

ACHILL ISLAND AND THE GREAT STORM OF 1847

First impressions are very important. How true this is! During our first holiday on Achill, in the Summer of 1997, we were 'smitten', and just knew we would have to return again to this beautiful Island. We were based at a caravan site near the Golden Strand at Dugort, in the shadow of Slievemore mountain. Each day we travelled to some of the many beauty spots and historic sites on Achill. At the southern end of the Island we explored Grainne Uaile's castle, which was built in the 15th century. As we followed the Atlantic Drive along the rugged coastline we saw some spectacular scenery. We visited the beautiful beaches at Keel and Keem Bay several times. The Achill Missionary Settlement and The Deserted Village were within walking distance of where we were staying in Dugort. During our short holiday we met many of the local people and were greatly encouraged by the warmth of their welcome and their genuine friendship. We returned home to Tipperary determined to revisit Achill again as soon as possible.

It was not very long before I was back on the Island. Stephen, a colleague and family friend, accompanied me on this occasion. We came to Achill with the intention of exploring not just the well-advertised tourist attractions, but the whole of the Island. So our tour began early the next morning. Stephen was driving and I was the navigator. Over the next couple of days we travelled the main roads, the minor ones, several winding lanes and Boreens, and even some mountain tracks. When we arrived at the top of Minaun Heights and surveyed the scenery we felt as if we were looking at some of God's finest creation. We could see vast areas of bogland and moors. Lakes, hills and valleys were spread out before us, with majestic Slievemore in the distance. Beautiful beaches, rugged mountains and sheep grazing peacefully suggested to us that Achill was a haven to which one could come if they wished to escape, even temporarily, from life's troubles.

But I discovered that this lovely Island, with all of its natural rugged beauty, has known its share of misfortune and hardship. Many of the older Islanders still talk of some of the terrible tragedies that devastated the inhabitants of Achill. They will direct you to Kildownet Old Cemetery where you will find two mass graves. On one of the headstones the names of the thirty two people who died in the Clew Bay drowning tragedy in 1894 are recorded. The bodies of ten young men who were burned to death in the Kirkintilloch Bothy Fire Disaster in 1937 were laid to rest in the other mass grave.

Black '47 will never be forgotten. This was probably the worst year of the Great Famine that swept through Ireland. The people who lived on Achill Island suffered immensely throughout the famine, which lasted from 1845 to 1849. The potato crop, which was the mainstay of their food supply, was destroyed by the Blight. Hunger and subsequent disease were rampant on the Island. Because they were unable to pay the rent many of the Islanders were evicted from their cabins. They had spent their rent money to buy food for their starving children. The land agents that were employed by landlord Sir Richard O' Donnell showed little mercy as they forcibly evicted these unfortunate people. In 1847 they evicted forty of the inhabitants of the village of Keel. Broken-hearted parents were compelled to carry their sobbing children from their cabins to seek shelter in the ditches and bogs. Mothers and fathers prayed their children, already weakened by hunger, would somehow survive exposure to the piercing wind and incessant rain blowing in from the Atlantic.

The events of the famine years have been well documented by historians. Much of their research has included a detailed examination of accounts written by people who actually lived in Ireland during those dark days. Two of the people who recorded some of the events concerning Achill Island were Mr. Robert Savage and Doctor Neason Adams. Robert Savage was a Quaker, and was proprietor of the Achill Mission Hotel at Achill Sound. Doctor Adams was a physician who was based at the Missionary Settlement in Dugort.

At the time of the famine the village of Keel consisted of approximately one hundred and thirty thatched cabins. Large families were reared in many of these little houses. As the famine gained momentum and the potatoes rotted, the inhabitants of Keel began to rely almost entirely upon the sea for food. A letter written by Mr. Savage was published in 'The Mayo Constitution'

newspaper on 19 October 1847. In his letter he tells of how the Society of Friends (Quakers) gave a donation of forty pounds towards the supply of curraghs and nets for the fishermen of Achill. At the outset of the famine many of the fishermen had sold their curraghs, fishing tackle and nets in order to buy food for their families. Later on they had to watch helplessly as shoals of herring and mackerel filled the inlets and bays. Without their boats, nets and tackle these poor starving people were unable to avail of this plentiful supply of food. Now this very generous donation from the Quakers made a tremendous difference to the situation. Within three weeks 90,000 herring and mackerel were caught.

But the curragh was suitable for in-shore fishing only. However, a combination of overwhelming need and great courage motivated the Achill fishermen and they did not hesitate to put to sea in these small craft. They were willing to risk their very lives as they attempted to avail of the abundant shoals of fish that swam in Clew Bay. In his letter Mr. Savage tells of some courageous fishermen who found themselves at the mercy of a raging sea.

