

SAINT NINIAN and the CAIM prayer

Ninian lived in turbulent times as did so many early Celtic saints. He probably lived between 360-432AD when the Roman Empire was in decline. Little is known about his early life and the two main primary historical sources about his life are rather dubious, written hundreds of years after his death. Venerable Bede wrote in 731AD that "The Southern Picts received the true faith by the preaching of Bishop Ninian, a most reverend and holy man of the British nation, who had been regularly instructed at Rome in the faith and mysteries of the truth; whose episcopal see, named after St Martin the Bishop, and famous for a church dedicated to him, is now in the possession of the English nation ----commonly called the Candida Casa, because there he built a church of stone, which was not usual amongst the Britons"

The other primary source was written by St Aelred of Rievaulx, later again in the twelfth century in "A Life of St Ninian" He claimed that Ninian was the son of a Christian Briton chieftain and that he went to Rome on a pilgrimage, was consecrated as a bishop before returning home via Gaul where he met up with St Martin of Tours. Martin was greatly influenced by the Desert Fathers who had left the main cities and set up small communities in the Egyptian desert giving spiritual direction to those who visited them.

Ninian arrived in Scotland in 397 AD having been given the task of converting the Picts by Pope Siricus. He established a mission at Whithorn (the Candida Casa) and set about converting northern Celts and the Picts. By the sixth century Whithorn had become a leading Anglo Saxon monastic centre

Archaeologists have found the remains of an ancient circular stone built church where the walls had been covered in lime plaster (unlike the usual wooden churches) along with ancient Christian gravestones and small wattle houses from an early Celtic community. Also there is the Latinus stone bearing the inscription "te dominum laudamus" – we praise you Lord dating from about 450AD. In fact, Ninian's monastic site was a new concept and is the oldest known Christian site of this kind in Scotland. There is evidence for trading and close links with Mediterranean countries.

Ninian and his followers converted masses of Southern Picts and northern Britons. Ninian was a renowned ascetic and man of prayer, regarded as a holy man, someone who was very different. He often retreated to a cave on Physgill Bech where he spent long periods in solitude and in prayer. Old pilgrim crosses can still be seen etched on the cave walls. Pilgrims travelled for miles to see this holy man, he was credited with healing powers and miracles. By the sixth century Whithorn had become a major influence on the development of Christianity in the surrounding areas and well beyond, a centre of education, prayer and mission. St Ninian's shrine drew many thousands of pilgrims to the site long after his death including Robert the Bruce, James IV and Mary Queen of Scots. New churches were built on the site and by the twelfth century there existed a thriving town nearby catering for the pilgrims.

Ninian is the first recorded person to use the "CAIM" prayer. Caim is a Celtic word meaning "to encircle" and it denoted protection. The Celtic church used these caim prayers regularly and they are still used by followers of Celtic Christian spirituality today.

Ninian was asked by a farmer to help him protect his cattle from thieves who were in the locality. Ninian drew a circle of protection in the earth with his staff all around the cattle, having gathered them in one place. As he walked he prayed a Caim prayer for protection. After that he retired for

the night and fell asleep. During the night the thieves arrived but each time any of them tried to cross the circle drawn out by Ninian they collapsed in agony. Their leader was badly gored "causing his intestines to spill out". Ninian came out to see all this commotion and prayed to God for the man to be healed having pushed his intestines back in. The man was completely healed. Some of the thieves were trapped inside the circle and were unable to leave it until they had begged for forgiveness. This is just one of many miraculous stories around the life of St Ninian. He had complete faith in the power of God to work on earth and followed a life of total obedience to God., certainly preparing the ground for saints like Columba and Kentigern.

A caim written as a night prayer for someone recently bereaved

This night and every night
Seems infinite with questions,
And sleep as elusive
As answers.

Pain and longing are always present,
Dulled only a little
By the distractions of day.
I am weary; I am angry.
I am confused

Circle me, Lord;
Keep despair and disillusion without.
Bring a glimmer of hope within.

Circle me, Lord;
Keep nightmare without.
Bring moments of rest within.

Circle me, Lord;
Keep bitterness without.
Bring an occasional sense

Of Your presence within

It can be helpful to use the Caim prayer in all kinds of situations. " See yourself and others encircled and be aware that the living God surrounds and encircles with His love , care and protection"

Another Caim prayer

Circle us, Lord.

Keep protection near

And danger afar.

Circle us, Lord.

Keep hope within,

Keep despair without.

Circle us, Lord.

Keep light near

And darkness afar.

Circle us, Lord.

Keep peace within

And anxiety without.

The eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Shield us on every side.

Amen.