

The Book of Kells

For the time between Ascension and Whitsun

Written on August 17, 1958

Cast

COLUMCILLE	brown monk's habit with green stole, white girdle; cap like a beehive, made of raffia
BRENDAN	dark green monk's habit, broad red girdle
IMIRE, an old shepherd	
LION	red garment, light red wings
ANGEL	light blue garment, dark blue wings
EAGLE	violet garment, orange-coloured wings
BULL	light red garment, yellow wings
MOTHER ITA	covered by a white veil



The stage is a room shaped like a beehive. In the centre is a rough-hewn table, at which COLUMCILLE is sitting. On the table lie sheets of parchment, little bowls with liquid dyes, brushes and quills.

The four Cherubinic beings are arranged in angel-like appearance around him as in the drawing. On Columcille's right the LION, a little raised the ANGEL, uppermost, far above COLUMCILLE, as though inspiring him, the EAGLE. On the other side, half raised, the BULL. The wings of the Four Angelic Beasts are in continuous movement, up and down, but also in other directions. The whole space is as though filled with their presence.

COLUMCILLE [*holding a brush in his hand, as though to himself*]:

So it says:

In the beginning was the Word.

How shall I understand

What is meant with this Word?

And yet I divine

That the Word's power

Imbues the nature of all existence.

How else could I know

That every being is

What its name implies?

And that by the very name

I know it as such

And cognise it!

Cognise – oh, this word!

Cognition, re-cognition

Self-cognition!

This is the answer to the Word

By which it was created.

Yes, so it is:

In what it has created

The Word finds itself

Again as self-cognition.

And it therefore knows:

I am who I am –
 That is the Word of the Lord:
 Eh'yeh asher eh'yeh

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: Eh'yeh asher eh'yeh.

COLUMCILLE: Thus it sounds out of myself,
 In me,
 Around me,
 Thus it sounds everywhere!
 It is the Word.
 In the beginning,
 Yes, in the beginning was the Word
 And is and works on
 And lives and creates
 And will be in the future.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: The Word: it was,
 It is and it will be.
 The Word works in eternity
 From Omega to Alpha
 And from Alpha until now.

COLUMCILLE: Until now?
 What works until now?

LION: In the beginning was the A.
 Man's divining spirit opened up
 His ears.
 And he listened expectantly
 To the creative weaving
 Of his evolving world.

COLUMCILLE [*listening intently*]: So forth from the A
 Was formed the first man.
 Adam he was called.

ANGEL: Then came the E.
 Filled with awe,
 The spirit of man turned around
 And he saw his own star
 Radiant with light.

COLUMCILLE [*completely lost in thought*]: So out of the E
 Was formed the other part.
 Eva she was called.

EAGLE: Then stepped in the I.
 Beholding himself,
 Man was startled to himself
 And heard astounded
 How out of his heart
 The names of all things,
 All beings,
 Were themselves named.

COLUMCILLE [*as though enlightened by knowledge*]:
 So out of the I
 Was formed the child,
 The child-man.
 Nameless was he,
 And waiting for his fate.

BULL: And then came the O.
 It rounded
 And welded together
 What was before unjoined
 And still hovering undetermined.
 The human spirit
 Took on form and shape
 As a child-man.
 [*With emphatic sound and gesture*]
 He saw the earth
 And dwelt within its space.

COLUMCILLE: Oh, this O!
 It created the order of man
 And welded it together.
 What was independent
 Became community.
 In blood,
 In spirit,

This O binds
 With its ring,
 Bearing human hearts
 In a row upon its circle,
 The order of godly creation.
 Thus can the deeds of stars
 Work
 Into human existence.

[From below the room on the stage, the mooing of a cow sounds persistently several times in succession. Each time and on each further occasion, the FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS bow their heads and beat their wings in greeting.]

COLUMCILLE: And that is the U.

I thank you, my good beast,
 That at this very moment
 You brought yourself to mind.
 You admonished me again
 About earthly life.
 Because U is the doom of man,
 It is his tomb,
 His gloom,
 It is also the womb
 Which gave him life.
 It is his rune,
 His rule, his food.
 And now I write:
 In the beginning was the Word,
 And move from A through E and I
 And O to U.
 In the U stands Colum,
 Who is allowed to write this down.