On the morning of Monday 8 November 1847 some of the fishermen who lived in Keel said goodbye to their families before making their way to Portnaluinge (Boatport). These families were depending upon a good catch of fish to help alleviate the pangs of hunger that were now part of everyday life. The fishermen spent some time preparing their curraghs, nets and tackle. The morning was cloudy, visibility was bad and the sea boisterous. But the nineteen men and boys from Keel were determined to put to sea and set their nets. They set out from Portnaluinge in six curraghs, taking turns at rowing their small craft to the herring grounds.

At around three o'clock the sea became unusually calm. The waters were like a molten looking glass. The winds abated, and seemed to be holding their breath. An eerie silence descended. Then suddenly, with a mighty roar, the savage tempest was unleashed, churning the sea into a maddening fury. The courageous fishermen in their little curraghs were no match for the raging storm. One by one their boats were swamped and overturned by the gigantic waves. The nineteen men and boys were thrown into the swirling surf and soon the merciless sea claimed the lives of these brave sons of Achill.

At the same time, not very far away, the crew of another fishing boat was in mortal danger. Earlier in the day, five fishermen had bid farewell to their wives and children and rowed their boat out from Achill Head. Having arrived at the fishing grounds they were busily engaged in setting their nets. Without warning, the fierce storm broke. The fishermen immediately decided to head for shelter and began to row towards land. But the mountainous waves tossed their boat about like matchwood. Within minutes their little craft was overturned and the fishermen found themselves at the mercy of the frenzied sea. None of them survived.

A report in 'The Mayo Constitution', dated 16 November 1847 gives an account of others who also perished in that terrible storm. The famine had reached the small Island of Inishturk and had caused severe hardship to its population. Starvation had claimed the lives of many of the Islanders. Three women and six men set out from Inishturk in an open boat and rowed to Westport to purchase some food for their starving families. On Saturday 6 November they left Westport to begin the journey home. However, the weather soon deteriorated and the sea became very boisterous, so they put in to Clare Island for shelter. They stayed on the Island for two days but felt they should then continue their journey home. Some of the Islanders pleaded with them to remain until the weather improved and the sea grew calm. However, they were anxious to get food to their starving children back on Inishturk, so decided they would risk making the perilous journey.

They set out from Clare Island on Monday 8th determined to reach home as quickly as possible with their precious cargo. Rowing hard against the swell and the wind, they had travelled about four miles when suddenly the tempest struck. The screaming, hurricane-like winds whipped the sea into a raging fury. Realising the danger they were in, the occupants of the boat immediately changed course and attempted to steer their little craft towards the nearest port. They knew that if they reached Louisburg they would be safe. They could shelter there and then continue their journey when the storm had abated. But the pounding waves made it impossible for them to navigate the short journey to safety. The boat was capsized within sight of Louisburg. All of its

occupants, along with the food they were attempting to bring home to their starving families on Inishturk, were thrown into the raging sea. There were no survivors.

Friends, I have been trying to picture what the situation was like on Achill Island while that terrible storm was raging. I have been trying to imagine how the wives of the fishermen felt. Earlier that morning they had bid farewell to their husbands, expecting them to return home some hours later. But how quickly the situation had changed! Now, as they looked out at the raging tempest, several questions must have been going through the minds of these distraught women – “Are they safe? Are they far from shore? Will they make it back to land?” I can picture some of them there in their small cabins, trying to comfort their children, especially the older ones who understood what was happening. How did they answer the children’s questions as they asked, “Why isn’t Daddy home yet? Will he be alright? Will he be afraid in the storm? Has he ever been out in a storm as bad as this one?”

I’m sure some of the women from Keel must have made their way to Portnaluinge. I can picture them there at the sea-shore, watching and waiting, hoping to catch sight of the currachs and their crews returning through the mountainous waves. And what about the mothers who watched their teenage sons leave home on that morning to courageously put to sea in the little currachs? A mother’s love for her child is especially strong when she knows he is in danger. What questions some of these dear mothers must have had on their hearts as they listened to the howling winds and watched in anguish as the gigantic waves seemed to reach to the darkening sky – “Why did I let him go out fishing today? I should have known better! Why didn’t I ask him to stay at home? I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to him. If there are any survivors, will my boy be one of them?”

