Pilgrimage as Prayer

I on my path, O God,
Thou God in my steps,
Bless to me, O God,
The earth beneath my foot.
Bless to me, O God,
The path wherever I go.
[*Carmina Gadelica*, III,]

The idea of pilgrimage as prayer permeates many spiritual traditions, yet is a concept that is frequently overlooked in works on prayer. Of all the spiritual traditions that hold to this concept, perhaps none made it as integral to their faith as did the ancient Celts. According to the Celtic understanding of the cosmos, all of Creation follows a cycle – a pilgrimage if you will – from conception to death to rebirth. Within the cycle, the ancient Celts believed, flows the primordial creative prayer, the Oran Mór, *en*fusing all with its numinous creative life-bestowing energy. To the Celts, Life is a great sacrament of divine love, a tangible prayer *from* the divine to us, a divine melody inspiring us as the Great Melody of Creation flows through and charges all Creation along its holy pilgrimage.

Conversely, following this reasoning the life we live as we listen to, and heed the melody is our prayer to the Creator. "Anyone can say words," a Celtic saint might say. "Words, however, might fall unheard, if not carried by the flow of the Oran Mór." In Celtic spirituality, there are "words", and there are *words*. *Words* take their meaning from their sound, not from that which we impose upon them. Words, in this sense, are part of the divine song of creation, flowing into us in our creation, and as the song continues to be sung, flowing out of us into Creation. To be carried by the flow, we must be certain that the divine melody is not dammed up within, but allowed to flow through us with its creative energy. To refuse to live the sacrament of Life is to dam the flow.

Quiet—
Eternal Quiet.
Not even the sound of the restless, stirring, dark waters
could be heard.

Then, a great spiraling strain of Melody moved across the endless waters.
Subdued at first, then quickly gathering momentum until it reached a great crescendo.
And, then, there was Life!

But the Melody did not stop.
It continued its song, filling all of Creation with its divine harmony.
And so it continues today, for all those who listen.

Prayer is not the "give me" of much of our contemporary prayer, which only dams the flow. It is, rather, the active giving of blessing. Every action, every deed, is full of the creative energy of the Oran Mór. It has been said that the Celts did not so much create prayers as they repeated the primordial prayer of God to Creation, infused with their own emotions. John Cassian, perhaps the Desert Father most revered by the Celtic Church, taught that prayer is simply opening up our hearts and lives to God; to spiritually hear, and to actively participate within, the primordial prayer of God. The Celtic Christian theologian, John Scotus Eriugena, put it a bit differently. He wrote that it is more proper to say that God recreated himself within Creation than to say that God created it. For Eriugena, prayer is the creative act, an expression of God within Creation directed back to the Creator. If the Oran Mór is the Image of God within Creation, then the Oran Mór becomes that which is directed back toward God through our creative actions. In Celtic lore the druid is the seer, the one who sees the creative melody within Creation, and understands how the cycles of nature are bound to that divine flow, and thus seeing, communicates with the numinous in, and via, Creation.

Nede Mac Ande, the chief ollamh (teacher of poetry) under the Ultonian king, Conchobhar mac Nessa, sings in his portion of the *Song of the Three Cauldrons* that the "Cauldron of Vocation" is where life is nourished, ennobled and exalted. He also sings of how the Cauldron sets the bound free, provides a name to the nameless, and instructs the free-born. Etymologically the Gaelic words for "free" and "bound" are both related to the Gaelic word for "seeing." The one who *fully sees* is the one who is free. "To see" is to be a "seer," one who communicates with divinity. It is important that we

remember that ultimately prayer is about communication between the divine and Creation. Prayer, then, in Celtic spirituality is the creative, cyclic movement of life— pilgrimage.

Let us go forth
In the wisdom of our all-seeing Father,
In the patience of our all-loving brother,
In the truth of the all-knowing Spirit,
In the learning of the apostles,
In the gracious guidance of the angels,
In the patience of the saints,
In the self-control of the martyrs.
Such is the path for all servants of Christ,
The path from death to eternal life.
[Traditional, *Celtic Fire*, p. 144]

Although pilgrimage was a part of Celtic spirituality, both pagan and Christian, it is from the Celtic Christian Church that we draw most of our knowledge about pilgrimage, or *peregrinatio*, as the Celtic saints called it. Pilgrimage for the Celtic Christian had three categories: Red, for the lost of life, Green, for the ascetic life under forced obligation, and White, for the purposeful living away from hearth. While all three, in one way or another, duplicate the movement of life, it is the White Pilgrimage that was to be sought after. St. Columba in his *Rule* writes, "Therefore let us concern ourselves with heavenly things … like pilgrims, sigh for our (spiritual) homeland."

