

“ATTENTIVENESS TO GOD”

June 30, 2019

A woman kneels on the earth floor of her small hut in the Outer Hebrides and lights her fire with this prayer: I will kindle my fire this morning, in the presence of the holy angels of heaven.

She started the day by splashing her face with three palmfuls of water in the name of the Trinity: The palmful of God of Life, The palmful of the Christ of Love, The palmful of the Spirit of Peace, Triune of grace.

Now, at daybreak, before the rest of her family is awake, she starts to do what is her morning chore, to stir into life the fire bunked down the night before. Fire was never taken for granted. It was seen as one of the miraculous gifts of God, given so that people have warmth and light, and it was for them at the same time a continual reminder that they too needed constant renewal. The lifting of the peats that brought the flame of the fire to life again was a daily task, done year in, year out. Yet by her words and gestures this woman gives it meaning, for she makes of that first flickering flame a symbol of the love that she keeps burning for herself, her family, the whole family of mankind.

I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven...
God kindle Thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbor,
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all...
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,
O son of the loveliest Mary,
O son of the loveliest Mary,
From the lowliest thing that liveth
To the Name that is highest of all.

Every Earthly Blessing, by Esther De Waal

Last Sunday when my message was reflecting on my recent Celtic Pilgrimage, I was talking to Monty after the service. I was sharing a little bit about Celtic Spirituality. I told him that it is centered around God as Creator and this earth and all of our blessings as we inhabit it. His response was that it sounded a lot like what we feel living here in Wyoming. I started thinking about it and I decided that I wanted to share a little more about Celtic Spirituality and how that and pilgrimage tie together as being relevant to our lives here and now. So here goes....

In the book Every Earthly Blessing, Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition, by Esther De Waal, she writes: Prayers such as these come from people for whom an active living faith was a positive factor in their daily life. There was nothing posed or formal about them. For the men and women who recited them, prayer was not a formal exercise; it was a state of mind. Life was lived under the shadow of God's out-stretched arm, his protection was constantly sought. They have something of the breadth and depth of the psalms. Awe and dread of the might of God and his anger at sin is more than balanced by trust in his love and mercy.

These are the traditional blessings and songs of men and women who had learnt them from their mothers in earliest childhood and who continued to use them for the rest of their lives. They were the prayers of a people who are so busy from dawn to dusk, from dark to dark, that they have little time for long, formal prayers. Instead throughout the day they do whatever has to be done carefully, giving it their full attention yet at the same time making it the occasion for prayer. Each thing in turn, however humble and mundane it might be, was performed with the help of the Trinity, the saints and the angels. This is totally unselfconscious. It

was entirely natural to assume God's presence and partnership from the start of the day until its close. Each of the three persons of the Trinity was acclaimed in turn, for each had an appropriate role to play---quite apart from the fact that saying and doing something rhythmically three times over fitted in so well with much of their daily work.

As the day proceeds whatever has to be done is done with prayer.

Before making bread or preparing food women will say, "The luck that God put upon the five loaves and up on the two fishes may He put upon this food." A similar blessing was said at the start of a meal. "The Lord shared the blessing of the five loaves and two fishes with the five thousand. May the blessing of him who gave us this meal be upon us and upon our sharing of this food." A grace said at the end of the meal runs:

A hundred glories to you, bright God of Heavens
Who gave us this food, and the sense to eat it.
Give mercy and glory to our souls
And life without sin to ourselves and to the poor.

In her 1999 Preface to this book, Esther de Waal wrote that the book "gives me the opportunity to reflect on the continuing role of Celtic spirituality in my own life, and it is clear also in great numbers of people like myself who are find here something that brings a refreshing and invigorating dimension to the Christian life.

In this small cottage where I now live in the Welsh border country, I am surrounded by the Celtic past with holy wells, ancient churches, the sites of hermit cells...But even for those who are geographically distant, with the Atlantic ocean a barrier, the internal landscape of the Celtic tradition can be equally powerful. Here we are given the opportunity to return to our roots, to come home to something that many of us find totally natural. For those who are wearied by the institutional church, and are looking elsewhere for whatever will help to make our praying a natural part of living, take us beyond words and nourish our imaginations, and above all bring us a contemplative vision, the Celtic way opens many doors. In recent years Celtic pilgrimages have become extraordinarily popular, a reflection beyond any immediate geographical or physical reality of that interior journey which is inescapable and on which we are always seeking those fellow-travelers who will accompany us and bring us the wisdom of their own experience. The Celtic world was harsh and often cruel. It is important not to romanticize it.