The waiting was hard. As the hours passed by and there was no sign of the fishermen returning, any hopes their families may have held out for their safety began to fade. The reality of the seriousness of the situation began to set in. The unfortunate families began to realise their loved ones would not be returning home alive. They tried to come to terms with the fact that the cruel sea had claimed them. Neighbours and friends tried to comfort them. But the inevitable questions and doubts must have begun to set in - Did they suffer? Did they die quickly? Will their bodies be washed ashore? If so, how soon? Or will we need to send out boats to search for the bodies? What will we do if we can’t recover the bodies? What if we can’t give them a Christian burial?

Doctor Neason Adams, who was the only physician on Achill Island at that time, wrote in ‘The Achill Missionary Herald and Western Witness’ newspaper, dated November 1847, an account of the tragedy. He tells of how he visited the village of Keel on 8 November, the evening of the storm. It was his responsibility, as the local doctor, to file an official report on the deaths of the fishermen. In his report he recorded the names of nineteen men and boys. Cause of death: Drowning. These courageous fishermen had left behind them fourteen widows and thirty-eight children.

Doctor Adams wrote the following harrowing words, ‘I have just returned from the melancholy and afflicted Village of Keel. The Irish cry resounding from the cabins, the wild screaming of the orphans and the tears of the aged made it one of the most distressing sights I ever witnessed.’ As the effects of the famine had intensified on Achill these poor families had been depending upon the catches of fish for their survival. Now, bereaved and heartbroken, they faced the prospect of starvation. Before that terrible storm had abated the sea had claimed the lives of a total of thirty-three people. Twenty-four of those who perished were fishermen from Achill.

To whom could the unfortunate families of these fishermen now turn? Who could understand what they were going through? Who could understand their grief? Who could ease the pain they were enduring? There was only ONE who could meet them at the very point of their need. Jesus is described in the Scriptures as ‘a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief’.¹ He knew what it was to lose somebody. We can read in the Bible of how ‘Jesus wept’² as He stood at the grave of a very close friend.

Jesus was very closely associated with fishermen and their families. In fact, some of His first disciples were fishermen. We are told in the Scriptures that, 'One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" And they left their nets at once and followed him. A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind'.³

Jesus knew the life of a fisherman was not easy. Sometimes their hard work yielded very little results. At such times as these He never hesitated to help them. 'When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish." "Master," Simon replied, "we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let the nets down again." And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking. When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him'.⁴

The dangers associated with the life of a fisherman were also familiar to Jesus. The Sea of Galilee is situated in a basin surrounded by mountains, and is particularly susceptible to sudden, violent storms. Cool air from the Mediterranean is drawn down through the narrow mountain passes and clashes with the hot, humid air lying over the sea. Many fishermen found themselves at the mercy of such storms.

Jesus had first-hand experience of the danger fishermen find themselves in during such a tempest. 'Then Jesus got into the boat and started across the lake with his disciples. Suddenly, a fierce storm struck the lake, with waves breaking into the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him up, shouting, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" Jesus responded, "Why are you afraid? You have so little faith!" Then he got up and rebuked the wind and waves, and suddenly there was a great calm. The disciples were amazed. "Who is this man?" they asked. "Even the winds and waves obey him!"⁵

Jesus often visited the homes of fishermen and dined with them. He had a personal interest in these fishermen and their families. While visiting the home of Peter and his wife, Jesus ministered to a member of the family who was ill. 'When Jesus arrived at Peter's house, Peter's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. But when Jesus touched her hand, the fever left her. Then she got up and prepared a meal for him'.⁶

On a number of occasions when Jesus was performing miracles He used fish. On one such occasion a large multitude that was accompanying Him became hungry. Jesus told His disciples to feed them. "But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!" they answered. "Bring them here," he said. Then he told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!⁷

One of the most sobering lessons Jesus taught concerned a fisherman's net and its catch. He said, "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."⁸

Perhaps Jesus' love for fishermen and their families is best illustrated by the fact that He appointed one of them to take care of His mother. As He hung upon the cross in agony, Jesus was greatly concerned for His mother. Mary, her heart broken and pierced with sorrow, stood nearby. This loving mother watched her Son suffering and dying as a substitute for sinners. He

was paying in full the penalty for the guilt of our sins. He bore the punishment for the sins of all who would repent and put their faith in Him, trusting Him as Saviour.

Just before He died Jesus lovingly arranged to have His mother taken care of. He committed her into the care of one of the first fishermen He had called to be His disciple. This fisherman, John, gladly took on the responsibility of looking after Mary for the rest of her life. 'Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, "Dear woman, here is your son." And he said to this disciple, "Here is your mother." And from then on this disciple took her into his home'.⁹

After His resurrection Jesus had His last meal with fishermen. 'Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples. Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." "We'll come, too," they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night. At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who he was. He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?" "No," they replied. Then he said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it. Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread. "Bring some of the fish you've just caught," Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn't torn. "Now come and have some breakfast!" Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead'.¹⁰

Here was someone to whom the bereaved families of the Achill Island fishermen could turn in their hour of grief and loss. Here was someone who could identify with them in their sorrow. Fishermen and their families played an important role in Jesus' ministry. Even after His death, Jesus drew alongside the fishermen.

