

ST. PATRICK, PATRON OF IRELAND

Gospel: Luke 5: 1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

REFLECTION 1:

PATRICK THE CHRISTIAN

St. Patrick's Day annually focuses attention of Irish people, at home and abroad, on their history and heritage. St. Patrick is a national symbol – possibly the only acceptable to all traditions, spiritual and political. When we read his writings we discover an attractive personality with a colourful human story to tell.

The scenario presented to us as to how we relate Patrick's story, to the environment in which Christian faith is nourished today, as we advance into the 'teens' of the 21st century, poses a challenge. We know that the world Patrick looked out on was very different from our own. Patrick came from a province of a decaying Roman empire. A society where people considered the end of the world to be close at hand. He saw the Irish to be more remote still, inhabiting the edge of the world 'beyond which nobody lives'. Patrick's historical background was only four times closer to the world of the New Testament, than we are today. The pagan gods of his own Celtic ancestors were still alive for the people of his day. The Irish society that he evangelised could hardly have been more different from our own: tribal, rural, and family-centred. In Ireland he encountered a vigorous if rugged pagan society. Patrick's starting point had nothing to do with his cultural or social attitude, but everything to do with his own personal faith; on intimate terms with his God in the midst of darkness and evil. God was of primary importance to him – loving and accepting. Patrick accepted God's love with total trust, but also he was accountable for all his actions. His concern was to do what was right rather than what he wanted for himself. At the age of sixteen Patrick was bereft, with neither friends nor future. In his confession he said 'when I had come to Ireland I tended herds every day and I used to pray many times during the night. More and more my love of God and reverence for him began to increase'. It was this stillness that enabled Patrick to listen to the emotions and memories that surface from his own depths. It enabled him to confront his loneliness, isolation and physical hardship.

There was much repetition in that early prayer of Patrick. 'My faith grew stronger' he says, 'and my zeal so intense that in the course of a single day, I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night'. In other words, God hears us and is close by. Because he knew that God was with him, he overcame all human fear and anxiety.

He saw clearly the source of his strength and his only concern was to become a more fitting instrument in God's hands. He felt that his critics thought him to be deluded, too big for his boots and being very sensitive he was hurt by this. He had been severely humbled all his life and he knew it. Patrick was constantly prompted by the Spirit; he knew that the Spirit was praying with him. He recalled the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans 'the Spirit himself pleads for us with signs unutterable that cannot be put into words' (Rom. 8:26). Patrick's honesty and dedication won him fervent loyal friends and converts, winning the goodwill and trust of the Irish Chiefs and Brehons. The fact that the Irish Church flourished in the spectacular way it did, in the period after his death, was due in no small way to his wise and farsighted policy. He was especially convinced of the value of working with young people and saw in them, a ray of hope for the future. He was also very caring towards his female converts. Towards the close of his mission in Ireland some of his converts were taken off by the soldiers of a certain Coroticus, who rebuked him publicly. This brought on a personal crisis of faith which nearly destroyed him – he yearned to have his good standing restored. He was even prepared to 'shed his blood in Ireland'. As it turned out, he was not put to death but his martyrdom was of a different kind, if no less real. Only well after his death did the full truth of his heroic Christian witness see the light of day. Today we celebrate that victory.

REFLECTION 2: 'A NEEDY 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 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 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'.