

St Patrick's Day 17<sup>th</sup> March 2019

There are many versions of the background of St Patrick. Some have him being born in Wales but it is generally accepted that St. Patrick was born somewhere on the west coast of Britain, to wealthy parents, around 385AD.

While he was only sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner after a band of raiders from Ireland had attacked his family's estate in Wales. They took him back him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity as a slave. It is said that it was at this time, while he was working as a shepherd on Slemish mountain, that he became a devout Christian.

He eventually escaped from his slavery to Gaul (in modern day France) where he studied for twelve years in the monastery under St. Germain, the bishop of Auxerre. It was during this period of training that Patrick realized his calling in life was to become a missionary and convert pagans to Christianity.

After his training, he wanted to return to Ireland, to convert the native pagans there to Christianity but he had to bide his time as St. Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestine and sent to Ireland as their first bishop. It was over two years later, when Palladius was transferred to Scotland, that Patrick was appointed as second bishop to Ireland.

Patrick proved himself to be quite adept at winning converts to Christianity, so much so that he upset the local Celtic Druids. In fact, he was arrested on several occasions, but managed to escape each time. He journeyed extensively across Ireland, establishing monasteries in several locations. In addition, he also set up churches and schools, all of which created the foundations for the whole of Ireland to eventually be converted to Christianity.

His missionary work in Ireland continued for thirty years. After that, Patrick retired to County Down in North Eastern Ireland where Patrick died on 17 March, 461AD.

He was canonized by the local church, as was the practice at the time, thus his elevation to sainthood was never formally granted by a Pope, however he is in the church's official List of Saints. The day became a feast day due to lobbying by the Irish-born Franciscan scholar Luke Wadding in the early part of the 17th century, though it soon evolved into more of a secular holiday.

Much Irish folklore surrounds St. Patrick's Day, and some of this folklore includes Patrick healing the sick, and raising the dead.

He is said to have given a sermon from a hilltop that drove all the snakes from Ireland. Snakes are known not to have existed in Ireland since the end of the ice

age but some scholars think the driving away of the snakes may have been a metaphor for the conversion of the pagans.

A more plausible story attributed to Patrick is how he used the shamrock, a three-leaved clover, to explain the Trinity. In his sermons he would use it to represent how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit could be separate elements of the same entity.

As we read in the words of the hymn St Patrick's Breastplate, Patrick was a firm supporter of Trinitarian theology;

*I bind unto myself today  
the strong name of the Trinity  
by invocation of the same,  
the Three in One and One in Three.*

*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.*

Armagh is the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland and, co- incidentally, where I went to school. There are two cathedrals, looking from one hill to another across the city- one Anglican the other Roman Catholic. This is ironically symbolic of the way in which society in Northern Ireland has looked at each other since Plantation of Ulster, under James I, when he brought in Lowland Scottish Presbyterians to take over the lands of the indigenous Catholics, in order to suppress the "troublesome Catholics".

We all know about "the troubles" that restarted in the 1970s and is in a state of parlous truce at the moment. But what is the state of Christianity amongst the descendants of St Patrick?

It is interesting to note that while 90% of people stated that they were Catholic in a recent poll an earlier one found that just 72% of people believe there is a God.

These apparently irreconcilable numbers however make a certain sense when looking at the place religion has in everyday life in Ireland to-day. Church attendance is dropping. A number of surveys suggest that only between 30%

and 35% of Irish Catholics now attend mass weekly, a huge reduction on the 90% plus who attended in the 1970s.

For an increasing number of Irish people church is a place they go to on special occasions – to baptize their children, get married or bury their dead – but rarely ever visit outside of those events. This all sounds very familiar to our situation I feel.

Being Catholic, or Protestant, in Ireland is as much a cultural as a religious statement – it is often a statement about a heritage rather than belief. There was often a significant misunderstanding by outside observers looking at the long running conflict in Northern Ireland who frequently saw it as a “religious war”. It never was but it was, and is, a struggle between communities with diverse histories and cultures. Thus, the well-known joke about the Belfast man who stated that he was Jewish, only to be asked

*“Yes, but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew?”*

The once unquestioning reverence for the clergy which was a feature of Irish life has been permanently undermined by a series of scandals which emerged over the last 20 years.

From now seemingly tame revelations about a well-known bishop revealed to be a father, the scandals seem never ending and became ever more horrific – financial impropriety, extreme physical and mental punishment, sexual abuse of children, the virtual slave labour endured by “fallen women” in Magdalen laundries, the brutal treatment of unmarried mothers and their children, illegal adoptions, as portrayed in the film, *Philomena*, and so, sadly, it goes on and on.

The strenuous efforts made in the wake of these revelations, by the church in general and by individual religious orders, to protect their financial position in the face of a slew of court cases did little to improve their standing. They have almost certainly been a major factor in the reduction in church attendance figures.

So, this evening let us give thanks for the life and ministry of St Patrick, for the people of both the republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. We pray for peace and security for all both young and old, both Catholic and Protestant, and for a harmonious future for all the people of Ireland.

Amen.