

Allowing the Moon- Covid-19 and the Celtic

This May I was expecting to be leading a Celtic Pilgrimage in Ireland with a small group from Australia. Today we would have been in Glendalough. Covid-19 has led us to postpone our spiritual adventure until next year. Practising social distancing, self-isolation and lockdown (the Irish have used the much more appealing word *cocooning*.) I have turned to the Celtic poetry and art, the music and the myth, to assist my isolated days. It's not quite the same as being there, but it has helped.

I invite you to join me in a little virtual ramble, a mini-Pilgrimage, in the context of Covid-19, along the pathways and streams of Celtic Spirituality, pausing before what invites our attention. Our ramble will take us back to the early centuries as well as to modern vistas.

Solitude

The gift of solitude was highly prized and sought by the early monks of the Celtic church in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. By early we are talking the sixth to tenth centuries. Not only was solitude regarded as the milieu in which one might best meet the Divine, it was also the state in which one encountered one's true self.

Solitude and community were not regarded as antonyms- on the contrary, many of the hermits belonged to co-operative community situations. For example, even in that most rugged of outposts, Skellig Michael, that vertiginous island off the coast of County Kerry, solitude was practised in a communal context. The word Skellig is from the Irish for "splinter of stone" so that gives you an idea of the nature of the place, and why co-operation was crucial to enable solitude, and indeed, to preserve life itself.

Of course, solitude, the reality of being alone, can be daunting, and many of us avoid it when we can. During this Covid-19 time, such isolation has brought its own challenges. The genuine habitual engagements and normal distractions, the easy props and escapisms have been suddenly and resolutely removed from us. Many of us have spent a lot of time in our own company. I am reminded of the words of the poet Sean O'Riordain, who wrote:

In the truth that

is within the mind

There is a place serene,

An island hermitage where you must dwell

And seek your inmost being,

Tremble not when you with you

Come face to face.

Reaching that “place serene” is not always simple. Coming face to face with oneself can stir and disturb. Perhaps there has been an invitation to conversion and healing. Hopefully we have all at least had a glimpse of the truth that John O’Donohue writes about: “There is a welcome for you at the heart of your solitude.”

There are several delightful poems outlining the aspirations of the hermit from the early centuries. Let’s look at one called *The Hermit’s Hut* from an anonymous poet of the ninth century:

*My little hut in Tuaim Inbhir,
a mansion would not be more delightful,
with its stars as ordained, with its sun, with its moon.
It was Goban that has made it (that its tale may be told you);
my darling, God of Heaven,
was the thatcher who has thatched it.
A house in which rain does not fall,
a place in which spears are not feared,
as open as if in a garden without a fence around it.*

This little poem has lovely touches: God is uniquely called the Thatcher, the One who so carefully and skilfully crafts the sturdy roof and is compared to the mythical Goban, a builder; God is also, endearingly “my darling” a term of exquisite intimacy and tenderness. Note though that life is not entirely idyllic as the hope for “a place in which spears are not feared” indicates the very real threat of Viking assaults. One other little Irish poem of this period rejoices in a stormy night as the chief deterrent for Viking landings. A storm means safety. The fragility of life is the same whether ninth or twenty first century. Perhaps some of us had forgotten that. In our way, we are just as vulnerable as those early monks.

Companions

Even in solitude we have companions. They are easy to miss. The Donegal poet Moya Cannon, in a tiny poem about a tiny creature- the Hedgehog- wrote:

*It snuffles across the lawn at night,
a small, silver, trundling boar
with a long nose.
We are seldom quiet enough
to allow the moon to find
with whom we share our ground.*

Being “quiet enough” is an imperative for meaningful solitude. It is worth asking yourself who or what your companions have been during this time. What creatures share your ground; what natural features cross your line of vision? What are the daily sounds that have been noticed more acutely even as some sounds have diminished in our skies and on our roads? You may think that you are alone, but they say that somewhere not too far away from any of us there is a spider or a little creature in the floorboards and walls just trying to eke out its livelihood. The human contiguous too takes on significance during this period of isolation. Every morning the Indian family who live next door to me prepare the food for the day, so the aromas of the blended spices of curry waft in my laundry window. It reassures me that just nearby is a continuity of nurturing from another ancient culture.

