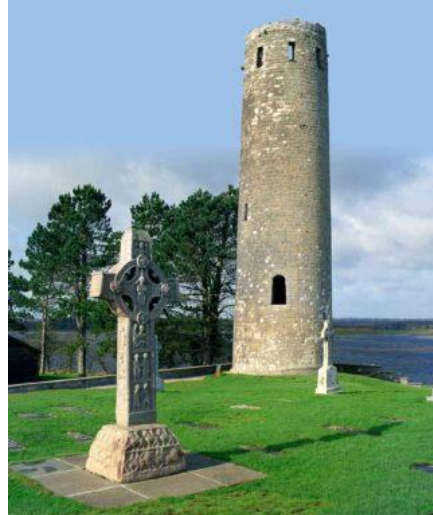


REFLECTION



Many of us would count 'Be Thou my vision' as a favourite hymn. I have chosen it for our worship this Sunday as we celebrate Christ the King.

Like many hymns and worship songs it is the marriage between the words and a particular tune that speaks to us and makes the hymn something that inspires us, moves us, expresses and enhances our worship. 'Be Thou my vision' is a hymn with an interesting history of both words and music, and some rich imagery, which I think it could be helpful to explore.

The original text is Old Irish. It is often attributed to the 6th century Saint Dallan Forgaill but was probably composed later, between the 8th and 10th centuries, and there are written copies in existence from as early as the 10th or 11th century. Two women were responsible for giving us the words. In 1905 Mary Byrne translated them from Old Irish into English and they were put into verse form by Eleanor Hull in 1912. Since 1919 it has been commonly sung to an Irish folk tune known as 'Slane'

The words are a prayer for protection and reflect aspects and images of life in Early Christian Ireland. The symbolic use of a battle-shield and a sword to invoke the power and protection of God draws on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:16–17), which refers to "the shield of faith" and "the sword of the Spirit". Such military symbolism was common in the poetry and hymns of Christian monasteries of the period due to the prevalence of clan warfare across Ireland. Medieval Irish poetry typically used heroic imagery to cast God as a clan protector, or chieftain, and so here he is the 'High King of Heaven'

It was common practice to attribute hymn tune names to the place where they were collected by folk song collectors, such as Vaughan Williams. Slane is a village in County Meath in Ireland. In the fifth century AD Saint Patrick came to

the Hill of Slane in an early attempt to convert pagan Ireland to Christianity. On the eve of the Christian feast of Easter, 433 AD, which coincides with the Druid feast of Bealtine (Beal's Fire) and the Spring Equinox, St. Patrick lit a bonfire upon the Hill of Slane.

There was a law that no fire should be lit in the vicinity when the great festival of Bealtine blazed at the Royal seat of power on the visible nearby the Hill of Tara so this was equivalent to declaring war on the Druids and their pagan beliefs and also on the King of Ireland.

That small act of starting a fire was a turning point in St. Patrick's life and mission and in the spiritual life of Tara and all Ireland

One image in the hymn speaks powerfully to me at the moment, that is God as our 'high tower'. High towers, as in the picture above, were built in Irish monasteries as a place of refuge for the monks when they came under attack. The door is set high up so that they could enter by a ladder and then draw it in after them so that they were safer. There they remained until it was safe to emerge.

This is so much like the situation of many of us are in at present. At a practical level it has become necessary to stay largely at home in order to stay safe; our place of refuge. At a spiritual level we are learning more about what it is to draw close to God, to seek God's peace to sustain us amidst all the anxieties and challenges of this current time.

Also, though we are physically separated we are, like those monks I'm sure, finding ways of supporting and encouraging each other through adversity. So as we give thanks to God for his faithfulness we also give thanks for all that we receive from each other.

Sue Loveday November 2020

An Advent Wreath

