

St Patrick's Day 17 March 2019 St Martin's

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Today, the 17th March is St Patrick's Day, and as it falls on a Sunday this year, I decided to preach on St. Patrick. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, and his day is a celebration of Irish culture, with religious services, parties and parades, Irish food and drink, Irish music and Ceilidh dances – not just in Ireland but among Irish communities all over the world. There have been big celebrations in Trafalgar Square for the last few days. But I want to say something about Patrick the man and his beliefs, and to see what we can learn from him today.

Patrick was born towards the end of the 4th century into a wealthy Roman-British family who may have lived in Cumbria. Although his father was a deacon in the church and his grandfather a priest, Patrick showed no signs of following in their footsteps and had a wild reputation in his youth. All this abruptly came to an end when he was kidnapped by pirates at the age of 16 and sold into slavery in Armagh in Ireland. There he worked as a shepherd for six years and during this time he met committed Christians and his own faith developed.

He later wrote of this time 'I used to pray a hundred prayers by day and a further hundred by night, through snow, frost and rain.' (*The Celtic Resource Book p87*) His life out on the Irish hills would have supported this kind of prayer life; and we too might find that a prayerful attitude comes more easily to us when out walking and when close to nature. This was discussed a little in our Lenten groups this past week, where one of the contributors on the CD said this:

'I believe that in loving the beauty of nature, you're loving the handiwork of God.' And another contributor said,

'You look at the night sky, you want to thank God.'

Perhaps we should all try during this Lent to spend more time outdoors, appreciating our beautiful Darent Valley and, in awe and wonder, spend time with God.

At the age of 23, Patrick escaped from Ireland and a boat took him to Gaul (modern day France). One tradition tells us that he spent time with his uncle, Martin of Tours – our own patron saint – before returning home. But he had no desire to take things easy and tells us that the Holy Spirit was seething within him. And so it was that he felt called to return to Ireland as a missionary.

Little did the young Patrick know, when he was cruelly taken from his home and family and thrust into slavery, that these years were formative years in his life and were fundamental for the mission to which God later called him. And next week in the 2nd session of our Lent groups, one of the questions discussed is about God's timing. One contributor says: 'I think we generally recognise God's timing looking back ... we recognise it in retrospect.' Often, when we are going through difficult times, it's hard to find God there with us – it's only looking back, when we see the bigger picture and how things turned out, that we may recognise God's hand at work.

Before Patrick could begin his ministry in Ireland, he underwent three years of training in a monastery in order to be ordained deacon. In fact, it wasn't until he was about 40 years old, that he was sent to Ireland, probably to Ulster; and on his death a year later, Patrick was consecrated bishop (432).

This teaches us that we do sometimes have to be patient and learn to wait upon God. Those who are called to ordination, for instance, have to undergo a rigorous process to test their vocation, and then a long time of training. One of our current aims in our Benefice is to raise up more leaders, not just for ministry, lay or ordained, but for church wardens, toddler church leaders, youth leaders, home group leaders and so on. During this time of Lent, listen to what God might be calling you to do and take the first steps on what might very well be a long journey of preparation. But don't put things off, if you feel that God is calling you.

Ireland was a pretty wild place when Patrick returned there, and not a safe place to be a Christian. There were many attempts on his life. His predecessor had had little success, but no doubt had laid the foundations on which Patrick built. Patrick was courageous and stood up to the Druids. He founded churches and monasteries, gaining toleration for Christianity by converting several members of the royal family. He united the scattered Christian communities in the north of the country, converted much of the pagan west, and brought the country into much closer relations with the rest of the Western Church. He worked tirelessly, with only one mention of a break, when he spent 40 days fasting and praying on the hill known as Croagh Patrick. And still today, on the last Sunday in July, thousands climb this hill on pilgrimage, often barefoot, in memory of St Patrick.

The shamrock is an emblem of Ireland because St Patrick used the 3-leaf clover as a visual aid to teach people the difficult Christian belief in God the Trinity: one petal representing God the Father, another God the Son and another God the Holy Spirit.

There are two writings attributed to Patrick: the Confessions and the Breastplate. The latter we know as a hymn:

'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the three in one and one in three.'

The Breastplate is the oldest Irish document in existence, called a breastplate after Ephesians 6 verse 14, where St Paul tells us to put on the whole armour of God, including 'the breastplate of righteousness'. Patrick lived in dangerous times and was very conscious of his dependence on the strength and power of God to sustain him. The Breastplate was Patrick's cry for protection in a dark and dangerous world.

Our lives in Britain today are very different from Patrick's one and a half thousand years ago. Yet there are still many parts of the world where Christians live in fear and are persecuted for their faith. We should pray for those Christians, and also be thankful that we are able to worship and evangelise in peace. Let us make the most of it.

But even in our comfortable lives - perhaps because of this, we still live with fears and anxieties; and situations which may get the better of us and when we may feel powerless. In those times, we can take comfort from Patrick's words and pray to Christ with him:

'Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.'

I'm going to finish with a collect for St Patrick's Day. Let us pray:

Almighty God,
Who chose your servant Patrick
to be the apostle to the Irish people;
to bring those who wandered in darkness and error
to the true light and knowledge of you.
Grant us so to walk in that light
that we may come at last to the light of everlasting life,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God now and forever. Amen

Most information about St. Patrick was taken from The Celtic Resource Book, Martin Wallace, Church House Publishing 1998. St Patrick's Breastplate was taken from Hymns Old & New, No 225, pub. Kevin Mayhew 1996.