In the prayer above, the pilgrim prays that the *peregrinatio* will be in the "wisdom of the Father" and the "truth of the all-knowing Spirit." If we had the time for a in-depth study of the Oran Mór we would come to find that both "wisdom" and "truth" are but two aspects of the Creative Melody. The prayer, then, is for an awareness of the Oran Mór, an awareness of God's creative prayer to Creation, in the pilgrimage. The White Pilgrimage then, according to Celtic spirituality, is the only way to become spiritually aware of the ebb and flow of life, of its fragility and strength, and of its sadness and joy; all integrally intertwined into one whole fabric called Life. And with the awareness, the White Pilgrim learns when to stay put and when to move on, and in so doing discovers his places of death and resurrection.

The White Pilgrimage found its source in what the Welsh call *hud*, that deep sense of wonder and awe of the divine residing in every thing and in every movement. The Gaelic language has a word, *nuirt*, which is usually rendered as "soul." This, however, is not a completely accurate translation. The *nuirt* is better understood as the Divine Melody, the Oran Mór, within. Some would call it the image of God, or Grace. The *nuirt* is said to be constantly aware of its own kind in all of Creation, and always seeking for this awareness, as this poem from the *Black Book of Camarthan* so richly illustrates:

I (the nuirt) am the flame of fire, blazing with passionate love;
I am the spark of light; illuminating the deepest truth;
I am a rough ocean, heaving with righteous anger;
I am a calm lake, comforting the troubled breast;
I am a wild storm, raging at human sins;
I am dry dust, choking worldly ambition;
I am wet earth, bearing rich fruits of Grace.

St Columba claimed that it was his "*Nuirt's* yearning to see the face of God and to rest in his home" that drove him on the *peregrinatio*. It is this constant yearning for spiritual awareness that produces what in Welsh is called *taithchwant*, a gnawing discontent that drives every true Celt to seek with mind and body their mystical home, the Celtic *Tir Na n' Og*. From the Celtic perspective, it might be said that *taithchwant* is God's prayerful call to us. Pilgrimage is the response to the divine prayer.

Our response – White Pilgrimage – as Celtic spirituality defines it, involves *tarus* (journey) and *dyserta* (the "desert place"). Although often translated "journey," *tarus* is more than journey. A journey, by definition, has a final destination, and while it may be said that the mystical *Tir Na n' Og* is the final destination of the Celtic pilgrim, it is also true that *Tir Na n' Og* as a destination will be found time and time again. Moreover, in each "finding," *Tir Na n' Og* becomes not the end of *tarus*, but the beginning. St. Brendan while on his mystical *inrama* (a sea-*tarus*) sails for seven years and each year celebrates the liturgical year at the same place and in the same way. Nevertheless, in some mystical way, it was always different. *Tarus* is that journey in which, while the cycles of life never deviate from their inherent rhythm, they are always different, yet always the same. In *tarus*, it is the experiences of the journey that gives meaning to the journey. Here then is another truth; *tarus* is not really about the destination. It is about the path,

about being on the path that leads to awareness of God and the divine prayer to us.

Peregrination can best be described as a form of self-imposed, irresistible exile. *Tarus*, the journey of exile, is driven by the yearning, the *taithchwant*, and is never vain repetition, for in the journey God is continually experienced. The greatest hindrance to faith is not unbelief, but lack of experience, lack of *tarus*. With each new experience, our inner communication with God becomes more intimate, yet how often we pray not for experience, but for things, and refuse to experience that which truly communicates.

There is a practical corollary here regarding spoken prayer. If we are constantly praying for the same things in the same way, we are not experiencing *tarus*. Perhaps we have never begun, or perhaps, we have lost our way. This last, in itself, is somewhat a contradiction, for the true pilgrim, while he may not know the way, is never lost. "We stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on our pilgrimage, we cared not where," is how three Irish fisherman explained their presence to King Alfred of Wessex after having drifted ashore following seven days of drifting in a boat made of skin and pitch, with little provision, and no oars. The *taithchwant* will lead where it will, where it is necessary for the pilgrim to go. In the Celtic Way, every road, every current of the stream, every breath of the wind, in the Celtic way, is both the road of life and the road <u>to</u> Life.

Tarus by itself is, however, not pilgrimage. *Tarus* must lead us to those places the Celts called *dyserta*, the "desert place." Here are to be found those "thin places" between This-World and the Other. To say "the next world" would be a misnomer, for the Other-World is not out there somewhere, a place to be achieved in the future. The Other-World is, according to Celtic belief, present in the now, overlaying and permeating this temporal world. The prayers of either the Celtic saints or the druids were not directed to a nebulous God "out there" somewhere. Prayer, for the Celt, is communication between intimate friends. More accurately, for the Celt, it was intimate communication with the divine as they walked along the pilgrimage. It was as if God was literally walking with them, and as far as the Celtic pilgrim was concerned, God was.

