

Patrick, Missionary to Ireland by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th April 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 49:5-7; Luke 10:1-12

Today we continue our sermon series on Heroes of the Faith with the patron saint of Ireland, St Patrick.

St Patrick's Day jokes

As some of you will know, St Patrick's Day was exactly four weeks ago, on 17th March, but I couldn't resist putting in a couple of Irish jokes, and in case anyone thinks I'm being racist, these come from the Irish newspaper, the *Irish Post*.

Billy stops Paddy in Dublin and asks for the quickest way to Cork.

Paddy says: "Are you on foot or in the car?"

Billy replies: "In the car." "Well, that's the quickest way," says Paddy.

And, in recognition of the fact that Ireland is a very religious country, here's one with God in it:

An Irishman is struggling to find a parking space.

"Lord," he prayed. "I can't stand this. If you open a space up for me, I swear I'll give up the Guinness and go to mass every Sunday."

Suddenly, the clouds part and the sun shines on an empty parking spot. Without hesitation, the Irishman says: "Never mind, I found one!"

If the Irish are happy to laugh at themselves, they have a particular reason to, as the patron saint of Ireland wasn't even Irish himself. Patrick was British!

The rebellious teenager

The story begins with Patrick as a teenager aged 16. Let's take a moment to think back to when we were 16. How were you thinking then about your life and what you wanted to do in the future? Did you have a relationship with God as a teenager? How has the faith you have now made a difference to your life?

Patrick was born to Christian parents around the beginning of the 5th century, just at the end of the Roman rule in Britain. His father was a Roman tax official and also a deacon in a local church. The family lived somewhere on the west coast of Britain, but the location has not been clearly identified.

Although Patrick's family were Christian, Patrick in his later writing describes himself as a teenager who did not know God or obey him. It was this rebellious sixteen-year-old who was taken prisoner one night by a raiding party of Irish pirates, taken with many others to Ireland and there sold as a slave.

Most of what we know about this time comes from a document which Patrick wrote in later life, called the *Confession*¹. Patrick was sent out to work as a shepherd, and it was during this time of hardship in a foreign country, and

¹ https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#

with no contact with his family that he turned to God and began praying. This is how he described what happened:

It was there that the Lord opened up my awareness of my lack of faith. Even though it came about late, I recognised my failings. So I turned with all my heart to the Lord my God, and he looked down on my lowliness and had mercy on my youthful ignorance. He guarded me before I knew him, and before I came to wisdom and could distinguish between good and evil. He protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son.²

Patrick goes on to say:

After I arrived in Ireland, I tended sheep every day, and I prayed frequently during the day. More and more the love of God increased, and my sense of awe before God. Faith grew, and my spirit was moved, so that in one day I would pray up to one hundred times, and at night perhaps the same. I even remained in the woods and on the mountain, and I would rise to pray before dawn in snow and ice and rain. I never felt the worse for it, and I never felt lazy – as I realise now, the spirit was burning in me at that time.

It was there one night in my sleep that I heard a voice saying to me: “You have fasted well. Very soon you will return to your native country.” Again after a short while, I heard a someone saying to me: “Look – your ship is ready.” It was not nearby, but a good two hundred miles away. I had never been to the place, nor did I know anyone there. So I ran away then, and left the man with whom I had been for six years. It was in the strength of God that I went – God who turned the direction of

² *Confession, 2*

my life to good; I feared nothing while I was on the journey to that ship³.

Patrick found a ship about to set sail, but the captain initially refused to take him aboard. However, as Patrick began to pray, the situation changed and he was allowed to travel on the ship. There were more dangers to face before he finally got home to his parents.

Patrick's hardships had taught him to develop a very close relationship with God. A little later, he had a dream, which he describes in this way:

I saw, in a vision in the night, a man whose name was Victoricus coming as it were from Ireland with so many letters they could not be counted. He gave me one of these, and I read the beginning of the letter, the voice of the Irish people. While I was reading out the beginning of the letter, I thought I heard at that moment the voice of those who were beside the wood of Voclut, near the western sea. They called out as it were with one voice: "We beg you, holy boy, to come and walk again among us." This touched my heart deeply, and I could not read any further; I woke up then. Thanks be to God, after many years the Lord granted them what they were calling for⁴.

