

Caim Prayer

Circle prayers are as old as the Christian church in Britain. Although ancient this form of prayer is growing in its use across the world. Circle prayer is sometimes known as 'Caim' prayer, this is from Irish gaelic meaning 'protection'. Most Christians know at least one Caim prayer associated with St Patrick from the fifth century.

*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 who love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and strangerⁱ.*

The origins of this form of prayer are to be found in the teachings of St Antony of Egypt in the fourth century. Much of his teaching, along with other Desert Fathers and Mothers is still available to us in the five volumes of the 'Philokalia'. His teaching came to Britain with St Ninian through a copy of the 'Conversations of John Cassian', which Ninian received at Tours from St Martin.

St Ninian's community at Whithorn became the pattern for the Irish style monastic communities which spread Christianity across Britain from the sixth to the eighth centuries. There are numerous examples of Caim prayers in the manuscripts of the golden age of the church in the first millennium. Circle prayers are notable for three characteristics. First they are simple and easy to remember. Second they seek God's blessing upon daily life. Thirdly they usually invoke the Trinity. The circle prayer quoted at the beginning of this article is a verse of 'St Patrick's Breastplate'. The words of this prayer begin 'I bind unto my self today, the strong name of the Trinity', and they encapsulate the essential nature of Caim prayers.

Caim prayers and popular forms of praying were suppressed after the Norman Conquest. The Norman ruling class didn't speak Anglo-Saxon or Gaelic and indeed regarded these languages as vulgar. Rather they introduced Latin as the language of religion, any other prayers than the church's liturgy could be punished as blasphemy! As a result Caim prayers were only to be found at the margins of society and used in secret. Caim prayers though never died out rather they became the everyday religious language of ordinary people.

In the nineteenth century Alexander Carmichael visited the Western Islands. He noticed how the local people prayed as they went about their daily lives.

'When the people of the isles came out in the morning to their tillage, to their fishing, to their farming, or to any of their various occupations anywhere, they say a short prayer called, 'Ceum na Còrach', (The True Way). If the people feel secure from being overseen or overhead they croon, or sing, or intone their morning prayer in a pleasing musical mannerⁱⁱ.

Carmichael noted down hundreds of prayers covering every daily activity - lighting the fire, milking the cows, laying the table, scything grass. All of the prayers share the three basic characteristics of

Caim prayers. Some of these prayers can be found in Esther de Waal's book, 'The Celtic Vision'. The following Caim prayer is an example of a night prayer.

*'May the Light of lights come
To my dark heart from Thy place;
May the Spirit's wisdom come
To my heart's tablet from my Saviour.
Be the peace of the Spirit mine this night,
Be the peace of the Son mine this night,
Be the peace of the Father mine this night,
The peace of all peace be mine this night,
Each morning and evening of my life'.ⁱⁱⁱ*

In 1938 George MacCleod re-founded the Iona community. In popularised what has become known as 'Celtic Spirituality' the prayers of The Iona Community have brought Caim back into popular usage. In England David Adam is best known for making popular forms of Celtic prayers. Among his books he uses Caim prayers and has written many modern forms. The following example is from his collection, 'The Edge of Glory'.

*Circle me Lord
Keep protection near
And danger afar*

*Circle me Lord
Keep hope within
Keep doubt without*

*Circle me Lord
Keep light near
And darkness afar*

*Circle me Lord
Keep peace within
Keep evil out^{iv}*

In the modern church there are many different forms of New Monasticism which take their inspiration from the Irish monastic communities of the past. The Iona Community has led to many new communities being founded around the world. Caim prayers are part of the distinctive spirituality that these new monastic communities use as part of their much simpler liturgy. Far from being a new spirituality for the present age, these prayers are rooted in a living tradition of faith distinctive to our islands.

There are a variety of practices of Circle prayers. One of the simplest can be used by individuals in their own home or outdoors, in small groups or by a church congregation. Firstly stand up, then turn in a circle to the right, as you do this pray, 'Circle me Lord...' and remember all those people and events that you seek God's blessing upon. Secondly, after a few moments of silence, turn gently to the left. Again begin with the words, 'Circle me Lord...' but this time ask that all the things that you wish to be protected from be kept away from you. Lastly, again after a time of silence, move for the third and final time to the right, say 'Circle me Lord...' and use this time to praise God. It is a simple method of praying but it is a form that can be very helpful and meaningful.

In the sixth century St Columba founded the first community at Iona. His famous prayer of blessing is one of the earliest known Caim prayers and a fitting summary to this short article.

*Bless to me the sky that is above me,
Bless to me the ground that is beneath me,
Bless to me the friends who are around me,
Bless to me the love of the Three
Deep within me and encircling me. Amen*

ⁱ The English Hymnal, OUP, Oxford, 1906, p.307

ⁱⁱ Esther de Waal, 'The Celtic Vision', DLT, London, 1988, p.1

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid p.103

^{iv} David Adam, 'The Edge of Glory', Triangle, London, 1985 p.8

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