From Genesis to Judgement
Biblical Iconography on Irish High Crosses

Dr. Peter Harbison

Response
Rev. Alan Martin

NATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY OF IRELAND
INTRODUCTION
The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell’s Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685, is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell’s Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle’s Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work — translation, publication and distribution — were foreshadowed by these two men.

The 2000 Lecture was given by Dr. Peter Harbison on November 22nd 2000 in Buswell’s Hotel, Dublin. Dr Harbison is Honorary Academic Editor with the Royal Irish Academy, and author of some twenty books. These include his three-volume *magnum opus*, *The Irish High Crosses of Ireland* (1992) and the abridged *Irish High Crosses with the figure sculptures explained* (1994 — and recently re-issued).

The Response was given by Rev. Alan Martin, a member of the National Board of the National Bible Society of Ireland.

We are pleased to publish the complete text of the Lecture and the Response and believe that this will aid our reflection and response to the living Word of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Judith Wilkinson
THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 2000

FROM GENESIS TO JUDGEMENT

Biblical Iconography on Irish High Crosses

To read the Bible from start to finish in a single sitting is not exactly something that you would contemplate lightly, yet, looking at a High Cross like Muiredach’s at Monasterboice, you can see how easy it is for one sweep of the eye to take you straight through from Adam and Eve to the Last Judgement. Admittedly, there is a lot left out in between, but the choice of biblical material on Irish High Crosses — and the reasons for it — is a study well worth undertaking, and will form the core of my lecture.

The age of Boyle & Bedell, however, had little interest in High Crosses. On the contrary, the old debate about religious images — for or against — led some iconoclasts to knock them, particularly in the North of Ireland, where ‘the old cross of Ardboe’ (See Plate 6) is the only complete example still standing. It was, curiously, the Great Exhibition which took place on Leinster Lawn on the far side of Leinster House in 1853 that brought about the popular interest in the subject, and made the High Cross a nationalistic symbol along with the shamrock and the Round Tower. Yet, long before any High Cross was erected in stone, the Irish had been reading their Bible, and learned a language totally foreign to them — namely Latin — in order to do so. Indeed, judging by biblical references in St. Patrick’s Confession, we can presume that, already in his day, a knowledge of the Bible was being promulgated in Ireland. The earliest surviving Irish biblical manuscript — the Cathach of St. Columba in the Royal Irish Academy — is scarcely much earlier than the year 600, but the following centuries saw a great upsurge in interest in the Bible, as witnessed by the considerable number of Latin commentaries on it and on the writings of the Fathers of the Church penned by what we take to be Irish authors. Sadly, very few of their manuscripts are illustrated. Up to the ninth century — the main period of the Crosses I shall be talking about — we have a handful of evangelist portraits and of Christ, but pictures about Bible stories are confined to two manuscripts which are either Irish or closely linked with Ireland, namely the Book of Kells and Manuscript 51 in the Abbey Library of St. Gall in Switzerland. The Book of Kells illustrates The Temptation and what is usually taken to be The Arrest of Christ, while the St. Gall codex shows us The Crucifixion and Second Coming of Christ. The latter manuscript in particular shows the Irish love of stylisation in the human figures but the more naturalistic representations on the High Crosses show us that we are dealing with a different artistic tradition, one which leads us through Central Europe back to the classical age of Early Christian Rome in the fifth century. In this sense, the Irish High Crosses are a break with native tradition, a new growth which mushrooms suddenly in the ninth century. Though there were almost certainly earlier crosses of wood and other materials such as bronze, it was not until around 800 that the series of High Crosses begins with examples in and around Clonmacnoise which bear no biblical scenes. Instead they concentrate on animal symbols such as the lion, which may have been partially a sign of deference to Pope Leo III (796-816), who occupied the throne of Peter at the time. It was not until the middle of the ninth century that we seem to get what we can regard as the classic kind of High Cross — that with the shaft and head carved with scenes from the Bible, a most unusual idea which has a much smaller predecessor in an enamelled box in the Vatican Museums dating from the reign of Pope Pascal I (817-824). Precisely how the idea developed to create stone crosses decorated with biblical scenes we will probably never know, as their presumed antecedents were created in ephemeral materials which have long since gone the way of all flesh. They were certainly not the first stone crosses. Britain was already
erecting splendid examples in the eighth century, but their narrative biblical content is minimal in comparison to that of the Irish crosses, where some new influence was at play, probably emanating from the Continent of Europe, to give whole sequences of scenes from the Old and New Testaments together on the same cross, arranged one above the other as in a modern film strip. My hunch as to what led to this circumstance was the apparent rise in popularity in the use of frescoes in the Carolingian lands under the reign of Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious (814-840), in contrast to his father who did not, as far as we know, encourage the use of narrative religious sequences in the churches of his empire. As Irish churches of the period would have been too small and dark to have frescoes, the High Crosses can be seen as Ireland’s fresh-air response to the new trend — even if it took a decade or two to reach our shores. One pointer in this direction is the similarity in composition of the Flight into Egypt panel on the cross at Moone in County Kildare with that on the fresco in the conven at Müstair in the Swiss canton of Graubünden. Furthermore, the way in which the rectangular fresco panels are arranged in horizontal and vertical rows on the walls of this church, which probably dates from the time of Louis the Pious, show a comparable system to that used on the Irish crosses. Such fresco cycles probably have their origin in Roman churches, and particularly those on the interiors of great basilicas such as St. Paul’s without the Walls, dating from the fifth century.