It is wonderful to know that this same Jesus is alive today? He wants to draw alongside to help and comfort us as we face life's storms. Remember how His presence made all the difference when His disciples found themselves caught in a sudden storm. Remember their cry, 'Lord, save us: we perish'. These disciples realised the danger they were in. They also realised they could not save themselves. They knew there was only One who could help them. So they called upon Jesus, and He saved them.

Friends, according to the Word of God, each one of us is in danger of perishing. Jesus Himself said, 'And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God'.¹¹ This is a warning to us all, 'For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard'.¹² The penalty for sin is very serious. 'For the wages [penalty] of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord'.¹³ This penalty for sin includes not just spiritual and physical death, but also separation from God for all eternity. Did you realise you were in danger of being eternally lost? Do you realise that you cannot save yourself? Religious exercises, good works or Church membership cannot save you. 'But - When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit'.¹⁴ Yes, we are all in danger of being lost, and must come to terms with the fact that we cannot save ourselves. However, there is one who can save us. Why not do as the disciples did, and ask Jesus to save you? He said to those who called upon Him, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Friend, are you fearful of death and the grave? Are you fearful of being eternally lost in Hell? Many people are!

But David, the Psalmist, was not fearful. He wrote, 'Through the darkest valley I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me'.¹⁵ Why did David have no fear of death, the grave and Hell? It was because he knew God had forgiven his sins and would take him to Heaven when he died. In one of his Psalms he wrote the following words, 'Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!'¹⁶ David knew his sins would not be counted against him. But how did he know this? His assurance was based upon the fact that he had sincerely repented of his sins. Because of this the penalty for his sins would be transferred from David to One who would become his substitute. Because his sins would now be put to Christ's account and paid for by Him, David could be forgiven. He believed God would save him because of Christ's work on his behalf. The security of David's salvation did not depend upon what he could do to earn or merit it. It depended entirely upon what Christ would do for him.

Friend, did you know that Jesus became the substitute and sin-bearer for all who would turn to Him in sincere repentance? As He was suffering and dying upon the cross He was paying the penalty for the guilt of the sins of all who would put their faith in Him and trust Him for their salvation. Referring to the Lord Jesus, the prophet Isaiah wrote, 'It was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrow that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all'.¹⁷ Jesus Himself said, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."¹⁸

As we have been thinking about those who were drowned in that terrible storm in 1847 we have been reminded of the brevity of life and the suddenness with which death can appear. This should encourage us to prepare for that inevitable appointment which all of us must keep: 'And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment'.¹⁹ God has been very patient with us. He has given us much opportunity, over many years, to reach out by faith and accept the free gift of Salvation that He has provided for us through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent'.²⁰

Friend, wouldn't you like to have the assurance of eternal life? Wouldn't you like to know for certain that you will go to Heaven when you die? You can have that assurance today. Acknowledging that fact that you are a sinner, come to the Lord in sincere repentance. Ask Him to forgive you and trust Him to save you because of what Christ, our substitute and sin-bearer has done for you.

'For God says,
"At just the right time, I heard you.
On the day of salvation, I helped you.
Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation'.²¹

Scripture References

- 1: Isaiah Ch.53 v 3
 - 3: Matthew Ch.4 vs 18-22
 - 5: Matthew Ch.8 vs 23-27
 - 7: Matthew Ch.14 vs 17-21
 - 9: John Ch.19 vs 25-27
 - 11: Luke Ch 13 vs 3, 5
 - 13: Romans Ch.6 v 23
 - 15: Psalm 23 v 4
 - 17: Isaiah Ch.53 vs 4-6
 - 19: Hebrews Ch.9 v 27
 - 21: 2 Corinthians Ch.6 v 2
 - 2: John Ch.11 v 35
 - 4: Luke Ch.5 vs 4-9
 - 6: Matthew Ch.8 vs 14, 15
 - 8: Matthew Ch.13 vs 47-50
 - 10: John Ch.21 vs 1-14
 - 12: Romans Ch.3 v23
 - 14: Titus Ch.3 vs 4, 5
 - 16: Psalm 32 vs 1, 2
 - 18: John Ch.3 v 16
 - 20: 2 Peter Ch.3 v 9
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