

Poetry and Liturgies from Celtic-speaking Christians “The Voice of the Spirit”

Poetry was the voice of theology spoken through praise and prayer. It was the common language of life with God, a mirror reflecting the presence of God in daily life.

An early Welsh thirteenth-century poem from *The Book of Taliesin* reflecting the goodness of God as the source of the goodness of life.

The beauty of berries at harvest time,
Beautiful, too, the grain on the stalk...
The beauty of desire and a silver ring,
Beautiful, too, a ring for a virgin.
The beauty of an eagle on the shore when tide is full,
Beautiful, too, the seagulls playing...
The beauty of desire for penance from a priest,
Beautiful, too, bearing the elements to the altar...
The beauty of a strong parish led by God,
Beautiful, too, being in the Season of Paradise...
The beauty of the fish in his bright lake,
Beautiful, too, its surface shimmering.
The beauty of the word which the Trinity speaks,
Beautiful, too, doing penance for sin.

Welsh Poetry Celebrating the Trinity

Welsh poetry has the unique ability of to describe a sacred presence embedded in the delight, earthiness, and adventure of human life. In Welsh poetry and song the language of theology is not divorced from the language of daily life because the realm of God and life on earth are not separate worlds.

A portion of an early Welsh saga poem: an *Englynion*

(Jenny Rowland translation: 1990)

Trinity in heaven, I extol you.
One in Three, one unit of energy.
In divine right
One miracle, one God to be praised...
I extol God who is one and two,
Who is three – no lie,
And doubting him no walkover –
He who made the fruit and flow
And the world’s miscellany:
God whose name is two, whose word is divine,
God whose name is three, whose energy is divine;
God whose name is one, the God of Paul and Anthony.

A Poem of Praise to the Trinity from the *Juvencus Manuscript*

(Oliver Davies translation: 1995.)

Analysis of poem by Donald Allchin in *God's Presence Makes the World*, 1997.

(Welsh, 9th – 10th century, but reflecting an earlier oral triad poem)

Almighty Creator, it is you who have made the land and the sea.

The world cannot comprehend in song bright and melodious, even though the grass and trees should sing all your wonders, O true Lord!

The Father created the **world**¹ by a miracle;
it is difficult to express its measure.
Letter cannot contain it, letters cannot comprehend it.

Jesus created for the hosts of **Christendom**²,
with miracles when he came, resurrection through his nature.

He who made the wonder of the **world**,³
will save us, has saved us.
It is not too great toil to praise the Trinity.

Clear and high in the perfect assembly;
let us praise above the nine grades of angels
the sublime and blessed Trinity.

Purely, humbly, in skillful verse,
I should love to give praise to the Trinity,
according to the greatness of his power.

God has required of the host in this world
who are his, that they should at all times,
all together, fear the Trinity.

The one who has power, wisdom, and dominion above heaven, below heaven,
completely; it is not too great toil to praise the Son of Mary.

¹ (Welsh: **presen**=The world is the place of God's presence. God's presence makes the world.)

² (Welsh: **bedydd**: baptism, the world in which Christ is acknowledged.)

³ (Welsh: **elfydd**=the living world with all its elements and creatures)

An eleventh-century poem praising the Trinity and the Incarnation⁴

(Translation by Paul Quinn)

Mary nurtures a Son in her womb:
His birth a blessing to those who discover him.
He goes forth like the sun, great is the number of his company.

Mary nurtures a Son at her breast:
His birth a blessing to those who see him.
He goes forth like the sun, wide reaching is his burning zeal.

Mary nurtures the Son of tenderness,
God, supreme ruler of every nation:
Her father, her strengthener, her brother.

Mary nurtures a Son on whom dignity rests:
None can violate his boundaries
Whose words are beauty, who is neither young nor grows old.

The unwise can never perceive
How Mary is related to God:
Her Son, her father, her Lord.

But I know, though I be but frail and earthly,
How Mary is bonded in the Spirit to the Trinity:
Her Son and brother in the flesh,
Her father, her Lord, blessed almighty.

Prayers from the Scottish Hebrides

The following prayers are from Celtic-speaking Christians from the highlands and islands of Scotland collected by Alexander Carmichael in *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*.

