

Reflection for St Patrick's Day (17th March 2021)



In today's gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out into the world with instructions to preach the gospel.

St Patrick's short 'Confessio' (See www.confessio.ie), his own account of his life, connects us with a most engaging and humane person who followed this instruction.

Patrick sees God's plan even in the traumas of his kidnap to Ireland as a 16-year-old, and in his subsequent missionary calling. However, it is poignantly clear that he never got over the loss of his educational opportunities. He calls himself 'unlearned', a man who had not 'been given the same chance as other people'. He is self-conscious about his plain writing style: 'I have long thought to write, but up to now I have hesitated, because I feared what people would say.'

Patrick is a practical man, who takes no money from converts but spends on keeping rulers and judges on side, and who draws upon his personal relationships with kings to recover possessions they take from him. This is a man who would have understood the insistence of the Spiritan founder Francis Libermann that his missionaries insure their luggage and pack adequate supplies.

In the *Confessio*, there are no fanciful stories about banishing snakes or 40-day fasts. Indeed, the miracle he describes in the greatest detail is God sending a herd of pigs when his group is half-dead of starvation. Thus, the mission to bring Christianity to Ireland is saved by two days of pork feasting, after which his companions, well-fed, 'gave the greatest of thanks to God, and I was honoured in their eyes.'

Patrick's mission is to the margins, 'even to the furthest parts where nobody lived beyond, and where nobody ever went to baptise and to ordain clerics or to bring people to fulfilment.' The gospel is for all of society, and his retinue includes the sons of kings.

He is no bigot. 'Towards the pagan people too among whom I live, I have lived in good faith, and will continue to do so.'

Above all, Patrick is a man with a tangible connection to the Holy Spirit. As a teenage slave-labourer in Ireland, he says that 'the Spirit was burning in me'. When Patrick is discerning whether to return as a missionary, the Holy Spirit physically enters his body, praying 'strongly, with sighs'. His union with the Spirit is practical as well as mystical; the Spirit is 'living and working in me to this very day' and when Patrick is not quick to accept what God is showing him, 'the Spirit prompted me'.

'Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you', God says to Jeremiah in today's Liturgy of the Word. It foreshadows the prayer we associate with Patrick, 'Christ be on my right hand, Christ be on my left hand...', and in turn, Patrick sets the template for all who follow in his footsteps, to the present day.

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