Before Patrick set out for Ireland, he first became a monk and then was ordained priest. It appears that people tried to dissuade him from returning to a land where he had been enslaved, but he was determined to follow what God had showed him, and in his writing he quotes the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel and other

³ *Confession*, 16-17

⁴ *Confession*, 23

words of Jesus about spreading the good news of Jesus to people who had not heard it.

Ireland was largely pagan at that time, although there is some evidence of Christianity before Patrick's time, and it is also known that another Christian missionary called Palladius was working in Ireland about the same time as Patrick. Patrick's mission was not without danger and further hardships, including at least one imprisonment. Jesus warned his disciples that not everyone would be receptive to their mission. In 5th Century pagan Ireland local chieftains would have been suspicious of this foreigner and his new religion, but Patrick endeavoured to show diplomacy by offering them gifts.

He appears to have had considerable success, no doubt partly due to having learnt the Irish language and customs during his six years as a slave. Patrick writes of baptising thousands of new converts to Christianity, and receiving men and women into new monastic communities, often in the face of opposition from their families. He saw the conversion of the Irish from paganism as reflecting the prophecy of Hosea, that "those who were not my people, I will call my people; and her who has not obtained mercy, I will name the one who has obtained mercy."⁵ Patrick writes:

How has this happened in Ireland? Never before did they know of God except to serve idols and unclean things. But now, they have become the people of the Lord, and are called children of

⁵ *Confession* 40, compare Hosea 1:10, 2:23

God. The sons and daughters of the leaders of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ!⁶

Patrick as appointed to the post of bishop, in spite of a strong sense of his own unworthiness. His humility is shown in this passage from the *Confession*:

I hope to do what I should. I know I cannot trust myself as long as I am in this body subject to death. There is one who is strong, who tries every day to undermine my faith, and the chastity of genuine religion I have chosen to the end of my life for Christ my Lord. The flesh can be an enemy dragging towards death, that is, towards doing those enticing things which are against the law. I know to some extent how I have not led a perfect life like other believers. But I acknowledge this to my Lord, and I do not blush in his sight. I am not telling lies: from the time in my youth that I came to know him, the love and reverence for God grew in me, and so far, with the Lord's help, I have kept faith.⁷

Like many medieval saints, there are many legends about St Patrick, including the claim that he drove the snakes out of Ireland. He is also credited with explaining the Trinity by using the example of the threefold leaves of the shamrock. What is clear is that in the thirty or so years that he worked in Ireland, Patrick helped to establish a Church that had a vibrant and personal spirituality, and which was later able to send missionaries back to Britain to re-establish the church that after Patrick's time had come under the rule of the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders.

⁶ *Confession* 41. By "virgins of Christ" Patrick means nuns.

⁷ *Confession* 44

The sixteen-year-old Patrick and his parents could never have imagined the influence he would later have, and how many thousands of people would come to know God for themselves through the preaching of the Christian faith.

One of the things I find most interesting is Patrick's own writing about himself, which reveals a lot about his faith, his humility and his commitment to serving God in the place to which God had sent him. For Patrick, being a Christian was about knowing God personally, and then trusting and obeying him. Our own church purpose statement talks about *Knowing God for ourselves, Growing as individuals and as a church, and Showing God's love in the world*. We cannot share what we do not have, so it's important that we give attention to our own prayer life, and learn to speak to God frequently, as Patrick did, to listen to him and then obey him.

What will *you* take away from Patrick's example?

Sources (accessed 13/4/2024):

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Patrick>

https://www.worldhistory.org/Saint_Patrick/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Patrick

A short video (lasting 12 minutes) about the historical Patrick can be found here:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=saint+patrick&mid=D1690BA59F5C640C81B6D1690BA59F5C640C81B6&FORM=VIRE>