Oppression, loss, insecurity were written into Celtic history. It is just because there were men and women who knew suffering, who knew the dark as well as the light, who prayed with tears, that we can turn to them in all the pain and disfigurement, inflicted not only on the earth but on so many of its people today.

Their message is never any easy optimism, yet when they speak of hope against hope, and of a continuing gratitude to a God who continues to shower us with blessing, I think we should pay attention."

One morning when we were on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, we took an early hike from the village where we were staying to the coast as the sun was rising over the waters. The reason for this part of the pilgrimage was to see the numerous "cairns" or "stacking stones" which pilgrims had erected over the centuries there on the beach. We said a prayer together asking for God's presence as we walked among the cairns or sat in the sunshine looking at them and feeling the presence of God in all the prayers which had been offered on that stretch of the beach. Then while I was sitting there I looked up and the sun was shining over the waves, blessing me with its warmth and hope. It was a very special time on the pilgrimage for me in a journey which was filled with so many blessings of God's love and grace and presence.

A cairn is a man-made pile (or stack) of stones. The word *cairn* comes from the Scottish Gaelic word *cairn*. Cairns have been and are used for a broad variety of purposes, from prehistoric times to the present. In modern times, cairns are often erected as landmarks, a use they have had since ancient times. However, since prehistory, they have also been built and used as burial monuments, for

defense and hunting; ceremonial purposes, sometimes relating to astronomy; to locate buried items such as caches of food or property/objects; and to mark trails, among other purposes.

George and I came across Cairns in the form of a human figure in Alaska. There they are called *inuksuks* and used to mark trails in landscape in the tundra. We have also seen cairns in the National Parks, especially Rocky Mountain National Park where we have hiked for many years. I saw cairns called *dolmans* in Great Britain where they marked ancient burial sites. And now a new type for me of cairns in Scotland, praying rocks. The spiritual practice of stacking stones claims ordinary moments of life for God and invites those who pass by to notice the holy ground on which they already stand.

One of my fellow pilgrims, Debbie Houghton, has written this beautiful reflection on her time sitting on the coast of the Holy Island among the cairns:

Encircling arms of waves hug the rocks on the shore
as I sit next to the cairns in the sunshine.
The ancestors are gathered around me,
standing silently,
endlessly scanning the sea,
keeping their thoughts to themselves,
but comforting me, standing so firmly by my side.

Resolute and timeless,
they remind me of the vastness and homeliness of God.

As I turn my eyes to the sea,
the sunlight road lies before me in the water,
the ancient path that these ancestors and mine have taken,
beckoning me to travel with them in love,
by living the Gospel way,
and joining them on the journey
when it is my turn.
All is light, all is love, all is God.

In her description Esther de Waal writes of God's world like this: Praying is not separated from singing or working or any other aspect of life. Because of the way in which they [Scottish and Irish men and women] saw their world they were ready to accept, enjoy, transform whatever lay at hand. The pattern of the day, of the year, and of the whole of life itself, was lived out totally in the presence of God and the saint. Every moment of the day, every activity becomes a way to God.

There was nothing self-conscious about this: rather, it seemed entirely natural. It meant, in the words of a young Irish farm-servant at the end of the last century, laying "our care and our keeping and our saving on the Sacred Trinity." Life was lived at two levels—the practical tasks of daily life are done for their own sake carefully and competently, but simultaneously they become signs of God's all-encompassing love. A thing is done well not only for itself but because of the part that that plays in God's world. It matters that the butter is made well or that the herds are driven carefully since God himself is involved. He cares about the things of his world. Work is, after all, a matter of partnership with him, something through which he may be better known. Celtic Spirituality is deeply incarnational.

It is through his world, in its totality, however mundane and down to earth, that God reveals himself. So the Celtic way of seeing the world is infused with the sense of the all-pervading presence of God. This is God's world, a world to be claimed, affirmed and honoured. This "inner attentiveness" to God is much to be desired as we move forward on our faith journey.

Please pray with me. May we, Lord, be blessed by your presence during our work and play, during moments of joy and sorrow, during times of quiet contemplation

and prayer, and during events that answer our need to know you more fully and deeply. May we, God, have this attentiveness to you and this “all pervading” sense of Your presence as we celebrate Your world and all the many blessings you give us!!! Amen and amen.