

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 29th May - A Mothering Landscape

Anoisteacht an Earraigsang the blind Irish pilgrim-poet Raftery. 'On the brink of Spring, with the "stretch" in the days, I will raise my sail, and launch out anew.' This is the time of year when nature beckons to us, the high roads call to us, something stirs in our soul. Shades of Druidic customs awaken within Celtic hearts. On St Patrick's day a few years ago, I said Mass on top of the Paps. I was born and grew up in their shadow in the South-West of Ireland. The Paps are two breast-shaped mountains that dominate the skyline along the road that runs from Cork to Killarney. They are named in honour of the goddess Danu (*Da ChichDanann*) who reigned supreme across Europe in more peaceful times. To complete nature's astonishing silhouette, the local worshipers laboriously carried rocks and boulders all the way to the top so as to form the two mother-mounds from which flowed the milk of life to the people of the valleys of *Sliabh Luachra*.

It was at the request of the local people that I celebrated the Eucharist on the Paps that Spring morning, remembering how the light of Christianity and the shadow of paganism have chased each other delightedly down the centuries of worship. They still do. As we hit the summit of the Western Pap, the ceodraiochta, the magic mist of folklore, parted, and we caught a glimpse, with the inner eye, of what Kathleen Raine calls 'the bright mountain behind the mountain'.

*But just behind, and through the thinnest surface,
Not uncreated light or deepest darkness,
But those abiding essences the rocks and hills and mountains,
Are to themselves, and not to human sense.*

Our finest scholar of things Celtic, Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, writes of an imagination in touch with transcendent truth and beauty, with the world of the senses, and the light of memory: 'Those who see the mountain spiritually are constantly conscious of a presence or presences behind what they see and hear and touch, somehow interfused with the colours of dawn and sunset, somehow seeking communication through the voices of the winds and the voices of the many waters, through the touch of the air and the mosses and the peat fields underfoot, through the scent of broom and bog-myrtle, the taste of clear bright water and wild strawberries.'

I have little doubt that a profound transcendence was happening in the silent hearts of that faithful gathering. Here, I felt sure, within smelling-distance of the highest drystone sheep-pens, was a breath-taking moment of sacramental imagination. As we recalled the Sacred Mystery of life and death on those timeless rocks, and lifted high, under an aching blue sky, the bread and wine of our history and destiny, something in us knew that we were completing a love-song that had started here four thousand years before. It had always been a holy mountain. But now everything was transformed. Now we were eating and drinking another kind of salvation, not on the pagan breasts of a divine goddess but on the broken body of a Servant-King.

Our 'Mass on the Paps' stirred the unconscious memory of those who climbed the mountains that day. The pagan and Christian within all of us embraced again. Maybe our simple celebration that morning, against the stunning reredos green-gold horizons, did something to heal and complete everything within us and around us that was broken and unfinished. Our Celtic imagination was slowly waking up. Away to the west of us the Atlantic Ocean sang of God's vastness; to the east, the Golden Vale of Munster reflected God's bounty. High overhead, wandering across the perfect sky, a little family of stray clouds was a sacrament of humanity's lonely pilgrimage in search of home. And far below us, a small, sloe-black

lake was ominous with contrast. All of us, I'm sure, in that sacred space, were connecting with unspoken, unspeakable dimensions of our being.

And then I spoke the words of divine disclosure and universal revelation: 'This is my Body'. Those words seemed to reverberate around the earth like the angels' Christmas song and to echo off the rim of the sun with transforming power. They were first whispered by our Creator when the world was brought to birth; again when the Word became human, and now, a thousand times a day, when people around tables receive the sacrament of 'who they already are'. 'This is my Body.' It is God become atom, become galaxies, become universes, become earth, become flesh, become everything. Too much for us to understand; too much to hold. How in wine and wafer, in imagination and faith, we could touch, for a fleeting but timeless moment, something of the mystery of death and life!

It was this, we said, that moved us most. It seemed to us that the play and struggle between the dying and rising, the hope and despair, in the loving heart of all God's people, and in the living cosmos itself, were purified and celebrated with, as Dr John Macquarrie puts it, 'a directness and an intensity like that of the Incarnation itself'.

And there they were, standing or kneeling around me, men and women of the mountains, heads bowed and backs erect, farmers' families from the fragile fields of their livelihood, their weather-wise hearts so well acquainted with the harsh and healing seasons of their lives, living sacraments of the human need to survive, to give thanks and to adore. A new understanding blessed us that morning as I read out Teilhard de Chardin's dynamic reflections in his Mass on the World:

'I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won, this morning, by the renewal of daily labour. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap that is pressed this day from the fruits of the earth . . . All the things of the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those that will die. This is the material of my sacrifice.'

John Paul II adds significantly to these soul-stirring insights:

'The incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, everything that is flesh . . . the incarnation then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension; the first-born of creation unites himself with the entire reality of man, within the whole of creation.'

Later, in Ecclesia de Eucharistia, in a supreme moment of pure sacramental imagination, the Pope continued . 'Yes, cosmic!' he wrote, 'Because even when the Eucharist is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, it is always, in some way, celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation.'