Myshall July

I owe a debt of gratitude to Bishop Denis Nulty for inviting me to this great international gathering in honour of Saint Columbanus and for introducing me to the saint’s roots in Myshall. I have read about him, given lectures about him, made films about him, radio programmes about him, followed his journeys from Bangor to Bobbio and all the places in between. I have prayed at the place of his burial in the beautiful Trebbia valley at Bobbio, but this is my first time to visit “the Midh Iseal, or low plain” in Irish, which is the place of his birth. Being here invites a fresh look at Columbanus, at the curious child he once was who became the celebrated monk, at the forces that shaped his thinking long before he became the force that shaped our thinking.

The man who helped found the legend of Ireland as the land of Saints and Scholars was not Myshall’s first saint and scholar. The man who founded monasteries across Europe was not the first man from Myshall to found a monastery. Seventy years before him the legendary Finian was also born here. His name is associated with the founding of Clonard, and it is said with Skellig Micheal. Columbanus would have grown up hearing of Finian and a key influence on both men was the first of the Irish monks and scholars, a Meath man, St Fortchern, his name now long forgotten but his legacy embedded in those he inspired men such as Finian, Columcille and Columbanus and many more whose holiness and scholarship gave the Irish a unique and enduring legacy to be proud of.

Here in Myshall Columbanus was we know a much-loved child. Like all Irish mammies, his was convinced even before he was born that her son was going to be a “remarkable genius”, Unlike most Irish mammies it turns out she was right. It was medieval Ireland of the mid sixth century, a hundred years after St Patrick had suffered starvation and slavery, banished the snakes, converted the Irish to Christianity, denounced British mistreatment of Irish Christians, written a hauntingly beautiful spiritual autobiography and generally made quite a name for himself a name that made him synonymous with Ireland, a unifying figure and merchandising miracle, for the next fifteen hundred years. Patrick was not of course Irish so there was definitely an opening for an Irish genius and ironically there would be quite a number whose reputation would have reached the ears of the child in Myshall; Comgall of Bangor, Brendan the voyager, and Ciaran of Clonmacnoise. But while Patrick would become official patron saint of Ireland, Columbanus would become the unofficial patron saint of and inspiration for the modern European Union.

The Ireland of Columbanus’ childhood was certainly in one sense a peripheral place, a small island surrounded by rough seas, and having so little of value to attract the attention of the Romans they made no effort to conquer it. By the time Columbanus was driving his parents mad with his precociousness and legendary temper tantrums the Roman Empire was finished in the West and the European mainland had descended into the chaos of warring factions and what became known as the Dark Ages. Ireland was not part of that. But it was not the remote backwater some assume. Quite the reverse. It was a place in energetic transition from its long-standing pagan ways which would have been the ways of Columbanus’ grandparents at least. Christianity was in its infancy and Ireland was a place of lively debate about the new religion. It was also a place of refuge, for by comparison with the rest of Europe it was, a peaceful place. It had economic and scholarly ties throughout Europe and the Middle East, well worn traffic both ways and its young people, among them Columbanus, were hungry for the new ideas and languages and sciences brought to Ireland’s shores by waves of visiting or migrating people, especially scholars fleeing the malignant fanaticism of the Dark Ages where books were burnt and intellectuals despised. In the scriptoria attached to the flourishing Irish monasteries their books secular and spiritual were faithfully copied by young men drawn to lives of exceptional difficulty, sacrifice and privation because they believed in a higher cause which was the new Christian faith. Columbanus whose home life was comfortable, who had status and opportunities to shine in the secular world was among them, much to his mother’s dismay.

If only he had listened to his mother and stayed home instead of joining a monastery his genius as a player or manager might have led Carlow to a sixth century five in a row footballing superstardom but like all Irish sons he did not listen to his mammy though he is reputed to have listened to another woman, something of a local mystic who advised him to forgo romance and marriage and head for monastic life. She did the world a considerable favour for that career advice set the scene for a life of astonishing drama, difficulty, bravery and influence far from Myshall, far from Ireland right across the continent of Europe and not just in the middle ages but across a millennium and a half of history and of religious and political thinking right up to the present day.

