

Holy places such as the Mass-rock here in Formil were immortalised in song many years ago, when the Drumquin poet Felix Kearney wrote:

God bless the glens of Ireland,
every rock and mountain pass;
'twas these same glens that, under God,
preserved for us, the Mass.

In this verse, he neatly put his finger on the important part that hidden places such as these played in the noble story of the faith we've received, that we celebrate and that we live. Today we gather – or rather, Christ gathers us as his people of faith, to listen to his word, and be nourished by it and his body which is the Bread of Life, so that we are strengthened and sent out on Mission to the world. Some Mass-rocks, like the one at Corradinna, above Omagh, were in deep hollows shaded by trees; others, like this one, usually shrouded in the mist which clung to the bald rounded hill which gave this place its name. But all of these Mass-rocks share one essential quality, no matter where the Mass-rock lies, you can see heaven from it. These Mass-rocks became the touch-stones of faith, the very bed-rock of life. Little wonder therefore, that their history goes back a long way, through many generations.

Not far from here stands another type of stone whose history is even more ancient still. The Ogham stone of Aghascribba stands as a salient reminder of the civilisations who trod these fields, fished these rivers and gazed across these Sperrin mountains long, long before our times: people who never heard of Christ but who made their mark not only in the accurate writing which gives the stone its nobility but on the people whom we have become today. Perhaps it was these same people, or others called the 'Beaker men', who put sense and order on time through the calendar stones that stand on Eskergurnan hill, better known as Beaghmore.

Of course, it's not what is written on these Mass-rocks or how they were arranged that has given them their dignity – it's what took place upon them and the prayers that were offered over them and around them that makes them holy still. While there are many places today where it is no longer fashionable to attend Mass, when these stones were sought out and sanctified, it was a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment or even death, to gather to celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

As we read the scriptures of today's Mass we hear mention made of hunger: we have a dictionary understanding of what it means. But, three centuries ago, those who gathered here and in similar places had firsthand experience of what it meant – and how it felt. Despite their tremendous hunger, they walked for miles, the soles of their feet battered and bruised, but their God-given souls radiant and serene. In going to Mass, they looked forward to an encounter with an event, a person, which gave their lives a new horizon and a decisive direction. As St Paul says to Timothy, they had come to know the one in whom they believed.

Like the Olympic torch, this faith has been handed on from generation to generation. There may have been slips and falls along the way, and at times panic when the light seemed to be going out – and yet, today, the flickering flame of faith still burns gently but brightly, warming our hearts, pointing to heaven and directing our focus and drive towards the things of God.

At times we might feel tempted by the notion that faith itself and the Holy Eucharist (which is its source and summit) are not for real people – just for those who have nothing better to do, nothing else left to hope in. If we give into this temptation, we'll make the mistake of the Israelites in the Old Testament, we'll dismiss the Bread of Heaven as unsatisfying food and what will have changed is not the nature of the Bread, but the nature of the appetites we wish to satisfy. We don't have to think too long or hard about the corruption and disaster which befall us especially when people of faith revert to their old way of life and decide only to fulfil their selfish desires. The headlines are terrible – but the effect on generations of people is all the more terrible still.

Living faith, and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist are exactly what real people need to be doing. Whilst the great rivers which have carved many of our valleys for centuries and even today might define the boundaries of our parishes – like the Strule or the Mourne – whilst these arise in the little springs, sheughs and burns which flow from hills such as these – so too, we know that what we do flows from who we are. Over the great Altar at the *Statio Orbis* Mass concluding the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin hung the words 'Become what you receive.' This is a quote from the writings of Saint Augustine who said:

O Noble Christian, your mystery is placed on the table of the Lord;
Receive this mystery;
Believe what you see and receive who you are.

You can see how, long before the recent advent of Gillian McKeith, Jesus Christ had been teaching his disciples that, indeed, where the Holy Eucharist is concerned, you are what you eat.

The effort mentioned earlier, which generations of people expended in going to Mass was nothing out of the ordinary for them. Everything they did – the very fact of existence itself – demanded tremendous effort. We gaze at our screens these days, gobsmacked at the accomplishments of athletes on the track, in the pool, in saddles on horses or on bicycles. We are left wondering about the effort it takes and the time and preparation it demands. But look around you here – and think for a moment – imagine the ice-cold of a winter morning, wet and blistered feet that had trod field of corn in the vain hope of a harvest, backs bent in two by work on knees bent in worship. The Rosary (a word which means 'a garden of roses') being recited by those for whom life was no bed of roses. We laud rightly and marvel at the endurance of Olympians who sacrifice four years of their lives in pursuit of few moments of tested glory. The people who made this place holy, were willing to spend a lifetime of hardship on just the promise of an eternity of peace. That's real endurance. That's real effort. That's real faith. And just like the Olympians of our day, they were real people in their day – real heroes, the giants of faith on whose strong shoulders we still stand today. We must be real people in our day.

We all have our champions. Usain Bolt is primed for the fastest 100 metres in history as he takes to the track this evening. Father Eugene Hasson took to Mullaghcarn last Sunday to be ready for Formil Mass-rock this Sunday. I don't know what his time was like last Sunday – but priests and time are not a great mixture! Anyway – both men share two things in common, they have a laid-back, relaxed approach, and a great love for the races!

It's not the time Father Hasson took in coming up here today – nor even the time he'll take saying Mass (and I promised I'd be brief). But it's the Bread and Wine he'll take and the words he'll say over them as they sit upon this ancient Mass-rock which might make a difference to our lives. In 1979, when Father Shields first unearthed the lore and tradition around these stones, and awakened something deep within the heart of this community, it was Bishop Daly who, at Dorvil, said those immortal words: 'This is my body ... This is my Blood ... Take ... Eat'. Whilst that day showed that Bishop Daly was surely the most precious cargo ever carried in a link-box – surely what he then and what Father Hasson will touch and celebrate today, and what every one of us is called upon to believe, to celebrate and to live, is the most precious gift of all – the precious cargo of Jesus Christ which we carry in our hearts. Like the manna in the desert, he is delicate, powdery and fine. But he is the bread of angels, the food of travellers. The Holy Eucharist is surely the only drug of choice for believing Christians, for practising Catholics. We bring his healing and strength with us to everyone we meet, wherever we may go.

On 11 October last year, Pope Benedict wrote a letter called *Porta Fidei* (The Door of Faith) when he declared the opening of a year of faith from 11 October 2012 until 24 November 2013 (Feast of Christ the King). This is to celebrate fifty years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Over the doorways of ancient Rome there hung the image of the Roman god Ianus – from which we get the name for January, the doorway to a new year. Ianus had two faces – one looking back and the other forward. At Mass, we stand on the threshold of eternity. From the top of this rounded bare hill today, as we look back on the 50th International Eucharistic Congress 2012 and all the places where the Holy Eucharist has been celebrated down through the generations, we say thanks; and as we look forward to the year of faith and all the places where the Holy Eucharist will be celebrated in the years to come, we say yes.

If only these stones could speak, we might say! But, very gently, they do speak volumes if we have the ears to listen. Like the Ogham Stone of Aghascribba whose scribal markings tell us something of the past, so these Mass-rocks teach us something about the place and people from whom we've come. Like the Standing Stones of Beaghmore whose arrangement marks the passage of days and seasons, instead, these timeless stones teach us something about eternity and the things to come.

May those who gather here in years to come still hear the prayers we say today ringing in their ears, and echoing in their souls. In seeking always the bread of life, may they never ever again be hungry, and may they never ever know the pain of thirst.