

‘A Rí na hAoine ...O King of [Good] Friday...’

Good Friday always struck me forcibly in my local church on Árainn(Inis mór) as grown men who tend to spend the liturgical year at the back of the church come forward, form a line in front of the altar and in an act of humility, one after the other, venerate the cross. This same gesture is repeated in churches throughout Ireland. Those who may not attend regularly tend to turn out for Good Friday. The pause in the daily routine to worship at the cross is made all the more significant amid the freneticism of modern life. Perhaps it is an indication of the strong identification with the suffering of Christ in our Gaelic tradition.

Celtic mythology from Fionn to Lugh to Cúchulainn to St Patrick emphasises the hero's struggle with darkness, dragons and demons on behalf of the community. Our understanding of Jesus echoes various aspects of the Celtic warrior as he descends into hell following his crucifixion and battles with the heart of darkness in what the Irish tradition termed *Argain Ifrinn* -the plundering of hell.

The confrontation with inner and outer demons is pivotal in the redemptive-heroic process. Jesus emerges the wounded hero – the wounded light- as the paschal candle with its nails representing the five wounds of Christ reminds us. The candle dipped in baptismal water acknowledges the mystery of suffering in human life and the hope of redemption and resurrection in Christ within it.

Poems dating from the tenth century in the Irish language invoke the power and protection of the cross of Christ over the senses and every limb of the body in all the actions of the day and night. In folklore Jesus is invoked as ‘*a Rí na hAoine, a d’fhulaing na mílte loit*’...O King of Friday who suffered the many thousand wounds..

Jesus is also referred to widely as *Mac Muire*, the Son of Mary, and from the earliest period there is a strong affinity with Mary's suffering. The 8th century poems of Blathmac indicate a mature devotion....Come to me loving Mary that I may keen with you, your very dear one. Alas that your Son should go the cross, he who was a great diadem a beautiful hero...

In Gaeltacht areas the lamentation of Mary or *Caoineadh Mhuire* is still to be heard in the , *m’ochón ó agus m’ochón ó..* which is customarily raised in the *sean nós* singing tradition on Good Friday. Those of us who struggled, however disaffectedly, through ‘Peig’ for our Leaving Certificate can never forget the stark image she gives us as she joins her keen with Mary's by placing the statue of Our Lady beside her to assist her in

preparing her young son's body for waking, following his accidental fall from the cliffs on the Great Blasket Island.

The strong emphasis on divine immanence in the Gaelic tradition means that the suffering of Christ is not confined to humanity but is echoed throughout the whole of creation. This is captured exquisitely in a more modern setting by poet Joseph Mary Plunkett...I see His blood upon the rose and in the stars the glory of His eyes.....His crown of thorns is every thorn His cross is every tree.

Jesus, however, is not only Rí na hAoine but also Rí an Domhnaigh (King of Sunday) and creation equally exults in his resurrection. In folklore it was held that the farmer who sowed some seed on Good Friday would be ensured a successful crop that year. It was also widely held that the Sun danced in the sky Easter Sunday morning and various methods were employed to experience it. A 19th century account, translated from Scots Gallic relates;

‘The glorious gold-bright sun was after rising on the crests of the great hills, and it was changing colour- green, purple, red, blood red, white, intense-white, and gold-white like the glory of the God of the elements to the children of men. It was dancing up and down in exultation at the joyous resurrection of the beloved Saviour of victory. To be thus privileged, a person must ascend to the top of the highest hill before sunrise, and believe that the God who makes the small blade of grass to grow is the same God who makes the large massive sun to move’

During these years we are commemorating the attainment of political independence. It can be of little surprise that given his intimate knowledge of the Gaelic tradition and his strong Christian faith, Patrick Pearse chose the Easter Triduum as the setting for a pivotal act in Irish history. It is also significant that since the Good Friday Agreement these same three days are destined in a new way to remain a part of the language of the Irish political landscape forever. Solas Chríost Linn!