There is a delightful legend about one of the ancient Irish monks Colman MacDuach, a contemporary of St Columba. He died in about 632 and spent an eremitical life of great austerity living under a cliff in the limestone landscape of the Burren. The whimsical story which opens the account of his life records that Colman MacDuach had three pets: a cockerel, a mouse and a fly. The crowing of the cockerel woke him in time for him to say his office; should he not then get up the mouse would nibble his fingers; and the fly served as a bookmark, settling at the end of the paragraph which the saint had finished reading. It was an austere life, but not without its friendships.

The most famous of the creatures associated with the ancient Irish monks is the one immortalised in the wonderful poem *Pangur Ban*. A monk working in a scriptorium in the 9th century wrote this tribute to his white cat Pangur in his spare time between transcribing Scripture texts. If you have not read it before it is worth exploring the entire piece rather than just this extract:

I and Pangur Ban my cat,

'Tis a like task we are at:

Hunting mice is his delight,

Hunting words I sit all night.

There is interdependence here; the monks need the cat to kill the rodents that would destroy the manuscripts and their food; the cat is fed and sheltered by the monks. Both are fulfilling their role in life. More than that though, is the sense of affection and admiration implicit in the poem.

In your recent solitude what elements of nature, what creatures, have you become more familiar with, and perhaps more dependent on? What has befriended you?

Memory

Of a more abstract but nonetheless vigorous presence are those “companions” about which we might be more ambivalent. Solitude can sometimes augment realities such as the anxieties and fears we carry, the regrets that we harbour. Consider the vast landscape of Memory, replete with all that has made us, and happened to and around us, and because of us, and in spite of us. In times of

solitude memories approach us unbidden; they can be painful, they can be gently comforting and fond- and sometimes all three at the same time. In his poem *In Memory of My Mother* Patrick Kavanagh writes:

*I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station...*

Has Memory been a companion to you during these times? Where has it led you?

The Natural World

It is said of the early Welsh and Irish nature poets that they brought a vividness and immediacy to their work. One scholar remarked that they seem to write with “rinsed eyes”, that is, with a clarity attributable to their contemplative approach and their sense of the presence of God in everything. The contemporary Irish poet Peter Fallon conveys the importance of contemplation, of gazing, in this exquisite miniature:

*When I looked
at the mountain
long enough
I grew to know
all manner
of mountains.*

Being gifted with the opportunity to spend time differently as we have been during this strange Covid-19 experience, to gaze from our windows and watch the same scene with all its subtle shifts of light and colour and atmosphere, may be one of the ironic gifts of 2020. Beautifully true is the fact that the earth has recovered some of its innate purity as the air pollution caused by our “normal” lives has dissipated. Are we being led to a reassessment of our lifestyle and consumerism, to companionship rather than domination of earth and the myriad species which inhabit it with us?

The Ordinary

If one regards all as sacred, indeed as sacramental, then the ordinary is imbued with a significance that can never allow it to be tawdry or mundane. As Patrick Kavanagh, whose bronze statue sits by the canal just down from Catherine’s house in Baggot St, says, “God is in the bits and pieces of everyday...”

