

## Tablet - August 2010



Sometimes it's better not to know everything. As our small boat ploughed an impermanent furrow through the waves to Skellig an English pilgrim, uncertain what pilgrimage was, asked 'what on earth made them come out here??' She meant the Celtic monks, who between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, prayed on top of this seven hundred foot sea-battered rock island soaring up out of the sea thirteen miles off the coast of Kerry.

If there was an answer it was lost in the wind and spray. An Irish neighbour looked less naïve but said nothing. Although he had replaced the white magic of Irish Catholicism with new age charms there seemed a more inalienable understanding surviving in him about the extraordinary place we were visiting.

The best answered prayers are those that have never been asked. So it seemed pure grace as the sun whimsically burned away the clouds. We approached the monastic island in the sheer lucid glory of the day, the vast blue sky, the calmly heaving sea and the two Skellig islands, one a bird sanctuary, the other a sanctuary of the soul.

We filter out the blinding light of the sacred with mundanities. So we talked about the two tourists who had died on Skellig last year and listened to the repetitious health and safety advice of the custodians of the island universe. The lighthouse on the other side of the island is now automatic but once three keepers and their families lived here for weeks at a stretch, provided for and transported off by the heroic sailors of the Irish Lights boats, the captain of one of them my grandfather Mike Sullivan. Three keepers were needed in case one went off his head and the other two could overpower him. Perhaps for the same reason they still have three custodians. They are archeologists but secretly driven by the same passion for solitude as the keepers and their monastic predecessors.

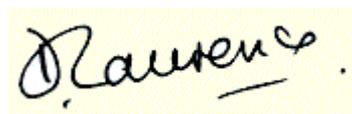
Almost anything we say about the history of Skellig is uncertain. But like the "historic" sites of the Holy Land or the "what really happened?" aspect of the gospel stories, it doesn't really matter. What matters is how present we are to what the place or the Word is saying to us now. The climb up the 500 steps is hard work and a rock hard allegory of the ascent of the soul. As in life there are occasional resting places but no turning back. I felt my first ego flash of possessiveness on the island as other visitors got in the way of my thoughts or interrupted the rhythm of my ascent by blocking the steps to take photos. The monks who chose to come here must have been very familiar with their egos to have survived.

They lived in a compact walled enclosure of six dry stone beehive huts, one of them the kitchen and common space, and two oratories in a sheltered curve of the peak. One of many legends (dating back to 1400 BC) says that Daire Domhain, a "king of the world", came here to recoup his strength before an epic battle. If his title seems inflated it may be only - and understandably - that he felt he really was on top of the world as he looked around him from Skellig's summit.

What is most striking here is the paradox that this remote and often inaccessible place was a place of both solitude and community. If you wanted to get away from it all why come with a group of twelve, sharing a hut with two others? There are remains of a single hermitage at the top of the south peak but this was a place for praying and living alone together. There was a common life of eating and praying and there must have been chores. There were burials in the tiny cemetery, planting in the not much larger vegetable patch, collecting rainwater from the cistern or gulls eggs. This is not the "solitude" of the single dwellings of urban individualism, the bedsit or bachelor apartment. It is extraordinary how ordinary their life must have been here.

Yes indeed, then, "what on earth made them come out here?"

If you can put your camera away for a moment and if you spend half an hour inside one of the huts you will feel something of an answer in yourself. "repulsion or exhilaration. Either they were crazy sociophobes or they had found something they came here in order to be with more completely. Most likely they had already fallen in love with the one love you never fall out of. True, when the monks left, Skellig became a place of pilgrimage and penance. There was a rough attraction to its harsh beauty. But firstly it was a sanctuary of intimacy, peace and pure love.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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