The beautiful Italian town of Bobbio where Columbanus founded his last monastery and died, keeps alive his story, the story of a stranger who came among them just as passionately as we Irish keep the story of Patrick alive. To talk to Bobbio’s school children is to be amazed how present Columbanus is to them as if he had just popped down the street for a cappuccino. Knock on the door of the local winery and it is answered by a man whose middle name is Columbanus, whose father was Ambassador of Italy to Ireland at the outbreak of the second world war, who spent his childhood in Dublin.

The air Bobbio breathes holds the spiritual and intellectual imprint of Columbanus and his fellow medieval Irish monks. His story endures and we are entitled to wonder why? He and his companions were first and foremost- peregrini per Christo- pilgrims for Christ. Columbanus’ faith was the driving force that allowed him as a middle aged monk, already a successful celebrated career behind him, to set out across the ocean with twelve companions bound for the madhouse that was Europe where the new Christian religion was teetering on the brink of vanishing. He had heard the awful stories from the refugees coming to Ireland. He knew he was in a place of relative safety with no pressure on him to leave. He knew he was heading into serious uncertainty and trouble. Still he went, faced awful hardships and enough misery to send him back home relieved to be out of the fray had he so wished. He did not and so, and he kept to his pilgrimage, with an intense faith in the unifying force that was then and still is the great commandment to love one another. Columbanus believed with a ferocious certainty that love of one’s neighbour could change the world, could bring peace out of war and harmony out of discord. More than that he believed it was a command from God, not a choice and someone had to let the people know. If he did not, then who would?

We travel the roads back to the medieval times of Columbanus at our peril for they are not motorways with clear signage and knowable destinations but meandering trails frustrated by faded footprints or false trails. We know that history happened. We just are not always sure precisely what happened or why or how or when. Living a life of Christian love was never going to leave an archaeological imprint. It is not easily amenable to archaeological searches for it rests in the soul, the mind, the heart, the thoughts of individuals, most long forgotten. However fortunately we know a lot about the life of Columbanus because he is the first Irishman to have left a body of his own writing, including poetry, sermons and letters, some of them rather cross letters to the Pope of the day. He is also the first Irishman to have been the subject of a biography. His medieval life is in fact well documented including his often argumentative nature but also his great courage and forward thinking. Over the centuries since his death, his heroism for Christ, has attracted generations of pilgrims to his tomb from St Francis of Assisi to Leonardo Da Vinci. Each generation kept alive the torch lit by Columbanus until there came a generation that needed it appreciated it and understood it more than any other. That generation was the one which saw so called Christian Europe turn into a monstrous killing field in two world wars. It was a generation shredded emotionally by self-inflicted suffering that asked itself if there was any way to prevent the repetitive cycle of wars between neighbours with their awful human waste especially of young life.

It was Columbanus (543-615), who had faced that very question in a warring Europe fourteen hundred years earlier. It was Columbanus who was the first to describe Europe as a potentially collaborative union of distinct nations; the first to coin the phrase ‘totius Europae’, the first to persuade the warmongering leaders of a broken Europe, that it was possible to be Irish, Frankish, German, Spanish and also to share a common European identity which would be a shared platform for building a sustainable peace and prosperity through partnership. In a documentary I made several years ago about his life I describe him as the First European. It was not an exaggeration.

Columbanus’ radical vision for a shared Europe of the nations would become the inspiration for the miracle we know today as the European Union. From the still warm ashes of twentieth century wars there emerged in the minds of four Catholic intellectual and political leaders the memory of an idea articulated by the medieval Irish monk Columbanus for a Europe of the nations. Those medieval embers they fanned to a flame.