If such fresco cycles were intended to encourage the faithful to appreciate the scriptures, and thereby to lead better lives and learn to harbour sentiments of piety, then the same function could also be ascribed to the High Crosses. It has been argued that the panels on the Irish crosses were, in many cases, so obscure and of such complexity that the laity would never have been able to appreciate them, and that the crosses were basically set up for the literate enlightened. But the similarity to the fresco sequences would, in my view, suggest otherwise, as the frescoes must have been there for all in the church to learn from and appreciate. While the selection of panels on the High Crosses was made by those who obviously had a deep understanding of the sacred scriptures, the intention, I believe, would have been that the sculptured panels would have helped the illiterate to comprehend and visualise the sacred texts in the same way that some of the better children’s comics can provide an educational benefit today. The very presence of these biblical scenes on the Irish crosses could also be taken as a compliment to the Irish laity of the time in their knowledge of, and acquaintance with, the Scriptures.

It should be said, however, that the High Crosses were not erected just to put across the Christian message. Recent decipherment of poorly-preserved inscriptions on the bottom of some cross-shafts show that they have a political dimension at a very high level in that church and High King co-operated in their creation and, by putting his name on one or more crosses, a High King was raising a political monument to himself — a practice not entirely unknown in our own day.

Over a thousand years have passed since these great crosses first graced the Irish monastic scene, and time, war and the weather have all taken their toll on them. You have to look at the undersides of the cross arms to get some idea of the pristine crispness of the original carving, and the sculptured panels are sometimes so worn that it is difficult to work out which scene is represented. During the last century and a half, scholars have come to very different conclusions about the identity of a considerable number of the biblical scenes on the Irish crosses. Yet it is only when we get the identification of each one correct that we are then in a position to appreciate what message they were designed to impart when seen all together — for each individual cross has a different selection of scenes. In my three-volume corpus entitled The High
Crosses of Ireland published in Germany just a decade ago, I tried to the best of my ability to identify the various subjects on the basis of comparisons with depictions elsewhere and in other media — often reaching conclusions which differed from those of other scholars — and it is these identifications which I am going to use here as the basis for my comments on the biblical matter visible on the High Crosses.

One of the most popular Old Testament subjects is Adam and Eve, shown either hiding their shame or with Eve offering the apple to Adam. Not unnaturally, the subject stands at the beginning of the whole series of narrative scenes, usually at the foot of the east face of the cross-shaft, indicating that it was this event which ultimately led to Christ giving his life for mankind on the cross, a subject which almost invariably occupies a central position high up on the west face of the cross.

But the Book of Genesis was also a popular source for other themes. At Monasterboice, for instance, Adam and Eve share a panel with their sons Cain and Abel (See Fig. 1), the latter being the first innocent victim of the Old Testament as Christ was to be the example par excellence of the New. But the Lord prevented another fatal repetition in the case of The Sacrifice of Isaac. Here we see Abraham, sometimes sitting on a chair, raising his sword to decapitate Isaac who had brought wood to his own sacrifice — a precursor of Christ carrying his cross to Calvary, a subject which is curiously absent from the High Crosses. Isaac was saved by the appearance of an angel, sent as an agent of the Lord, and this is the first of a number of instances where events were chosen to illustrate how God saved the good in time of danger. We shall meet others shortly.

