repressive religiosity. In the islands, young men and women were being kept apart at weddings; the old songs and stories, music and dances had been banned, and the musicians' pipes and fiddles were being collected and burned, often by the Church's ministers. Roosters were even being locked away on the Sabbath, for fear that they might do something natural with the hens.

The repression was of Celtic spirituality in its broadest sense, for it touched the culture and language of the people as much as their religious life: schoolteachers beat children for speaking Gaelic and the ministers inhibited people from openly reciting the old prayers. As one young woman recounted for Carmichael, she and some other girls had begun to sing a Gaelic song as they walked home after school one day. 'The schoolmaster heard us,' she said, 'and called us back. He punished us till the blood trickled from our fingers, although we were big girls, with the dawn of womanhood upon us.'<sup>23</sup> Carmichael tells many stories about how hesitant the people often were to divulge the old prayers to him, lest they be overheard or found out by the schoolmaster or parish minister. Sometimes people would wait until he left their village and follow him, perhaps under the cover of night, to the next village, in order to tell him the old stories and prayers in safety. Even then they were cautious; Carmichael describes how some would flee his room if there was a knock at the door, leaving hats and coats behind in their hurry to escape.

What was it the establishment feared in this stream of spirituality that ran so deep within the people of the Celtic world? Was it in part that people of such a spirituality could not be neatly controlled or confined

within the narrow bounds of religion and order as defined by the established Church and society of the day? Are people who believe that the life of God is deep within them easily cowed or brought into line? It is difficult to know exactly what, over the centuries, sparked off the fear of Pelagius and Eriugena, for instance, rousing the might of Church and State to act against them and against those who followed them. However, in the case of the people of the Western Isles, although the religious establishment tried to suppress the old prayers, the most decisive blow against their continued use was probably struck by the Highland Clearances of the first half of the nineteenth century. The clearances were not of course a Church policy, but when tens of thousands of people were torn from their lands and islands and separated from clan and family, there was virtually no official Church resistance. In fact, in many cases, the opposite was true. The parish minister was often the voice and pawn of the powerful.

1792 was known as 'The Year of the Sheep', in which many of the great landowners of Scotland began to introduce sheep by the thousands, expelling crofters in almost equal numbers, to free the land for grazing. The sale of wool was more profitable than leasing the land to the people for the traditional small-scale family farming that had characterized the Highlands and Islands for centuries. In the centres of power, like London and Edinburgh, the clearances were euphemistically called 'Land Improvements'. For the people affected it meant the destruction of their culture, their way of life and the context of their spirituality. Many of the old simply became homeless and many of the young died of disease in the move to the cities and



abroad. One old woman described to Carmichael some of the terrible things she had witnessed:

Many a thing I have seen in my own day and generation. Many a thing, O Mary Mother of the black sorrow! I have seen the townships swept, and the big holdings being made of them, the people being driven out of the countryside to the streets of Glasgow and to the wilds of Canada, such of them as did not die of hunger and plague and smallpox while going across the ocean. I have seen the women putting the children in the carts which were being sent from Benbecula . . . while their husbands lay bound in the pen and were weeping beside them, without power to give them a helping hand, though the women themselves were crying aloud and their little children wailing like to break their hearts. I have seen the big strong men, the champions of the countryside, the stalwarts of the world, being bound on Loch Boisdale quay and cast into the ship as would be done to a batch of horses or cattle in the boat, the bailiffs and the ground-officers and the constables and the policemen gathered behind them in pursuit of them. The God of life and He only knows all the loathsome work of men on that day.<sup>24</sup>

With the scattering of family and the loss of land, livelihood and a distinct way of life (including, for instance, the gatherings or 'ceilidhs' in which the old stories and songs had been recited and passed down), there came an inevitable loss of memory. Nearly all of the prayers in this stream of spirituality had been orally communicated from generation to generation; now

many of them began to be forgotten. Carmichael was aware that he was collecting the prayers at the verge of their disappearance from living history. Something other than a loss of collective memory had occurred for many of those who remained, however. It was as if something of their spirituality had been broken in the collapse of the simplicity and wholeness of their lives. One old man recounted to Carmichael what life had been like before the clearances, when four generations of a family could sometimes be found dancing together on the hillside:

But the clearances came upon us, destroying all, turning our small crofts into big farms for the stranger, and turning our joy into misery, our gladness into bitterness, our blessing into blasphemy, and our Christianity into mockery. . . . The tears come on my eyes when I think of all we suffered and of the sorrows.<sup>25</sup>

One can wonder about the wrong done to these people and why it happened. One must wonder also why there was so little effective resistance from them to the clearances. And why was it that their spirituality was so shaken? Was it in part because it was a spirituality without a church, so that when family and culture were decimated there was no structure or context left in which the treasures of their spirituality could be protected and passed on? This is not to say that nothing of this stream of spirituality survived, for, as we shall see, it was to find new courses, but by the time Carmichael made his collection the ancient prayers were being used by a decreasing number of men and women, a dwindling remnant of a strong and deep spiritual tradition. If Carmichael had not transcribed

them, most of the prayers would have been erased from memory within another generation and a rich mine of spirituality for us and for the whole Church today would have been lost.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the prayers of the Western Isles is the perspective that death is a river that is hard to see or a place of black sorrow that is difficult to cross and that the angels of God are guiding us over to a goodness of unimaginable glory. This glory is not, however, unrelated to the goodness we have known in creation and in the earth's cycles of seasons. Rather, it is a return to the very home of the seasons, to the Source of creation, a returning to the One who is the heart of all life. A prayer that was said at the deathbed of a loved one speaks of the depth of hope found in this tradition, not only for an individual in the face of death, but for a whole people, and even for the whole of creation:

Thou goest home this night to thy home of winter,  
To thy home of autumn, of spring, and of summer;  
Thou goest home this night to thy perpetual home,  
To thine eternal bed, to thine eternal slumber. . . .

Sleep this night in the breast of thy Mother,  
Sleep, thou beloved, while she herself soothes thee;  
Sleep thou this night on the Virgin's arm,  
Sleep, thou beloved, while she herself kisses thee.

The great sleep of Jesus, the surpassing sleep of  
Jesus,  
The sleep of Jesus' wound, the sleep of Jesus' grief,  
The young sleep of Jesus, the restoring sleep of  
Jesus,  
The sleep of the kiss of Jesus of peace and of  
glory. . . .

The shade of death lies upon thy face, beloved,  
But the Jesus of grace has His hand round about  
thee;

In nearness to the Trinity farewell to thy pains,  
Christ stands before thee and peace is in His mind.

Sleep, O sleep in the calm of all calm,  
Sleep, O sleep in the guidance of guidance,  
Sleep, O sleep in the love of all loves;  
Sleep, O beloved, in the Lord of life,  
Sleep, O beloved, in the God of life!<sup>26</sup>