The "thin places" are those special places where our communication with the numinous is not hindered by temporal restraints. These were, for the

Celts of old, literal places. A rip in time as it were, where time burst forth in all of its fullness: a place where present time contained all events, past and future, within itself. Time for the Celts, Christian and otherwise, was a holy reality blessed by God's overflowing love, and thus, within Creation (of which time was both a temporal part of and eternally separate from) there where those physical places where one could experience the fullness of this reality. It was in these places, the *dyserta,* that the pilgrim became intimately aware of the numinous, and in the awareness, experienced both death and resurrection, and in time temporal, began anew, the *tarus*.

The *dyserta* of the *peregrinatio* should not be confused with hermitage, which quite often was lush and beautiful. The *dyserta*, in Celtic lore, is never a place of beauty, but always a waste place of stark loneliness. On the eve of Samhain, when the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest, the world is dark, cold and fearsome. The harvest is in, only the waste remains. This idea of *dyserta* must have been embedded in the psyche of the Celt, for both druid and Christian monk sought out those craggy, stark and isolated places to communicate with the divine. St. Cuthbert's biographer describes Cuthbert's retreat on the Isle of Farne as "haunted by Satan's angels. What is interesting, however, is that in time the saint came to find beauty in the starkness. Celtic spirituality claims that when a person meets God face to face all of Creation is transfigured. The holy beauty of the divine prayer, the Oran Mór, loudly sings out.

The Russian saints called the *dyserta, poustina*, the "waste place." Here in mystical terms is St. John of the Cross' "Dark Night of the Soul." It is here that the Celtic pilgrims wrestled with their demons, dying and being resurrected. It was here in the stark solitude of the *dyserta* that the Celtic saints uttered the ultimate wordless prayer of submission, meeting their God face to face. Like Jacob, they too wrestled with God and lost. Yet, like Jacob, in losing, won. Like Jacob, they rediscovered their true selves.

From hereon the pilgrimage took on a different nature. No longer was it solely of this temporal plane. The fullness of time had been discovered, and with the discovery, into the present came Tir Na n' Og. The Celtic pilgrim never looked to the future. Why should they when the future is now? Pilgrimage is not the journey to some future place that is to be found on a supernatural plane. Pilgrimage is the journey *in the present that makes the*

future now. And to be present with the numinous in the *now* is the most intimate form of prayer possible.

For the Celtic pilgrim such intimate experience was not an either/or proposition. It was not one foot in This-World and the other foot in the Other-World. It was living with both feet fully and simultaneously in both worlds.

It is claimed that all true Celt have the curse of *hiraeth* upon them. *Hiraeth* is an insatiable yearning for home. On one hand, there is that which continually calls us back to the hearth, to our roots. On the other hand, the *taithchwant* propels us toward *Tir Na n' Og,* our mystical home, which is just as much part of our roots. "The great cry of the people (of home) has broken my heart in four," wrote St. Columba. The yearning for home is a painful one, made all the more so by the irresistible exile imposed by *taithchwant*. Maybe the Apostle Paul had the *taithchwant* in mind when he wrote of those groaning within Creation and within our very spirit, the *nuirt*, that call out for God.

The *taithchwant,* it is said, has been sung into all Creation from the very beginning. *Hiraeth* flows from that within which wants to be safe. *Taithchwant* forces us to take risks. And is this not what life is all about, the conflict between safe-taking and risk-taking? All too often though, our prayers are about safe-taking and little about risk-taking. Yes, we will go on pilgrimage, but only if it is safe, that it does not demand too much of us. This, however, is not pilgrimage at all. Pilgrimage is not safe, it is scary and fearful. Tarus must lead to the *dyserta,* risk-taking must be part of pilgrimage. Jacob met God and walked forever with a limp. The Irish saint Fintan Munnu met God and contracted leprosy, and he considered it a blessing! Ferghill, the Irish monk of Salzburg, met God and was condemned as a heretic.

Prayer, then, is not about safe-taking, but about risk-taking. If we note carefully, the Celtic prayers were "pilgrimage prayers," flowing within the natural rhythm of Creation. Their prayers for protection were not said to keep the status quo safe, but for the provision of succor and protection along the pilgrimage. The spoken prayers were for blessing in the Pilgrimage, in the "doing." Prayer, then, is ultimately about action, about following the divine melody and the giving and receiving of blessing. Not just fits of following, but like pilgrimage, a continuing process. The Apostle Paul urges us to "pray without ceasing." This is not words, continually thought or said, but rather

that perpetual listening for that primordial melody which never ceases its song, and continually following its lead.

Pilgrimage – prayer – according to the Celtic spiritual understanding is, in biblical terms, *conversion*, in that it is the process (*tarus*) of sanctification which moves (*dyserta*) us toward *glorification*-- *Tir Na n' Og*.

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 nuirt,
God in my heart.
[Carmina Gadelica, III]