[During these last words repeated barking from the space under the room as well as loud human steps and words can be heard.]

As if in answer, the FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS sit down on their steps covering their faces with their crossed wings, giving the impression of sleep. COLUMCILLE rises, steps back and listens to the sounds from below.]

COLUMCILLE *[turning downwards]*:

Who is disturbing the monk of Kells?
 Who is asking after Columcille
 When he is struggling for the word?
 Visitors are only
 Let in at midnight.
 Who is it
 Wanting to confuse me
 At the holy time of noon
 The high time of the Sun?

[Again the dog starts up loudly and a voice tries to calm it down. The cow lows.]

BRENDAN *[calling from below]*: It is Brendan,
 Brother Columcille.
 Allow me to disturb you,
 For I bring tidings.

COLUMCILLE *[speaking downwards]*: Can you not wait,
 Brother,
 Until the shining of the Sun
 Has gone
 And enlightens us
 From within?

BRENDAN *[calling from below]*: Before that happens,
 I must again
 Become a wanderer.

COLUMCILLE: Then come up and be my guest
 In the realm of the Word.

[He opens up the hatch leading below, takes off his head covering and waits for his visitor. BRENDAN pushes himself through the hatch.]

He has some trouble, because in contrast to Columcille, he is broadly built. He then pulls his knees through and at last stands panting and laughing in front of Columcille.]

BRENDAN: Greetings to you,
My brother Columcille.
To reach you means
Squeezing oneself
Through the door which otherwise only
Sucklings pass through.
I feel as if I had
Risen
From the gate of birth.

COLUMCILLE: I thank you,
My brother.
But you are mistaken,
If you think
You have passed through
The gate of birth.
It was the other way round,
For you have returned
Into the motherly womb
Of cosmic forces.
When you abide
In my house
You are in the cosmic uterus.

BRENDAN: However that may be,
I came to speak to you
And convey to you
The instructions
Brought to me
By my journey to the west.

COLUMCILLE: Then let us both sit down, Brother.
I am listening to what
You have to tell me.

And should the light of thought
Be kindled in my mind
I shall try
To transform it into sounding words.

[COLUMCILLE fetches two stools, which he places at the two narrow sides of the table. Both men sit down opposite each other. The FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS rise up and again spread their wings.]

BRENDAN: A few days ago,
I reached our homeland again.
Erin's gentleness
Shone towards me in emerald green.
Sacred beauty here holds sway,
The sanctuary of beauty
Was revealed to me.
You know that I was
In Atalanta
On behalf of the holy Council of Fathers
Who preside over our cloisters.
They sent me with a band
Of physicians
To investigate forms of illness
Found only over there.
It was the second time
I was allowed to tread
The soil of Atalanta.
We wandered through wide stretches
Of that country.
We crossed rivers, passed
By lakes
Almost as large as our seas.
We encountered herds of buffalo, aurochs,
Enormous snakes, little horses,
And dwelt in the wigwams
Of our brothers there.

They met us with friendliness
 And gave us
 What we needed.
 They asked what prompted us
 To visit them.
 We answered openly
 And spoke of the Great Mother
 Who sends her forces into our
 Bodily limbs.
 They could tell us
 Much about this.
 Some of them we saw
 Dying
 And others taking the path
 Into earthly life.
 The gates of birth and of passing away
 Are wider, brighter and more open over there
 Than they are in our homeland.
 Yet the tremendous creative force
 Of the World Mother streams
 In such abundance from
 Below the Earth
 That already in childhood
 Men are ripe for procreation,
 Women ready to give birth.
 Thus the subterranean force
 Thrusts
 The generative power of knowledge
 Too soon into human bodies.
 Man becomes creative
 But loses his cognition.
 He becomes a man,
 Because the earthly woman
 Imbues him
 With her power.