One of my favourite Irish poems celebrating the sacredness of the ordinary is by the late Eithne Strong, who was the early widowed mother of nine children. Listen to her poem *Necessity for Reverence*:

*O potato that I peel
 I am made to know
 your raw appeal
 insidious, oddly,
 not blunt nor coarse
 as might one
 expect from something so
 crudely sprung;
 in some peculiar fashion
 you quietly present
 your claim for reverence,
 you, cockeyed, swarth,
 supporter of my family;
 I feel a vague design
 holds me in curious link
 with you whose peel
 I strip while the Taoiseach
 sits in council.*

For the Irish, of course, the potato has historical resonances of imperialist tyranny and deprivation, and the decimation of Irish society brought about by the Great Famine of the 1840s. All of that is held in the poem with its mention of the politicians (Taoiseach is the Irish word for Prime Minister) making their remote decisions, but in this modern domestic setting the focus is the woman's own paean of appreciation to what the unprepossessing potato signifies to her family. I challenge you ever to look at a potato again with indifference or complacency. Allow it to present to you its claim for reverence.

Eucharist

The infamous Land Clearances, the forced eviction of inhabitants of the Highlands and western islands of Scotland, conducted in the mid-to-late 18th century, enacted much the same carnage on Scottish life as the Irish famine, with thousands deprived of their homes and small farm holdings. They had no choice but to emigrate in vast numbers, principally to Canada, the USA and Australia.

In the preceding centuries the practice of the Christian faith was deeply rooted and creatively expressed by the people of the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland. We are indebted to two great collectors of the prayers and customs in Scotland and Ireland, Alexander Carmichael and Douglas Hyde, who wrote down ancient prayers and stories entrusted to them from the vernacular oral tradition. This material has much to teach us about the idea of sacramentality, the reverence for the everyday, and the precious connection between human life and the Divine. There are prayers for kindling the fire, milking the cow, dressing, ploughing, weaving, harvesting, fishing; prayers of praise and thanks, entreaty and trust, invocations of blessing and protection, that encompass all aspects from the minutiae of daily life to the grander rites of passage.

In this Covid-19 time, when attendance at the public celebration of the Eucharist has not been possible, a consideration of what these illiterate small croft holders can teach us about faith and ritual is reassuring and perhaps potentially gestational of a parallel way. History tells us that in the year 1679 for example, there were only four Catholic priests in the rugged and isolated expanse of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Celebration of the Mass during this era was a rare event. To contextualise this, it is useful to know that there are more than 900 islands off mainland Scotland! Even today, to get to some of these remote islands is a challenging exercise.

The people of the Highlands and Islands, and of Western Ireland, were adept at nurturing their faith and fostering their community life. For example, they developed their own rituals for Baptism and for accompaniment of the dying. It was a woman's role to baptise the newborn with Trinitarian prayers and the holy water. At the other end of earthly life it was the Anamcara- the soul friend- whose responsibility it was to recite the soul-leading prayers that would see the dying person safely into eternity, through the travail of physical death. "Christ stands before you and peace is in his mind..." says one of them. And of course it was women who traditionally conducted the keening ritual, that profound vocalisation of grief and loss that was part of the burial rite.

These are rituals of grace and power, emanating from a faith filled people who had an unerring sense of God's presence in all creation and all human experience. Their rituals were not yet clergy-centric as later evolved throughout Europe. Their God was bigger than the Church. Their God was never contained within four walls. It is timely at this point in the Church's history, and in conjunction with our experience under Covid-19, to ponder what they can teach us about shaping the future. It was becoming clear before Covid-19 that the Church is at a watershed moment; ironically, Covid-19 has, it seems, validated that beyond dispute.

In thinking about the Eucharist at this time, I found myself reminded of the meaning of the word. It comes to us from the Greek and means thanksgiving, or that for which to be grateful. When I thought about the events of the Last Supper, the Cenacle events, I found myself reminded not only of the breaking of the bread, but the washing of the feet, the ritual of care, cleansing and comfort rendered by water and human touch. The Cenacle event was always about more than the bread and the wine, and Jesus points us to more than one way of remembrance and emulation. Perhaps Covid-19 has emphasised for many of us the Eucharistic nature of the washing of the feet. The recognition of care workers and medical and ancillary professionals, all those who keep things moving in domestic and institutional care, has been profound. At the same time, ironically, the deprivation of touch, the lack of

human contact where loved ones have been unable to attend the dying or visit the frail aged, has been acutely distressing. The inability to honour the dead in the customary ways has been one of the cruellest deprivations of the pandemic.