Robert Schumann, Jean Monet, Alcide De Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer, became the founding fathers of the European Union, an egalitarian homeland for all, the best and noblest idea anyone in the world has had in millennia except Christ himself. They wondered if the idea would find support among the allied, axis and neutral post war leaders. In July 1950 they met in secret in Luxeuil, the site of a monastery founded by Columbanus. They met on the margins of a conference celebrating the 1400th anniversary of the birth of St Columbanus. Schuman described Columbanus as having ‘willed and achieved a spiritual union between the principal European countries of his time’, calling him ‘the patron saint of all those who now seek to build a united Europe”. Myshall can say- that is our boy, our Columbanus, the son of our soil. Among those present at that secret meeting were four members of our then government, Winston Churchill and the papal nuncio to France whom we know today as Pope John the 23rd. A few years he would match the historic watershed created by the European Union by convoking the Second Vatican Council and asserting the Church was to become a garden not a mausoleum. In 1963 he published the greatest papal encyclical so far Pacem in Terris on the rights and obligations of people and their states, as well as proper interstate relations. It emphasizes human dignity and human equality, endorses women's rights, immigrant and refugee rights, argues strongly against the arms race and advocates nuclear non-proliferation, support for the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The imprint of that meeting in Luxueil is on every page, the imprint of Columbanus on every page, and if you doubt Columbanus’ relevance to our times take a look at our world with the existential polycrisis all around as humanity and the earth grow weaker not stronger. Yet through the despair at human stupidity and venality, see Columbanus towering above it all, with his faith and his insistence on the sacredness of the human person, the sacredness of the earth. See his faith in the ordinary people’s respect for the sacred and see his faith in the power of untried love of neighbour to redirect the world away from war to peace. He is the author of the Sacred Ordinary, an appeal to religious and secular to politicians and kings, to find the commonalities which could yet save us from the looming dangers which impact all.

To see him only in the stones of the monasteries he founded all over Europe is to miss the point. The physical and intellectual legacy of his arduous pilgrimage is to be seen in the monasteries he founded and the place-names that honour his memory all over continental Europe. But it is his life-enhancing vision of the human person and our earthly home and its flora and fauna that is the real light left by Columbanus. If you want to know the creator he said, get to know his earth and all its creatures.

His words are inscribed on the wall of the Columbanus chapel in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome ‘*si tollis libertatem tollis dignitatem*’ – if you take away human freedom you destroy human dignity. Those words are to be found too in the first Article of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (declared 2000, came into force 2009): “Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.”

Here we are today in Myshall, the inheritors of his vision, fellow inhabitants of his homeland, citizens of the European Union, most ambitious peace process the world has ever known, inspiration for our own Peace process on this island both vindications of Columbanus’ faith in the transcendent power of love and his life of witness to it. His more recent biographer Aidan Larkin ascribes these words to Columbanus

*Let us all be truly humble and spiritual men fulfilling Christ’s commandment to love one another as He has loved us. Do not, I beseech you consider us estranged from you. That would be unthinkable. For were all members of the one Body of the Lord. Whether Frenchmen, or Britons, or Irishmen or whatever nation we belong to*.

(Larkin 2012: 118)

Somewhere in Ireland’s tradition of military neutrality, somewhere in President Éamon de Valera’s words to the British officer to whom he surrendered in 1916 after helping lead the uprising against dreadful British rule, when he said ‘The Irish do not like to fight’, somewhere in the search for peace that was the hallmark of that great European Statesman John Hume, somewhere in the Daniel O’Connell’s opposition to violence for political ends, in his championing of the human rights of all oppressed peoples from Russian Jews to African American slaves, somewhere in our very particular non-violent but yet supportive response to the Russian attack on Ukraine, our calling out of the evil of Hamas’ antisemitism and the Gazan genocide of Netanyahu, we can find the logic of Columbanus stripped of everything except the ideal that prompted him to set sail from Bangor in a small open boat and push out into the deep. Love one another as I have loved you. Love your neighbour as yourself… Whatever he learnt here in Myshall it was a good cradling, in fact a great cradling, one to be proud of. From his grave in Bobbio Columbanus speaks still to a world that needs to hear and heed his voice.