COLUMCILLE: So the vessel is
 Stronger than the content?
 The husk does not let the kernel
 Ripen?
 BRENDAN: You say rightly –
 And to me it was evident
 That we
 Must shield Europe from these forces,
 If it should continue
 On its path
 Of inner ripening
 In centuries to come.
 COLUMCILLE: What do you intend to do?
 Do you want to beat the sea
 With chains
 So that it engulfs the ships
 Which set out to the west?
 BRENDAN: O brother,
 Do not mock.
 The cosmic hour
 When we must understand this
 Is fraught with
 Earnestness by
 Decisions to be taken here.
 The Council of Fathers
 Has resolved
 That of Atalanta
 We may know no more.
 Cast out into the night
 Of the dark part in our soul
 It sinks down and is forgotten.
 [*BRENDAN rises.*]
 Acheron
 The river of the Underworld
 Streams over it, thundering onward.

We close up our knowledge
By the sacrifice of renunciation.
Within us Atalanta dies.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: May the renouncing decision
Of human hearts
Live in light-filled cosmic heights
As a gift of grace.
May the knowing relinquishment
Of human souls
Shine in dark ground of the earth
As an offering of knowledge.

[BRENDAN, hearing the Four Angelic Beasts speaking, turns around and at the sight of their presence falls to his knees.]

COLUMCILLE *[with inclined head]*: I told you, my brother,
That here you
Find yourself
In the womb of cosmic powers.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: We bear
The decision of men,
We guide
The sacrifice of souls,
We lead
The renunciation of spirit
Upwards.

COLUMCILLE: Now are the walls erected,
Roused by the trumpet-sound
Of the spirit-voice.
From the motherly floods
Rises an ether defence,
A rampart of spirit
Is built.
From now onwards
Only the blasting horn of intellect
As it must awaken

In coming centuries
Will tear down
The ether defence
Of the motherly floods,
The spirit rampart
Which is now built.

[COLUMCILLE stands up while speaking. He bows down before the Four Angelic Beasts and then strokes Brendan's head in a brotherly fashion. The latter is still sunk down on his knees and shaken.]

COLUMCILLE: Wake up, brother,
Let us still exchange
Human words.
You came from the west
And I am preparing myself
To penetrate the east.
We want to celebrate our earthly parting.

[BRENDAN and COLUMCILLE rise and return to their stools at the ends of the table, with their backs to the Four Angelic Beasts.]

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: Past decision
Engenders
Deeds of the future.
Hear
What the present demands.

[During these words, Brendan's old teacher, MOTHER ITA suddenly appears out of nothing on Columcille's chair behind the table.]

MOTHER ITA: Columcille,
Brendan,
Sons,
Do you hear me?

BRENDAN: Who is calling us?

COLUMCILLE: Is it you, Mother,
Wanting to instruct us?

MOTHER ITA: I am not your mother,
 Columcille;
 I am the mother
 Who taught you, Brendan,
 When you were a child.
 Do you now hear me?

BRENDAN: Yes, Mother Ita,
 I hear you
 And still hear your warning
 To cast Atalanta
 From my mind.

MOTHER ITA: When against my advice
 You departed from Erin,
 I left Erin as well.
 My heart longed like yours
 For the Kingdom of Heaven.
 In the vessel of my earthly deeds
 Which like a swift coracle
 Bore my liberated soul
 Through the ether ocean,
 I followed you to Atalanta.
 In that country
 I accompanied you and your brothers.
 And always when your heart
 Thought about me,
 It was I myself
 Who made it resound.

BRENDAN: Yes, Mother Ita,
 I was blind and did not see you.
 Forgive the obduracy
 Which blinded the eyes of my soul.

MOTHER ITA: That is not why I came.
 In this world hour
 There is something else
 Which both of you must know.

*[She rises, and a pale lilac light gleams around her. The
 FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS beat their wings in great motion.]*

MOTHER ITA: In the east,
 Where lies the counter-island
 To our Erin,
 Arabia, dark and great,
 Queen of the night,
 There the enemies of the gods are preparing
 New onslaughts.
 Once, in bygone days,
 When friends came
 From Miletus to Erin,
 To prepare here
 The soil
 From which you, my sons,
 Have sprung –
 You both and the other ten
 Of Finnian's apostles –
 Long ago, when that took place,
 Men also went from Miletus
 To Arabia.
 There too the fruit is now ripening
 On its tree.
 A great and mighty Prophet
 Will be born there
 And hundreds of thousands will
 Confess themselves to him.
 Fire and sword will be his weapons.
 With ravaging and slaying will his disciples
 Move across the lands.
 Europe is their goal.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: There, where the human spirit
 Wakens to itself,
 Shall he bear the fetters
 Of dead thinking.