I remember vividly a night I spent in the emergency department of St James's Hospital in Dublin waiting with my father for a hospital bed. It was a noisy, cramped space with humanity in all its vulnerability and finiteness. Amidst the clamour and the obvious dis-ease all around, I became aware that at the exact height of the trolleys the waiting patients could read some of Ireland's best and pertinent poetry if they chose, with a selection printed on the walls in large lettering. One excerpt that caught my eye that long night was by the contemporary poet Pat Boran:

It's the simplest form of healing;

late at night,

the washing of feet.

When the light called sky

is an absence,

when the traffic's asleep;

when song is a physical thing

needing physical shape

but you're so worn out

facing darkness again...

*

When the world is a cave, a dungeon,

when the angels retreat,

return to this tiny

pacific ocean,

to the washing of feet.

Reading those words that night was a grace beyond measure. Covid-19 has brought us to a sharp realisation of the physicality of our existence and its fragility, and to the ambivalence of care, the risks of care, as well as the poignant longing for touch and healing.

Simplicity and the Normal

Many of us have experienced these past few months an involuntary paring back, a stripping away, a prevention of activities and freedoms we normally take for granted such as sitting in a café, walking along a beach, and most poignantly, of engaging at close quarters with those we love. Hopefully many of these things will be reinstated and celebrated anew in the

coming months. But perhaps it is timely to ask ourselves whether elements of our imposed simplicity and frugality need to be retained and treasured. And what of our previous life matters not a jot and needs to be hurled on the scrap heap? The normal will certainly not be the same normal we lost earlier in the year, and perhaps that is not altogether a bad thing. What have been the gifts and advantages for you during this strange and terrifying time? What in an ongoing way are we perhaps being invited to preserve of this time of Covid-19? What's going on the scrap heap?

Simplicity itself can be a wholesome lifestyle, and maybe there is a call for us to live more simply. Simplicity sharpens the sense of what matters and what does not. It bears witness to the essences, the sine qua nons of our life. Perhaps Peter Fallon can help us here again:

Dawn dilutes the dark.

I stand beside

the glistening

current,

listening.

I must take more time

to learn from rivers.

For each of us there is the ongoing question ‘from what and where and from whom must I take more time to learn?’

Waiting for Wrens

Our ramble around the Celtic landscape cannot conclude without a short stop before one of the magnificent High Crosses- “sermons in stone” as they have been called. We come to Clonmacnoise, in the centre of Ireland and we kneel, as centuries of pilgrims have, before one of the imposing sandstone structures, incised with biblical scenes and topped by the distinctive circled cross of the Celts. The Celtic cross encompasses the reality of suffering and hope, its circle a symbol of light and embrace, where all is held in the tension of life's experience, one with Christ's life. If you kneel before the Cross of the Scriptures your eye will be level with the Resurrection scene, an intentional ploy of the sculptor, signifying the primacy of the Resurrection. It is a profoundly simple and beautiful depiction of the dead Christ in the tomb, guarded by soldiers. Unknown to them a tiny, tiny bird has flown in and is breathing into the mouth of Jesus. A little wren, the spirit, restores life.

At this time of Covid-19 we wait for the little wrens that will augur restoration and renewed life.

The late Seamus Heaney once wrote “a long winter breeds a long liberty.” The long winter that is Covid-19 is not over yet but there are signs of recovery and hope. With survival comes responsibility and the call to creativity and renewed service. To an articulation of, and adherence to, what matters.

I give the last word in this little ramble around the Celtic psyche to Brendan Kennelly, poet and Professor Emeritus of Trinity College Dublin:

*Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along the Pembroke Road. ..*

*

*Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.*

And so we begin.

Mary Wickham rsm

