

Celtic Christianity: attributes of God

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*The High Creator, the Unbegotten, Ancient of Days,
was without origin of beginning, limitless,
He is and will be for endless ages of ages.*

‘These sonorous opening lines of the *Altus Prosator*, a somewhat forbidding poem attributed to Columba, paint a picture of God as primordial, foundational, utterly transcendent and awesome’ (Bradley 2018.67), and a similar emphasis on divine mystery and ineffability pervades many of the prayers and poems of the so-called ‘golden age’ of Celtic Christianity. In theological terms, these pieces stand in the apophatic tradition, which stresses the unknowability of God. These Celts had little time for abstract speculation. For them, it was more important to *experience* God, than to try and explain him. There is little by way of systematic theology in their annals. What we have instead is an accumulation of stories and responsive pieces, all of which express something about their faith. It’s this, that I’m reflecting on today, as I outline aspects of their sense of God and how these impacted their living. Doing this helps us to clarify our own understanding, and how this in turn affects our living – our worship, prayer, and engagement with one another and the world.

A fundamental conviction for the Celts was that God is infinite, ineffable, and so beyond the grasp of the finite human mind. In so far as God could be known, it was primarily through appreciation of creation. ‘*Ever since the creation of the world God’s invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made*’, St Paul wrote in Romans (1.19). This, the Celts acknowledged, though having said that, for Columbanus (for example) what Creation mostly reveals is God’s

unfathomability – divine mystery. ‘Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator’, he wrote, ‘if you will not know the former, be silent concerning the Creator... For just as the depth of the sea is invisible to human sight, even so the Godhead of the Trinity is found to be unknowable by human senses.’

What was evident, however, was God’s power. The words **power** and strength, occur again and again in Celtic prayers, poems and sermons. Take *St Patrick’s Breastplate*, for example. ‘For my shield this day I call a mighty power: The Holy Trinity’, it begins. It goes on to use the word power in every invocation of Christ’s activity – ‘I arise today through the power of Christ with his baptism, through the power of his crucifixion with his burial, through the power of his resurrection with his ascension, through the power of his descent for the judgment of doom... I arise today through the strength of the love of the Cherubim... through the strength of Heaven: light of Sun, brilliance of Moon, splendour of Fire, speed of Lightning...’ on and on it goes. In another prayer, he begins: May the strength of God pilot us, may God’s power preserve us.’

In the *Altus Prosator*, ‘Columba’ wrote: ‘This great globe doth God the Highest by his power all surely keep’. And again, ‘When from heaven to earth descending comes the Christ in power divine, then the signal cross, his banner, shall all glorious shine.’ And in another well-known example, a favourite hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*, God is variously named as ‘high King of heaven’, ‘power of my power’ and ‘Ruler of All’.

Hilary Richardson, a leading authority on Irish high standing crosses, says that these were also symbols of God’s strength and sovereign rule. ‘The Cross wasn’t so much an allusion to Christ’s passion’, she writes, as ‘an expression of Divine Power’. And connected with this are numerous stories

of Celtic saints manifesting this power in mighty works – ‘charging around the country like Power Rangers, zapping their pagan foes and performing spectacular conjuring tricks to prove the superior power of Christianity’ is how Bradley describes it (2018.75). According to the eighth-century *Miracula Ninie Episcopi*, with the help of ‘the almighty rule and revered power of the world – the Lord of miracles’, countless good works were performed by our patron saint. Once, after discovering there were no green vegetables for the monk’s dinner, Ninian is said to have caused a prolific crop to mature within hours from seeds in the monastery garden (maybe that explains what Bill and Mary have produced in the church veggie patch!!). The message of these miracle stories, Bradley suggests, is that God’s power was available and could be channelled by faithful, prayerful servants.

Outside of charismatic circles, this focus on miraculous works is alien to many contemporary western Christians. To appreciate it, though, it helps to remember how brutal life was for most of those living in the early Middle Ages, and ‘how tangible and terrible they felt the power of evil to be’ (Bradley 2018.77). *St Patrick’s Breastplate’s* list of ills for which protection was needed starts with the ‘dark powers that assail me’. For these Celtic Christians, bad forces were felt to be every bit as pervasive as good ones.