MOTHER ITA: If you must forget
 The west,
 If you turn your gaze
 Away from Atalanta,
 There is then the need
 To Christianise the east.

BRENDAN *and* COLUMCILLE [*rising*]:
 Tell us, Mother Ita,
 Does that mean we must
 Leave our homeland Erin?

MOTHER ITA: Inbreeding may no longer
 Rule in your cloisters.
 You were long, all too long
 Sufficient unto yourselves.
 Arise, to Europe
 Must your sons wander,
 Your pupils make their way.
 There shall light
 Be kindled
 In the Order's settlements:
 The light of Erin,
 Which can withstand
 The darkness
 Driving from Arabia
 With fire and sword
 Towards Europe.
 The longer it will shine there,
 The brighter it radiates,
 The warmer it
 Keeps in human hearts,
 The more powerless
 Will be that Prophet
 In the East.

COLUMCILLE: I see an image
 Opening up

As a tremendous revelation
 To my spirit's eye.
 [*He points forward.*]
 I gaze into the depths of the Earth –
 Streams of power are rising up
 From its innermost core! O Mother Earth,
 Terrible depths do you hide
 And we step blindly
 Over them.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: Cover up the image,
 Do not behold
 What shall
 For centuries yet
 Remain a secret.
 [*COLUMCILLE sits down on his stool
 and covers his eyes.*]

BRENDAN: I am bewildered
 By everything
 Happening here.
 How shall I grasp
 What is to become of us?
 O Mother Ita,
 Can you help
 And explain to me
 The meaning
 Of what we have here experienced?
 [*As he turns towards her, he notices
 that her chair is vacant.*]
 She has vanished;
 Brother Columcille, say,
 What was all that?
 [*The FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS have again settled down
 on their seats and covered themselves with their wings.*]

COLUMCILLE: A time will come when men
 From Arabia

Will in Atalanta
 Desire to destroy
 The course of the universe
 With telluric forces, which they
 Draw upwards
 From below the Earth.
 Other men will resist
 This behaviour
 By so bearing in them
 The light of the spirit
 That it shine not for themselves
 But for their brothers.
 Now I understand
 And know
 What has been given us to do
 And bring about.

[There is very audible knocking at the hatch. From below the lowing of the cow and the soft barking of a dog are heard.]

COLUMCILLE: Who is it
 Wanting again to disturb us?

IMIRE: It is me, little son,
 I am bringing
 Supper for you
 And your brother Brendan.

COLUMCILLE: Then come, old man,
 Lead us back to the Earth.

[The hatch opens and a jug with two bowls is placed on the floor.]

IMIRE *[pushing his head out of the hatch]*: God bless
 Your food, Master.
 Mother Earth
 Has prepared it for us.
 The Spirit Father
 Has accepted it.

In the name of Christ
 We now desire
 To enjoy it.

COLUMCILLE: Imire, many thanks
 For your grace.
 That was
 What
 Set us right again,
 Into the light of the earthly day.

[IMIRE exits. COLUMCILLE takes the jug and the two bowls, places them on the table and pours them full. From a recess in the wall he takes a loaf of bread, cuts off a piece and gives it to Brendan. He also has a piece himself.]

BRENDAN: So let us eat, brother.

We thereby appease
 Those forces from the depths of soul
 Which come out of the Earth
 And want to destroy us.

COLUMCILLE: The Word has become flesh,
 Brother Brendan.
 Do you know what that means?
 In a presentiment
 I am beginning
 To grasp it.

BRENDAN: The Word dies
 Into the womb of Mother Earth,
 So as to rise again
 In the human spirit.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS *[rising and spreading their wings]*:
 Yea, so it is.

[Slowly the stage darkens, while Columcille and Brendan chew their bread and drink their milk.]