

This morning I'm going to take you back twelve hundred years to the Dark Ages. There were probably about half a million people in Britain, living in little towns and villages separated by vast tracts of forest or bleak moorland. Much of the population was pagan, fearing and worshipping the spirits in rocks, trees and rivers, the sun and moon, or even the Norse gods. There were little monasteries and Christian communities in some areas, and monks made missionary journeys to teach and preach the faith. Some became revered as saints: Columbanus, Brigid and Patrick in Ireland, Columba in Scotland, Aidan, Cuthbert, Hild and Wilfrid in the north of England, Edmund and Oswald in East Anglia. Death was always around the corner. There was danger everywhere, literal danger from disease, famine, or when the countryside was ravaged by the army of a rival king or one of the devastating Viking raids, and spiritual danger from the evil spirits, ghosts and trolls that populated every nook and cranny.

The early Celtic Christians looked to their God to defend them from all these perils. Their faith was strongly Trinitarian. God, Christ and Holy Spirit were very real to them. If you've read or used any of the old Celtic prayers you'll know how deeply the triune God was embedded in their understanding. And at some point, probably around 800AD, an Irish poet composed a prayer, one version of which was translated in the nineteenth century by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander, (who also wrote *Once in Royal David's City* and *All Things Bright and Beautiful*). We know it as *St Patrick's Breastplate*. It couldn't have been written by St Patrick, who lived about 400 years earlier, but it probably acquired his name because he was a very powerful and well-known saint who was known to have called on the Trinity to help him when he was in danger. The original poem was called *The Cry of the Deer*, and was written in Irish Gaelic except for the last verse, which was probably added in Latin to make it suitable for use in worship. It was rather longer than the version we shall sing in a few minutes, and I've made a copy for each of you because our hymn leaves out some of the most interesting parts.

Present-day spirituality tends to focus on the personal inner journey, and our growth in love, understanding and reverence, but this poem is quite different. It is an incantation for divine protection - an unusual emphasis for today. It's not irrelevant, however, because we are surrounded by just as many evils, even if many of them are seen in less concrete forms, and times of difficulty and danger are just as common. The hymn is often used as a creed, but it is much more than this - it is a spiritual 999 call. There is no interest in self-exploration. It is a cry for help, with a strong, carefully crafted structure to ensure maximum effectiveness. It's about power - the power of the Trinity (strongest) and Christ's power set against all the evils outside, contrasted with the powerlessness of the pray-er, who cannot hope to overcome them without colossal heavenly help.

The first verse invokes the Trinity, the supremely powerful three-in-one - and yet immediately emphasises that the power of the Trinity is the power of love. Verse two introduces Christ, again in terms of power (there is no mention of him as suffering or as a servant, which was given much greater emphasis by later writers.) Even here, though, some aspects of Christ's power would have sounded unusual to a pagan - power in baptising or in dying would have been strongly counter-cultural. Pagans who worshipped Norse gods might have been familiar with the sagas - here Christ is presented as a hero in terms very similar to those of the sagas, meeting the old gods on their own ground. The Christian evangelists were doing their best to speak to their audiences in familiar terms, so verse three brings in a cast of

thousands as supporters, to lend additional protection. They are lined up in battalions as a powerful army - not as intercessors!

Verse four draws in all the powers of creation alongside the spiritual and temporal powers of the previous verses - an attempt to tame a very alive, alarming and uncooperative force and to pull the powers of nature away from the pagans and line them up for God. Then verse five, now referring to a single rather than a triune God, adds his immediate presence, companionship and advocacy to the raw power already assembled.

Our familiar hymn leaves out the whole of verse six, which is odd, because only now, when all the forces have been assembled to do spiritual battle, do we find out what all this protection is needed for. The forces of evil are as strong now as they were then, even if some of them have different names - we are no longer too worried about blacksmiths. It's interesting, though, that a woman's spell was felt to be as powerful as that of a pagan priest! We don't need much imagination to identify the heretical lying and the knowledge that injures the body and spirit today.

Now the pray-er weaves Christ's protection around himself in a seamless, impenetrable, chink-less covering. This is a simple, child-like approach, very comforting and very powerful. However reluctant you may be to bring in the patriarchs and the seraphim to strengthen your resolve, this enfolding in Christ is tremendously helpful and effective at any time of danger or temptation. It can be a song, a prayer, a meditation; individual phrases can be used as arrow prayers; the whole verse can be sung or recited as an accompaniment to walking; separate sections can be used as "theme for the day". Imagine going to a series of difficult meetings thinking "Christ on tongue of all who meet me", and attempting to recognise Christ in each of the other people present.

Finally in the last two verses the poet cycles back to the beginning - a very common device, and often also used in that intricate Celtic tracery which somehow is endless, and then there is the short Latin prayer and the amen. He has given us a rock-solid declaration of faith, a demonstration of the strength we gain from belief in the Trinity, a lyrical prayer and a foundation for healing. No wonder it has survived for twelve hundred years. The ultimate message (which Mrs Alexander has somehow also contrived to leave out) is not one of battle but of love - the Trinity is strong because it makes all through love. This is a paean of praise - no matter how frightening and terrible things are on the outside, nothing can separate us from God's love.

THE CRY OF THE DEER

1.

I bind to myself this day:
A mighty power,
The Holy Trinity!
Affirming threeness,
Confessing oneness,
In the making of all through love.

2.

I bind to myself this day:
Christ's power in his coming
and in his baptising,
Christ's power in his dying on the cross,
his arising from the tomb, His ascending;
Christ's power in his coming for judgement
and ending.

3.

I bind to myself this day:
Strong power of the seraphim,
With angels obeying,
And archangels attending,
In the glorious company of the holy
and risen ones,
In the prayers of the patriarchs,
In the visions of the prophets,
In the preaching of the apostles,
In the witness of the confessors,
In the innocence of the virgins,
In the deeds of the righteous.

4.

I bind to myself this day:
Heaven's might, sun's brightness,
Moon's whiteness, fire's glory,
Lightning's swiftness, wind's wildness,
Ocean's depth, earth's solidity,
Rock's immobility.

5.

I bind to myself this day:
God's strength to direct me,
God's power to sustain me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's vision to light me,
God's ear to hear for me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to uphold me,
God's path to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's legions to save me

From snares of the demons,
From evil enticements,
From failings of nature,
From the one or the many
that seek to destroy me, anear or afar.

6.

Around me I gather today
These forces to save my soul and body
From dark powers that assail me:
Against false prophesyings,
Against pagan devisings,
Against heretical lying
And false gods all around me.
Against spells cast by women,
By blacksmiths, by druids,
Against knowledge unlawful,
That injures the body, that injures the spirit.

7.

Be Christ this day my strong protector;
Against poison and burning,
Against drowning and wounding,
That I may have great reward.
Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind
me,
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above
me,
Christ to right of me, Christ to left of me,
Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in
my rising,
Christ in heart of all who know me,
Christ on tongue of all who meet me,
Christ in eye of all who see me,
Christ in ear of all who hear me.

8.

I bind to myself this day:
A mighty power:
The Holy Trinity!
Affirming threeness,
Confessing oneness,
In the making of all through love.

9.

Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of Christ.
May your salvation, O Lord, be always with us,
Amen.