

The Christology of the prayer resonates with St Paul's, 'I live now not I but Christ lives in me.' Christ's presence is all embracing and intimate. The spirituality of the Breastplate is not that of the 'peak experience' but the everyday lived experience of union with Christ. Neither is this spirituality individualistic.' The self-transcendence of the pray-er meets the same Christ in others:

Christ in heart of all who know me,
Christ on tongue of all who meet me,
Christ in eye of all who see me,
Christ in ear of all who hear me.



HYMN TO ST PATRICK

Australian Version

Hail, glorious St Patrick, of Erin's green isle,
On our sunburnt country bestow a sweet smile.
In God's name and yours came that generous band
Of Irish on mission who voyag'd to our land.
Those priests, nuns and brothers, who left home and lov'd ones
To plant and to foster the Faith in our land.

Both pris'ner and pastor, you well understand
Both native and migrant who people our land
We're trying with peace, to mix colour and race,
On our task of blending beg God's special grace.
On our rich mosaic of peoples and cultures,
For all in Australia beg God's special grace.

Hail, brave, fearless Patrick, we beg your fond care
For this land and Ireland and Faith we both share.
And now that you dwell in God's mansions above,
On our fine, free country, look down in your love.
On our lovely homeland, our wild, but so dear land,
On all in Australia look down in your love.

St Patrick's Breastplate:

A powerful Christian protection prayer

Saint Patrick's Breastplate is a Christian prayer invoking God's presence, power and protection. It may have roots in the pagan past and been adapted by Christians for their own needs. Written in honour of St Patrick, it comes down to us probably from the eighth century. This prayer invokes the energy of the Trinity, of Christ in his mysteries, of the heavenly hosts and of nature itself against the powers of darkness, danger and evil. It shows a Christianity that is vibrant, Trinitarian, Christ-centred, in tune with creation and integral to the everyday lives of the people.

A Scriptural background and Christian inspiration for St Patrick's Breastplate would be Paul's letter to the Ephesians: '*Put God's armour on so as to be able to resist the devil's tactics ... stand your ground, with truth buckled around your waist, and integrity for a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to put out the burning arrows of the evil one. And then you must accept salvation of God to be your helmet and receive the word of God from the Spirit to use as a sword. Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the spirit on every possible occasion.*' (Eph 6:10,11,14-18)

The Breastplate, though not composed by Patrick himself, is perfectly in tune with Patrick's own authentic writing. The *Confessions* illustrate this point: 'So it is right and proper in the measure of faith in the Trinity, to make known clearly, the gift of God and his eternal consolation. And, to this without hesitating at its dangers. This is the kind of faith that was bedrock for the building of Christianity in Ireland.

The vibrancy of the Christian faith that is captured in the Breastplate relates to a belief of the Celts that there is an energy behind everything that exists. This energy accounts for the changing seasons, the movement of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The word used to describe it was *nert* or *núirt* in the Old Irish, or *neart* in modern usage. It indicates 'force', 'power', 'strength', 'energy', 'dynamism', 'vibrancy' etc. It evoked awe.

We turn to the translation of Noel Dermot O'Donoghue. In language and metre, O'Donoghue is the most faithful to the original. The rhythm in this translation resonates with the Irish language. At this point it is best to listen to the vitality of the text itself ...

I

For my shield this day, I call:
A mighty power:
The Holy Trinity!
Affirming threeness,
Confessing oneness,
In the making of all
Through love

II

For my shield this day I call:
Christ's power in his coming
and In his baptising
Christ's power in his dying
On the cross, his arising
from the tomb, his ascending;
Christ's power in his coming
for judgement and ending.

III

For my shield this day I call:
strong power of the seraphim,
with angels obeying,
and archangels attending,
in the glorious company
of the holy and risen ones,
in the prayers of the fathers,
in visions prophetic
and commands apostolic,
in annals of witness,
in virginal innocence,
in the deeds of steadfast men.

IV

For my shield this day I call:
Heaven's might,
Sun's brightness,
Moon's whiteness,
Fire's glory,
Lightning's swiftness,
Wind's wildness,
Ocean's depth,
Earth's solidity,
Rock's immobility.

V

This day I call to me:
God's strength to direct me:
God's power to sustain me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's vision to light me,
God's ear to my hearing,
God's word to my speaking,
God's hand to uphold me,
God's pathway before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's legions to save me:
from snares of the demons,
from evil enticements,
from failings of nature,
from one man or many,
that seek to destroy me,
anear or afar.

VI

Around me I gather
these forces to save
my soul and my body
from dark powers that assail me:
against false prophesyings,
against pagan devisings,
against heretical lying
and false gods all around me.
Against spells cast by women,
by blacksmiths, by Druids,
against knowledge unlawful
that injures the body,
that injures the spirit.

VII

Be Christ this day my strong protector;
against poison and burning,
against drowning and wounding,
through reward wide and plenty
Christ beside me,
Christ before me;
Christ behind me,
Christ within me;
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me;
Christ to right of me,
Christ to left of me;
Christ in my lying,
my sitting, my rising;
Christ in heart of all who know me,
Christ on tongue of all who meet me,
Christ in eye of all who see me;
Christ in ear of all who hear me.

VIII

For my shield this day I call
a mighty power:
the Holy Trinity!
affirming threeness,
confessing oneness
in the making of all –
through love

IX

For to the Lord belongs salvation,
and to the Lord belongs salvation
and to Christ belongs salvation.
May your salvation, Lord,
be with us always.



The seal of this hymn is Trinitarian, for it is bracketed at each end by a Trinitarian invocation.

We can see that the Christianity of the Breastplate was integral to the lives of the people as it relates to their everyday concerns. When the Celts absorbed the Christian message, it was inevitable that there would be certain carry-over from the old mindset to the new. Protection is sought against the evil chances of life: death by fire, by poison, by wounding, by drowning. We, also, hear echoes of the world of spells and incantations where words had the power to curse as well as to bless. The Breastplate portrays a world in the grip of evil forces. The pray-er is expecting to be protected by the mighty energy of God.