The idea of using Old Testament scenes to prefigure those of the New Testament, as embodied in Isaac bringing wood to his sacrifice — and as presented pictorially on opposite walls of Italian basilicas — is also found in another episode that precedes it in Genesis.

This is Noah’s Ark (See Fig. 2), which relates to Baptism, as we shall see below. One of the most extensive pictorial cycles from the Old Testament in Christian art concerned Joseph, but in Ireland his presence was confined to a maximum of two crosses, Connor, Co Antrim, and a more problematical instance on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise. There, I believe, his interpretation of the dream that the Pharaoh’s butler would be re-instated after three days is used to prefigure Christ’s Resurrection on Easter Sunday, represented in a panel placed back to back with it on the bottom of the shaft.

Illustrations of the Book of Exodus I shall mention briefly below in discussing the Broken Cross at Kells.
Plate 1 Old Testament Scenes
Cross of Moone

Plate 2 Old & New Testament Scenes Together
Cross of Moone
Plate 3 Crucifixion
Muirdeach’s Cross, Monasterboice
Plate 4 West Face
Broken Cross, Kells

Plate 5 East Face,
Broken Cross, Kells
It is not surprising that David makes frequent appearances on the High Crosses, as he is an obvious precursor of Christ, who belonged to his house. His various manifestations — being anointed, as shepherd, musician, or slayer of Goliath or a lion, sometimes in a series — would make it appear that the compositions were borrowed from an extensive cycle of pictures illustrating him and his achievements, of which a number are known in early Christian art.

The ‘Help of God’ idea, already encountered in connection with Isaac, is well represented again in two scenes from the Book of Daniel — Daniel in the Lions’ Den and The Three Children in the Fiery Furnace (See Fig. 3). One panel on the base of the tall cross at Moone — one of the few where the Irish love of stylised figures comes to the fore in a wonderfully graphic way — shows Daniel flanked by seven lions, a number which can only have come from an apocryphal part of the Book known as Bel and the Dragon, demonstrating in art what we know already from literary sources that early medieval Ireland had a considerable knowledge of apocrypha, both in the Old Testament and the New. One example of the latter may be present in what I interpret to be scenes from the early life of the Virgin on the cross at Duleek in County Meath, and we will shortly come across another example from the same county.

The Old Testament scenes of the ‘Help of God’ illustrated on the base of the Moone cross (See Plate 1), where the intervention of the Lord saved Daniel and the three Hebrews from an otherwise almost certain death at the hands of the Babylonians, also have their New Testament equivalent on the same cross base (See Plate 2). This comes in the form of the charming Flight into Egypt mentioned above, where the Christ child was saved by the angel appearing to Joseph and telling him to take his family off to Egypt to avoid massacre at Herod’s hands, as well as The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, whereby those who were listening to the word of the Lord were miraculously saved from hunger.

The Flight into Egypt is a scene which was most likely derived from a whole pictorial cycle of continental origin dealing with The Childhood of Christ, though it is difficult to understand why The Birth of Christ is never represented on the Irish crosses. But other childhood scenes are present, including The Annunciation to the Shepherds, The Massacre of the Innocents, Christ before the Doctors and — most popular of all — The Adoration of the Magi (See Fig. 4), those eastern astrologers in whom the ancient Irish are known to have taken a particular interest. Surprisingly, the majority of the panels illustrating this theme on the Irish crosses have eastern/Byzantine affiliations, and it is only on Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice that we find the western variety showing all in profile, the feature of Christ being held diagonally across the Virgin’s lap being traceable back to a Roman church fresco of the early 8th century.
The number of panels on the Irish crosses illustrating Christ’s public life are disproportionately few in comparison to the relative number of chapters devoted to it in the Gospels. The most frequently reproduced events — The Baptism of Christ and The Marriage Feast at Cana — I will mention below in connection with the Broken Cross at Kells. With the exception of the almost equally popular Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes already mentioned (See Fig. 5), miracles — if correctly identified — such as The Healing of the Centurion’s Servant, or Christ Stilling the Tempest and Walking on the Sea get only a single outing, as does also Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me.