Connected with this was a strong emphasis on divine **protection**. A striking number of early Celtic prayers are heartfelt calls for deliverance and protection. This includes prayers in the *lorica* or breastplate tradition, and in circling or encompassing prayers. Disease, disaster, forbidding weather, and violence (endemic in a society still dominated by warlords), meant that life for many was nasty, brutish and short. The protective authority of the cross was often drawn upon, and the physical act of making the sign of the cross was seen as a way of averting danger. According to legend, Columba used this

sign to open the barred gates of the pagan Pictish king Brude's palace, and on one occasion to banish a devil from the milk pail!! The best story I read concerns his repelling of infamous Loch Ness Monster. Here's an excerpt from Adomnán's late 7th century 'Life of Saint Columba':

On another occasion also, when the blessed man was living for some days in the province of the Picts, he was obliged to cross the river Nesa. When he reached the bank... he saw some of the inhabitants burying an unfortunate man, who... was a short time before was swimming and was bitten most severely by a monster that lived in the water. His wretched body was, though too late, taken out with a hook... The blessed man, on hearing this, was so far from being dismayed, that he directed one of his companions to swim over [to retrieve] the coble that was moored at the farther bank. And Lugne Mocumin, hearing the command of the excellent man, obeyed without the least delay... leaping into the water. But the monster, which, so far from being satiated, was only roused for more prey, was lying at the bottom of the stream, and when it felt the water disturbed above... suddenly rushed out and giving an awful roar, darted after him with its mouth wide open... Then the blessed man, observing this, raised his holy hand, while all the rest... were stupefied with terror, and, invoking the name of God, formed the saving sign of the cross in the air, and commanded the ferocious monster, saying, 'Thou shalt go no further, nor touch the man; go back with all speed'. Then at the voice of the saint, the monster was terrified, and fled more quickly than if it had been pulled back with ropes, though it had just got so near to Lugne... that there was not more than the length of a spear-staff between man and beast.

Take that, foul fiend!!!

There's one final conviction animating the Celtic understanding of God that I'd like to mention today, and that's **presence**. If God was seen as transcendent and infinitely-powerful, he was also felt to be immanent and intensely present – in creation and the spirit realm. Scottish theologian John Macquarrie notes that 'the Celt was very much a God-intoxicated [person]

whose life was embraced on all sides by the divine Being'. For Celtic Christians, 'the world is the place of God's presence', and 'God's presence makes the world at every moment' (Allchin 1997.11). When Patrick was asked about the Christian God by one of the daughters of Lóegaire, the pagan high king of Tara, he replied:

'Our God is the God of all, the God of heaven and earth, sea and rivers, of sun and moon and all the stars, of high mountains and lowly valleys. The God above heaven, the God in heaven, the God under heaven. He has his dwelling in heaven and earth and sea and in all that in them is. He inspires all things, quickens all things, is over all things, supports all things...'

In the *Breastplate*, he speaks similarly of Christ –

'Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger...'

Presence was incredibly significant for these Christians; the presence of the three persons of the Trinity, of angels (and devils), and of risen saints. It's so often affirmed in their prayers and liturgy.

And one final aspect of this to mention is what today might be termed an *ecclesiology of presence*. For Celtic Christians, the role, the mission of the church was seen primarily as enacting God's presence; as being with and alongside people – available, hospitable, attentive, reconciling, compassionate, constant; a prayerful, pastoral presence in the midst of the world. *'The kingdom of God is in your midst'*, Jesus says in Luke 17.21 – within you; among you. Celtic Christians were alert to this presence, and in their lives, sought to enact it. And, I can think of no better way to end this

reflection, than by inviting us to be likewise attentive to the presence of God, and to enact this presence in the world God loves.

**Our next hymn is Columba's response to Pope Gregory the Great, who apparently read the Altus Prosator and was critical that it made so little mention of Christ's redeeming work.*