

"And when I am lifted up from the earth
I shall draw all to myself."

A HOMILY

PATRICK O'BRIEN

WHEN I MEDITATE THE FACE OF CHRIST LIFTED UP ON THE CROSS ONE image possesses me. It is, perhaps, the first representation of Jesus Christ in Irish art history. And it is difficult to find. To get to it you have to risk sea and weather; and even then there is no guarantee of safe landing. Caher Island lies on the western edge of Clew Bay: next parish, America! The Bay itself is ringed by the mountains of Mayo and Galway, with Croagh Patrick their faceted diamond. According to local legend Patrick founded this island church. It is a small island, perhaps a half-square-mile; an island, which from the distance looks like a whale at rest, maybe the Leviathan that has just coughed out its reluctant prophet! One way or the other there is nothing in the archaeological evidence that the foundation is any later than the 7th century. Around the rude oratory are a series of standing stones where the early monk-sculptors played with the bare image of the cross. Each one decidedly different, some verging towards abstraction: as if they knew that the cross could bear the weight of much examination and elaboration. On some, circles are seen, none of them reaching, yet, that final dominating form of the 'Celtic Cross'. On another two dolphins swim underneath as if frolicking in the tide of blood.

But on the highest cross there is a face of Jesus Christ. On my first visit it was almost invisible, hidden under the lichen of centuries, a millennium and more of winds and rain and the beating of what Seamus Heaney called once "the secular Atlantic". It is hardly a face. The long years have stripped the limestone flesh and what is left might be a skull skeleton. And yet, it seems to contain everything; to draw all into its compassion and pathos. Draw in the landscape of

rocks and mountains. Taste the sea on its parched lips. The plaintive call of the seals, the orchestra of seabirds are heard like words of comfort. It rests on a gentian rich hillside. In its delicate lines you trace the courage and daring of those first Irish monks, who humorously named such wild western places 'Discart', Desert. Here also you feel the force of history. Viking invasions marked the end of Caher as a living space for the monastic community. A little further south is Inishboffin Island where Cromwellian forces drowned members of the Catholic Hierarchy. Nearby is Clare Island where a Spanish Armada ship foundered, and where on one promontory a Martello Tower once awaited a Napoleonic Invasion. There also during the Second World War naval victims were washed ashore and a Canadian Air Force plane crashed killing all the crew. History like a cold wintry storm lashes those shores.

Over the years I have brought visitors to Caher Island. The great Anglican Bishop Richard Hanson, the leading expert on Saint Patrick, came here after he had paid the cost of speaking the hard truth about violence in his own community in Northern Ireland. We both felt the original call to reconciliation issue from that face. On another occasion Thomas Merton's friend Daniel Berrigan spoke of the healing power of this image, its urge to create a world where there are no more strangers, no more enemies. Many of the other people who have come with me to Caher have been artists and writers who all have a deep love for Thomas Merton. Every visit has been in a strange, or not so strange, way a visit to Merton. A visit to the compassionate face of Christ, the pathetic love of a God which draws all things to itself, and which speaks from all things. Our first reading from Jeremiah contains a moment of such insight. That deep within us, deep within the fabric of all life, the divine secret is planted, is at home.* The image of the shamrock as metaphor of the Trinity is no metaphor or simile. The shamrock, the limestone, the sea, the wind are not metaphor but revelation of the Trinity. It is the very heartbeat of Celtic Christianity, a central strand in the Welsh bloodstream of Thomas Merton. He loved the story of the Voyages of St Brendan—the islands visited on that legendary journey include ones in this area. Merton also was fascinated by the 'Ceili De'—that later reform movement which echoes with St John of the Cross and Merton's own writings and commentary on the monastic reform in the twentieth century.

The Caher Island face of Jesus Christ lifts up all into the loving gaze of God. Merton's enduring legacy, his greatest gift, was in lifting his time, with all its contradictions, to that same place. Its wars and violence, its uncertainties and easy certainties; its gospels and acts in the writings of Camus, Pasternak, Milosz, Zukovsky, the Andean range of South American poetry. Merton read the twentieth century with eyes rinsed clean by the Bible, the Desert Fathers, the monastic and mystical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, the great spirit of Amerindian thought.

The Sign of Jonas sculpture with Thomas Merton in the belly of its paradox, which graces this Conference, brings me to that Leviathan island in Mayo with the face of Christ deep in its entrails. And in both all is lifted up. And in the surroundings seas "deep calls on deep in the roar of the waters".

* 'Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts.'

(Jeremiah, 31:33)