For crosses which have The Crucifixion as heir focal point, it is not surprising that the Passion scenes play an important role in leading up to the main event. Here we find The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, The Kiss of Judas, Peter Cutting Off the Ear of Malchus, Christ Mocked (See Fig. 6), The Denial of Peter, Pilate Washing his Hands (See Fig. 7) and The Soldiers Casting Lots (See Fig. 8) — this last scene directly beneath The Crucifixion to symbolise the indivisibility of the Church. Most, if not all, of these scenes appear on more than one cross. The Crucifixion is, understandably, the most frequently represented scene of all and, with very few exceptions, it is placed at the centre of the west face. There it is usually surrounded by the ring which gives the ‘Celtic’ cross its characteristic form, and which has been interpreted as an ancient sun symbol or a crown, like the laurel wreath placed around the heads of victorious Roman emperors. Leaving aside the purely practical explanation as a support for the cross-arms, it is perhaps more appropriate to view the ring as representing the cosmos, because early Christians saw Christ’s death on the cross as, literally, the most crucial event in the whole history of the universe. In this sense we might also interpret the two curious figures accompanying the sun and moon beside the crucified Christ on Muiredach’s Cross (See Fig. 9) at Monasterboice as Ocean and Earth — Tellus and Gaia — important elements making up the ancients’ universe.

The Crucifixion is represented in various ways, sometimes showing Christ in an Irish version of the loin-cloth, or in a long robe, and frequently accompanied by Stephen and Longinus who offer Christ the hyssop and pierce his heart respectively (See Plate 3). With only four exceptions, it is always the Saviour’s left side which is pierced. None of the evangelists tells us which side was perforated, and western art of the second millennium has conditioned us to think of it as having been Christ’s right side. But the old Irish view of seeing it as having been the left side would make sense in that it was the side where his heart lay, and to pierce it would show that he was truly dead.
Fig. 8 The Soldiers casting Lots
Cross of the Scriptures,
Clonmacnoise

Fig. 9 Crucifixion
Muideach’s Cross,
Monasterboice

Fig. 10 Christ in the Temple/
Moment of Resurrection
Cross of the Scriptures,
Clonmacnoise
Post-Crucifixion scenes, such as Christ in the Tomb (See Fig. 10) or The Holy Women coming to the Tomb, are found in considerably fewer numbers, but it is interesting to note that the High Crosses provide some of the earliest surviving representations of The Resurrection, a subject so wondrous and mysterious that earlier generations seem to have shied away from depicting it.

The Bible cycle on the Irish crosses is rounded off with The Second Coming and The Last Judgement (See Fig. 11), and other scenes of Christ in Majesty which are often difficult to define exactly. Here, again, the Irish material is among the oldest to survive, particularly in the Weighing of Souls (See Fig. 12) on Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice, where we can feel a certain sense of humour in the details of the carving. The Last Judgement above it on the same cross is one of the most expansive to survive from the first millennium, presenting to us a Christ in a very Egyptian-looking pose, flanked closely by David and a musician, with the arms of the cross filled with good souls looking towards him, and bad souls turning their backs on him. There is only one exception, a figure who turns his head around in an effort to turn back the clock — but too late!

I have already pointed out that the selection of scenes on each cross is different, and those who chose them — for whatever reason — certainly showed that they had a good knowledge of the Bible. But because, as I believe, the source of the compositions came from outside — possibly from frescoes transmitted through artists’ pattern books — it is logical to think that the range of subjects chosen for representation on the crosses ultimately depended on whatever material there was available for copying. But, even with correct identification, it is not always easy to work out precisely why a particular selection of scenes was made on any one cross. There was obviously a purely educational benefit in explaining gospel stories through colour pictures, for coloured the crosses must have been, though not a trace of paint survives. But the purposeful selection of scenes must have had some deeper meaning. I see my High Crosses book as a first step in the process of discovering it, through trying to identify correctly as many of the panels as possible. But even if alternative explanations are required should my own prove not to be entirely satisfactory, there is a necessity for Bible scholars, medieval theologians and liturgists in tandem, to bring enquiries a stage further, in an effort to elucidate more of what lies behind the High Crosses, in the way that Eamonn Ó Carragaáin has been doing in Cork.

