

## **ST. PATRICK, PATRON OF IRELAND**

*Gospel: Mark 16:15-20*

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

### **REFLECTION 1: 'A NEEDEY AND DESIROUS PEOPLE'**

As we reflect on life as it was on this island of ours in the 5th century, we might observe that Ireland was heavily planted with trees, the plains the grazing grounds for herds of cattle, while the mountains were speckled with sheep and goats. At that time the great crime was cattle rustling, which did in fact ignite wars between opposing chieftains. There was a sprinkling of Christianity here and there before Patrick arrived, thanks mainly to a certain Psalladius and companions who had established a few Christian communities before his untimely departure through illness. The Druids were the high-priests of a paganism that worshipped the gods of nature, the sun, moon and stars. Social communication was oral as the written word on vellum was the luxurious preserve of the rich and the learned.

Today we live in times that are turbulent as well as exciting and progressive. In the name of knowledge and the pursuit of information, even the most sacred truths come under scrutiny. People today are interested in spirituality, but our lives are fraught with rampant secularism. The minds and hearts of people are divided between self-expression and freedom on the one hand and on the other, a desire for peace of mind and soul. In these times that are at once brilliant and confused, the figure of St. Patrick provides a model whose example can bring us direction and comfort.

Patrick, we are told, was sent as a missionary bishop to Ireland by Pope Celestine in 432. Now, according to Vatican II documents a missionary is defined as one who is called and sent with the intention of naming Jesus where he had not been named before – preaching the Gospel and the Kingdom where they have not been preached and gathering the community of the church where this has not been done. The missionary is sent not to a place so much as to a people. This makes a missionary a frontier person who has a definite intention of speaking of Jesus Christ and the kingdom among a people who do not know him. St. Patrick bears continuing testimony to the fact that mission is based, not only on human abilities, but on the power of the Risen Lord. The Spirit of Christ transformed Patrick into a strong and courageous witness for the Kingdom, centred on a deep intimacy with God through personal prayer. John Macqarie speaks of our Celtic forbearers as a 'God-intoxicated people'. St. Patrick was indeed a God-intoxicated man, a God who captivated and moved him to leave his own country, his family and his father's house for the land the Lord would show him.

Revisiting St. Patrick in this day and age, we see that he was truly a man of the Bible. Prayerful reflection on Sacred Scripture was the touchstone of his faith. His writings were salted with quotations from the scriptures, often linking them with experiences of God's grace and human rejection that were part of his life. The Bible was his food and drink – his very sustenance. Being the teacher that he was, he spurs us on today to deeper reflection on the practical wisdom of God's word.

What made Patrick remarkable was his zealous faith. He performed mighty works that made the deeds of the Druids pale by comparison. He had charisma, he preached like Jesus with authority and when he acted his deeds were stunning. Patrick got himself noticed and through him the faith was noticed. Maybe we could ask through our prayers today, that he would rekindle the faith among us Irish whom Patrick once described as being a 'needy and desirous people'.

## **REFLECTION 2:**

## **A GIFTED PEOPLE**

We are all familiar with the story of St. Patrick, the youth from Roman Britain who was captured by Irish raiders. Legend has it that Niall of the Nine Hostages was involved. Patrick spent six years in slavery when God called him in a dream to escape and take ship for Europe. He gives an account of his voyage in his Confessions. In later years Patrick became a priest and heard the call of God once again. This time in the person of an angel, who came in a dream, calling him back to Ireland to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to a land of pagan darkness. He came; he encountered many difficulties and he spent the rest of his life here in complete dedication to the God who called him.

St. Patrick wrote two documents, both of which remain with us today. One of them, the Letter to Coroticus, is a public letter to a raider who had killed and captured Irish Christians. The other called the Confessions of St. Patrick is a defence of his life and ministry and gives interesting insights into the man himself. There are a couple of things that stand out in St. Patrick's Confession. First of all there is the sense of Patrick's unworthiness. Patrick comes across as a very humble man in contrast to the legends of Patrick which later Irish writers have left us. He is a man of deep faith, intense faith, a man with a burning concern to hand on that faith to the Irish people. He has a profound sense of duty and tremendous confidence in God's call and in his presence with him. These help him to overcome his own reluctance to leave his own people and come to a land of barbarians – and yes, that's how Patrick saw us. He feels he is being faithful to the Gospel and to preach that Gospel to the ends of the earth; and as far as anyone knew at the time, Ireland was on the edge of the known world beyond the fringes of Roman civilization. Although he doesn't mention the shamrock, he shows a lively faith in the Trinity. In fact the three persons of the one God has long remained a strong part of our religion and culture ever since.

In the Ireland of today, we are challenged not just to live the faith that Patrick and his successors gifted us, but also to hand it on and preach it to the next generation. The times we are living in today are every bit as challenging as they were in previous generations. St. Patrick would exhort us to deeply cherish what faith we now possess and to nourish it by the power of the Mass and the sacraments so that it blossoms into strong relationships with God and with one another. That is the starting point and the rest will follow. It was the rock on which Patrick built his life – firm, solid and true. 'Christ be before me, Christ behind me, Christ in the eye of everyone who sees me'.