A Prayer for Encompassing

The compassing of God and His right hand,
Be upon my form and upon my frame;
 The compassing of the High King and the grace of the Trinity
 Be upon me abiding ever eternally,
 Be upon me abiding ever eternally.
May the compassing of the Three shield me in my means,
The compassing of the Three shield me this day,
The compassing of the Three shield me this night
 From hate, from harm, from act, from ill,
 From hate, from harm, from act, from ill.

⁴ From: Marged Haycock, *Blodeugerdd Barddas O Ganu Crefyddol Cynnr*. 1994.

A Caim Prayer

The caim of God be on thee,
The caim of the God of life.
The caim of Christ be on thee,
The caim of the Christ of love.
The caim of Spirit be on thee,
The caim of the Spirit of Grace.
The caim of the Three be on thee,
The caim of the Three preserve thee,
The caim of the Three preserve thee.

A Baptismal Prayer from Scotland

When the child comes into the world, the kneewoman puts three drops of water on the forehead of the poor little infant, who has come home to us from the bosom of the everlasting Father. And the woman does this in the name and in the reverence of the kind and powerful Trinity. With each of the three drops of water the child is handed across the fire and then carried sunwise around the fire as the kneewoman says:

In the name of God,
In the name of Jesus,
In the name of Spirit,
The perfect Three of power.
A small drop of water
To thy forehead, beloved,
Meet for Father, Son and Spirit,
The Triune of power.

A small drop of water
To encompass my beloved,
Meet for the Father, Son and Spirit,
The Triune of power.

A small drop of water,
To fill thee with each grace,
Meet for the Father, Son and Spirit,
The Triune of power.

The little drop of the Three
To fill thee with Their virtue
O the little drop of the Three
To fill thee with Their virtue.

A Tenth-century Celtic Psalm

Hail to you, glorious Lord!

May church and chancel praise you,
May chancel and church praise you,
May plain and hillside praise you,
May the three springs praise you,
Two higher than the wind and one above the earth,
May darkness and light praise you,
May the cedar and sweet fruit-tree praise you,
Abraham praised you, the founder of faith,
May life everlasting praise you,
May the birds and the bees praise you,
May the stubble and the grass praise you,
Aaron and Moses praised you,
May male and female praise you,
May the seven days and the stars praise you,
May the lower and the upper air praise you,
May books and letters praise you,
May the fish in the river praise you,
May thought and action praise you,
May the sand and the earth praise you,
May all the good things created praise you,
And I too shall praise you, Lord of glory,

Hail to you, glorious Lord!

From *Hebridean Altars* by Alistair Maclean (1937)

The Milking Croon

Finding nothing common or unclean, we Highland people sense Divinity everywhere, in opal dawns and quiet seas: in trusty friendship and in cleansing laughter: in food and drink, in glistering fish, or in the flesh of deer. "We are God's guests," said a pious man of the Lewis, "and 'tis He who keeps the generous table". It is not surprising, therefore, that in a simpler age the women crooned a heart-blessing and God's blessing on even the frothing milk:

White foam of milk,
Be life to me,
And life to mine,
Who drink Thy wine.
Most sacred Three,
With blessing bend
Over this gift

Your care doth send.
Yea, whoso drinks
Of this white feast,
Gift him with vision
Clear to see
Thy love full-brimmed
Within the cup
Raised to his lips'
Necessity.

A Grandmother's Benediction

Wilt thou not grant me vision,
Lord of Grace,
Of that vast realm
Of unhorizoned space
Which is Thy heart
That heart-room makes for all?

The Secret of Gentleness

In a gear house that gave its back to the meadowlands and its eager face to the sea, there lived, in other days, a most noble lady. The four desires of a woman's world were hers fulfilled – beauty of face, a true man's love, the kisses of children and plenteousness in warmth and food. But, because she was a king's daughter, He who is wise to whom to give a gift added a grace that crowns even a queen. And that was gentleness. So she was the marvel of her kind, a byword for tenderness in the mouth of the Isles.

One nightfall, so the old tale goes, who should come to her door but a wandering saint. To him she gave food and a resting place. On the morrow, ere parting, she asked him whether there was any service she might make him. "Yes", said the holy man, "there is one. Tell me the secret of your exceeding gentleness". At this the lady mused for long, her eyes downcast; then answered softly as one waking from a lovely dream, "There is no secret – only - only I am always at His feet, and He is always in my heart."

The Motherhood of God

I have a secret joy in Thee, my God.
Thou art my Father,
Thou art my Mother too.
And of Thy tenderness and healing and patience
There is no end at all.