However, let me conclude with one example which, I believe, can show what can be achieved through (hopefully) correct identification, and that is the Broken Cross at Kells in County Meath (See Plates 4 & 5) which, like Marie Antoinette, lost its head some
centuries ago. It differs from other crosses in that more than half of its scenes are unique to it and, if my identifications be correct, they may be tabulated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEST FACE</th>
<th>EAST FACE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Passage of Israelites through</td>
<td>Entry of Christ into Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Red Sea</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Pillar of Fire</td>
<td>The Magi questioning Herod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses turning the waters of</td>
<td>The Washing of the Christ Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt into blood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah’s Ark</td>
<td>Lame man at the pool of Bethesda/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Samaritan Woman at the Well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>The Marriage Feast of Cana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Baptism of Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that, at some time probably within the past few centuries, the cross has been turned around 180°, so that the Old Testament side would originally have faced east, as is normal, and the New Testament would have correspondingly faced west. What will be immediately noticeable in the choice of scenes is the relevance of water to more than half of them, and some are obviously so obscure and rare in first millennium art that we can only conclude that they were sought out specifically because of their water content.

Moses turning the waters of Egypt into blood (if my interpretation be correct) is a much more unusual scene than The Passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea. This would also have been chosen along with yet a third Exodus scene, The Pillar of Fire, as another prime example of the Help of God, here helping the Israelites to escape from captivity. Noah’s Ark has long been taken to have baptismal significance, in that Noah survived through water. On the New Testament face, the same can also be said of The Samaritan woman at the well, through the words Christ uttered to her: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be a well of water springing up into everlasting life”. (John 4:14)

She shares a panel with what I take to be The Healing of the Lame Man at the Pool of Bethesda, a water-based miracle of a somewhat different kind to The Marriage Feast of Cana, illustrated on the same face. Further up the east side of the cross is The Washing of the Christ Child, a further instance of the use of apocryphal sources, here clearly demonstrating the cleansing power of water and foreshadowing The Baptism of Christ, which must surely be seen as the most important scene of all on this cross. If Adam and Eve (See Fig. 13) back to back with it be seen as the first creation which brought about Original Sin, then the Baptism of Christ and, by implication, Christian baptism itself, can be seen as a re-creation, banishing the effect of that sin for mankind. Both of these subjects are at the bottom of the shaft, The Baptism being out of its proper chronological order, probably to emphasise its importance for those kneeling in front of it, some of whom may have been pilgrims. But the great emphasis on water in the scenes on the Broken Cross at Kells would suggest that it was The Baptism scene which was the most significant of all, sending out the message of the
vital necessity of what was, at the time, the only sacrament — other than the Eucharist — which was recognised by the church. But in addition to the Adam and Eve and baptism parallels, there are other interesting Old and New Testament affinities which can be seen on this cross: the Egyptian horses foundering in the Red Sea and Christ entering Jerusalem on an ass on the way to his death, the common factor of supernatural light seen in The Pillar of Fire and the star that guided The Magi to Bethlehem, and the transformation of water in both Egypt and Cana.

How much more insight could we have gained had the head been preserved for us! Certainly, more than any other, the Broken Cross at Kells shows us a keen and well-read mind balancing Old and New Testament scenes, all carefully chosen to bring out a particular theme, in this instance the importance of Baptism. I would like to hope that people more steeped in biblical scholarship than I could take matters a stage further and work out similar deeper meanings embedded in other crosses. Finally, I feel sure that you will agree with me that it is worthwhile going out into the field to look at, admire and study these crosses, not just as great works of Irish art, but as valuable witnesses to the advanced learning of the Irish monks in their study of the Bible and their desire to propagate its message to the country at large.
Response
Rev Alan Meara

May I begin with not one but two confessions. I have a very limited knowledge of high crosses. I have driven all over Ireland but usually been in too much of a hurry to stop and turn off the main road to go and examine them closely. My second confession arises out of the first part of your paper where you say that especially in the North of Ireland the old debate about religious images — for and against — led some to knock the importance of the high crosses. Well I suspect that some of those who did the knocking came from my own Presbyterian tradition. One of the results of rivalry between Christian groups is that people are not open enough to treasures outside their own tradition.

However things are changing and Christians of all traditions see the importance of using audio/visual aids to teach Bible stories. You make it very clear that these Biblical scenes on the high crosses were teaching aids and when the majority of people could not read and certainly could not read Latin, very important aids for keeping the Biblical themes alive.

