



All And In All

History waited the long centuries,
the present re-enacts annually the truth
that plays constantly in every atom:
the world longs,
the human heart yearns,
for what it already carries,
the promise that is already kept,
for the presence, the meaning and the blessing
of Emmanuel: God-with-us.

Advent has us waiting,
Christmas leads us to welcome:
to embrace, to invite, to shelter, and recognise
the Christ amongst, around and within.

In our anthropocentrism we are slow to understand that the whole of created matter in its way welcomes as well. The early Celtic Christians of the western isles of Scotland and of Ireland had an intuitive understanding of this. One of the great collections of ancient native oral prayers written down as they were entrusted to him by people who still prayed them in the 19th century by Alexander Carmichael, was drawn together as the *Carmina Gadelica*- Songs of the Gaels. It gives us insights into the spirit of these early Christians, so self-reliant, so imbued with the blessing of each moment, so attuned to the sacramentality of all. These were the people whose isolation ensured their faith had to be claimed and nurtured, often without the regular attendance of a priest. These were the people who developed the notion of the anamcara, the soul friend, companion to the rituals of birth and death.

Listen to this poem, hundreds of years old. It is at once familiar and domestic, and at the same time astonishingly cosmic in its theology:

*This night is born Jesus,
Son of the King of Glory...
This night is born to us
the root of our joy,
this night gleamed the sun on the mountains high,
This night gleamed sea and shore together...
Glowed to Him wood and tree,
Glowed to Him mount and sea,
Glowed to Him land and plain,
When that His foot was come to earth.*

(Carmina Gadelica)

The natural world unites in hospitality. Gleam and glow, shine and radiance – this is the welcome proffered in the midst of darkness, by the landscape, by flora and fauna. Sea and shore, opposites, gleam together. The significance of light is manifold- it reminds us of the

first generative utterance of the Scriptures- “let there be light”- but also evokes the northern winter when light is a rare and treasured commodity. The effort and profligacy of this natural show of light demonstrates the profound gift that is being welcomed. All aspects of the natural world glow like beacons to bring the newest human home, to enact salutation and enable safe passage. What an amazing interpretation of the birth of Jesus.

This phenomenon of incorporation, of welcome and recognition is illustrated, literally, in one of the great pages of the Book of Kells. We move back in time from the indigenous peasant domestic spirituality to the great period of Celtic monasticism. It is about two kilometres as the Irish crow flies from the house that Catherine McAuley built at 64A Baggot St, Dublin, to where one of the most famous manuscripts in the world resides in the library of Trinity College. It is unlikely, for reasons of sectarian history, that Catherine McAuley ever saw it; Clare Augustine Moore would have loved it.

Created in the eighth century, it comprises the four Gospels handwritten on vellum. A much travelled survivor, its own story is fascinating. Some of the pigments used were zealously bartered – the blue of the ground Lapis Lazuli is thought to have come from Afghanistan. It is the work of many- those who prepared the vellum, those who made the quills, those who practised by candle light in cold stone shelters the art of scribing, rendering theological truth into art; those who did the hack work; those whose gifts met grace and created the decorative art that still dazzles today. The manuscript was a labour of love: saving the Word, inscribing in the heart of the Christian community the power of the message. Legend associates its making with St. Columba of Iona, who had been the founder of the abbey at Kells in Ireland before departing for Scotland.

The work consists of 339 vellum leaves, or folios, covered with beautifully formed black-ink script, the initial letters picked out in brightly coloured paints and ornamented with fantastic animal and human forms. The Book of Kells contains a wonderful variety of elements. In abstract patterns alone, there are diverging and interlocking spirals that spring from indigenous Celtic decorations, interlocking ribbons, perhaps derived from everyday ornamental and jewellery work such as torques of braided wires; animal heads, interlacing birds, leaves, knotwork: this is the profusion we find in what some regard as the most beautiful of all books. What makes the achievement more amazing is the small scale: the pages measure only a few inches.

We gaze today at one page: the Chi-ro page, the first words of St Matthew’s Gospel- a Christmas page without a human infant, without a crib. It is, nevertheless, a celebration of Incarnation that glows intricately of gold and red.

The page is a supreme calligraphic achievement of precision and geometrical patterns tempered with whimsy and gentleness, replete with religious symbolism and vibrant design. What do we see?

The great Incarnation page of the Book of Kells. The Chi-ro page. Greek for *of Christ*. A great sweeping X, and the r, shaped like a p, tucked and curled in under. Word became flesh. Flesh holy. The divine enters nature. All nature is in kinship with the Divine.

When you look at reproductions of that page, it is easy to forget how small the original is, and how amazing the detail and intricacy of it. You need to look at it with a jeweller's eye-glass truly to see the richness and facets of life within its reddish gold. How many spirals, symbol of journey, how many triskeles, symbol of the Trinity, how many circles, symbol of

infinity? A majestic serenity. Yet it has a great and marvellous movement of being: contractions and impetus to the right of the page, each spiral spinning and impelling to the narrow neck of the right hand edges of the great X : a birth, an ejection, a release, a full flowering, set loose off the page altogether. Uterine. Or a trumpet for the Son. Triskeles are spinning moons at all phases. Crescents and orbs. Curves within circles. Splaying and spiralling.

This art is not a generalised pattern of geometric shapes: on the contrary it is teeming with particular lives, the domestic and the untamed. Here is a pair of moths, there an otter, sleek and black, poised over invisible water, curved between two elements, its hind legs on the bank, its head and front paws waterwards, in its mouth a long fish. An odd set of creatures around an invisible manger. Nature in praise of the God become creature: all elements in praise. Water and air, fire and earth. Fire in the angels' hair. Are they tiny flowers in formation like a floral guard of honour in several places at the curves? Moths at rest, twelve birds, serpents and human heads. And two cats, uniquely marked and coloured individuals, perhaps based on the actual monastery mousers, with their kittens engaged in a curious game with the Communion bread. Word made flesh. This is my body.

And they say, those who have studied such things, that beyond the play and humour of the creatures is a serious cosmic symbolism. The lozenge shape of the moths is an early Christian symbol for Christ; the fish likewise. Ichthus. Greek for fish. Creation sings, creation welcomes, creation accommodates, creation incorporates. Jesus.

The ancient Celts knew a thing or two: that if Christ is, as St Paul tells the Colossians "all and in all" then that All is infused with the dynamism of Christ, and that All should be honoured accordingly. It is a belief grounded in scripture, that was lived out in their daily experience. Centuries later, Teilhard de Chardin, called it *Le Christique*, the quality of "Christness" present in the world, with which created matter is infused. This reality is what the Chi-ro page celebrates: ranging in its artistic representation from the angels to the kittens, the otter and the fish, flower and flame, all embraced by, and embracing, Christ Jesus, Emmanuel.

May your heart, this Christmas, be attuned to the truth of the Christ who is All and in All.

May your spirit, this Christmas, inspire you to new ways of honouring the All.

May your mind, this Christmas, guide you to wise and workable actions to protect and nurture the All.

Book of Kells, Detail from
Border, Chi-Rho Page