Taken as a whole the Biblical scenes depicted on the high crosses cover basic beliefs, God the Creator of the world, Christ as Lord and Saviour and the Spirit that helps people and sustain the whole creation. The prominence of the high crosses, even more so if they were painted as you suggest, must have drawn people’s attention. They were an attempt to theologically educate everyone who came close to them not just a select few scholarly people. The Prior of Bolton Abbey maintains that the monks of Ireland imitated the practice in Jerusalem that goes back at least to 3rd century of holding evening prayers in front and behind a cross set some distance away from a church. A bell was rung to summon the people, not just the monks, to gather around the cross. Perhaps at festivals larger crowds would assemble. What an opportunity for using a visual aid? As a result it seems to be a fact that the Celts of this island were more theologically literate than most other people in Europe at that time.

The Biblical scenes were also from both the Old Testament and the New Testament indicating that they saw the Old Testament as an important tool for understanding the New. The New Testament is often described as a fulfilment of the Old but if you don’t know what is being fulfilled you miss a lot. Coming from a tradition that has always taken the Old Testament seriously, perhaps with too much emphasis, I appreciate their use of scenes from both.

You draw attention in particular to the broken cross in Kells and the unifying theme of water that connects the different Biblical scenes on it. Since it is a fact that Biblical scenes are often used to speak to people about their current circumstances I wondered if we could show a particular relevance of the theme of water and baptism to the circumstances of those who may have sculptured this high cross in Kells around the 9th century. Baptism involved immersion in the water and being raised again with Christ out of the water. This depicts in symbolic form an escape: from evil forces to a new life in Christ. It seems that some in the Christian community in Kells had escaped from Viking raids on the island of Iona and had crossed the waters of the Irish sea in coracles to the comparative safety of Kells and some other Irish monastic settlements. When choosing a theme for Biblical scenes for a cross in Kells, would not the theme of escape from evil by the hand of God have been particularly appropriate?

Unfortunately we do not know enough about how they interpreted the Biblical scenes to be able to comment in detail on their exegesis. However in the case of the broken high
cross in Kells you have noted in the various scenes on both sides of the cross a common theme of water pointing to the importance of Baptism. God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea, the saving of Noah and family through the ark that floats on the waters of the great flood, these and the other scenes from the Old Testament are often described as God’s Saving Acts. Water was greatly feared by Hebrew people. The great waters represented the perils which threaten to overwhelm the believer. The Baptism of Christ in the waters of Jordan was an immersion in water and rising out of the waters. Our baptism is also a dying and a rising again. It is significant that there is also a depiction of the Marriage Feast in Cana where Jesus turns water into wine symbolising that he would be the one to bring the great feast of God’s kingdom. God intervenes in history for the purposes of liberating people for a fuller life. There are in these scenes possibilities for great sermons and very profound theology. However this is speculation since we cannot now eavesdrop on the Abbot of Kells in the 9th century expounding these scenes.

To my mind your paper raises a bigger issue. How are people to become acquainted with the stories of the Bible today in a way that is fresh and exciting. So many people think they know beforehand what the text says that they don’t anticipate finding anything new. People need the stories of the Bible including the parables of Jesus, strangely missing from the high crosses, to look with new insights at the world around us.

When the poor people of El Salvador were facing oppression many found hope and inspiration in Bible study. They discovered that God still acts in a saving way but also that oppression is perceived in the Bible as the basic cause of poverty. Many who read the Bible in the western world have not noticed that point. Some in authority in El Salvador began to realise that the Bible could be a dangerous book and imprisoned some of those engaged in this subversive activity of Bible study. Those who engaged in bringing about changes in society suffered even more than imprisonment but they were not defeated. Instead the resurrected Christ who had come through the suffering of the cross became all the more real for them. A practice grew up of painting on crosses the life story of people who had become martyrs in the cause of justice. Here is one. It is the story of Maria Gomes.
I began with a number of confessions. Confessions require us to change. So I have made a beginning. On Monday I went to see the high Cross at Moone and had the scenes explained to me by Fr. Owen, Prior of Bolton Abbey. It was a great experience. So your paper has already whetted my appetite to know and see more. I hope to stop on journeys around Ireland to visit more. As to my tradition I think we are already well on the road to repenting of putting too much emphasis on the written word and coming to see that the visual arts can also convey the Word.