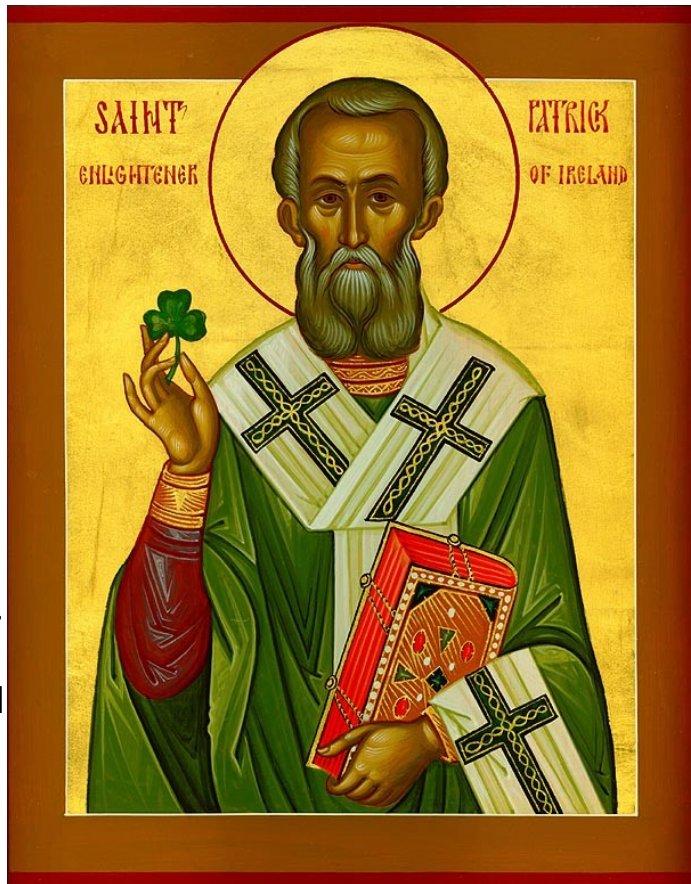


St Patrick – Apostle of Ireland

I have heard that the preacher Patrick is coming to the Rath down the valley to preach and proclaim the gospel to the inhabitants there, who have not yet heard of Jesus Christ, and turned to him. Here in the Rath of Clonard we were blessed to have been visited by Bishop Palladius, who had been made a Bishop by Pope Celestine I to minister to those of us who were already followers of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately Bishop Palladius was not able to stay many years in Ireland, as he was attacked by non-believers and imprisoned by the King of Leinster, who then banished him. Those of us who were believers had to keep quiet about our faith for fear of being harassed, or even worse. Now Bishop Patrick has come, and has been here for many years. Stories abound about the number of people he has converted from the old gods to the God of Jesus Christ. I want to be able to stand up and be proud of my faith. I want to be able to talk about it without fear. Maybe Bishop Patrick will help me.



I have heard tell stories of Bishop Patrick's bravery. We have been told that he was born in Bannavem Taburniae, a Roman town somewhere in the north of Britain. We think that it must be not too far from the sea, because as the stories go, he was captured by pirates, brought here to Ireland and sold as a slave. He spent six years working as a shepherd. This must have been a real come down for a man whose father, I think he was called Calpurnius, was a Decurion that is a Senator and tax collector in a Roman city. He was also a Deacon in a Christian church. When Bishop Patrick preaches, he tells people that his grandfather Potitus was a Priest from Bonaven Tabernia, but despite the faith of his father and grandfather, he himself was not really interested in Jesus Christ. What changed his mind was his body being enslaved and made to work, but where his mind and his spirit could float free, where he had time to think and pray and find Jesus Christ for himself.

After six years as a shepherd; six years praying and deepening his faith, Bishop Patrick recounts that he had a vision in which a voice told him that he

would soon go home, and that his ship was ready. Soon afterwards he ran away from his master and walked 200 miles to a distant coast of Ireland to avoid being dragged back to his master. There he persuaded the captain of a ship to take him back to Britain. After three days at sea they landed back in Britain. Something must have happened to the ship, for he tells the story that everyone disembarked and began walking. They spent 28 days in a wilderness without any food. Bishop Patrick then took it upon himself to pray for food and soon afterwards they encountered a herd of wild boar. After various adventures he managed to return to his family.

Returning back to his family allowed him to continue his studies of Christianity. He travelled to Auxerre in France to study, and there he was made a Deacon. He moved to Lerins Abbey on the French Riviera, where he took the tonsure. Back in Auxerre he was ordained a Priest. In Auxerre, it is said, he had a vision in which he saw us the people of Ireland crying out to him to come back and walk with them again, and he became determined to return. Before he came back he was consecrated a Bishop by Maximus of Turin, and like St Palladius before him, returned to us here in Ireland as our Bishop to continue our conversion to Christ.

Much of his work since returning has been among our kings and rulers. I suppose that if they are turned to Christ, then it would be easier for him to work in their kingdoms, and to convert their people. It is said that when he arrived in Wicklow, he was almost immediately turned away by the local chieftain. He ended up sailing to one of the Skerries, and living there until he felt safe enough to return again.

When he comes to the Rath, we are hoping that he will do here what he has done elsewhere, and that is ordain local men as deacons and priests to help him in his work, and set up a religious community to continually pray and work for the kingdom of God in this place. He will find fertile ground here, as so many of us have already dedicated our lives to Christ. We just need to have some guidance as to how we now live out our faith. I know that he has set up communities of Holy Virgins, some of whom are the daughters of kings and high officials. Those officials have not been happy with him at all.

It bothers many that Bishop Patrick generally has not integrated with us. He floats through our society refusing all offers to become an adopted son of a leading family. In our society family is everything, and everyone has their place and their honour price to protect them when adversity happens. Bishop Patrick is said to have spent time in prison expecting to be executed, although we do not know what crime he was accused of. That would be odd in our society, for we usually fine people for crimes and for the serious crimes of murder or treason a man is put into a curricule and pushed out to sea. If God wishes him to be spared, the boat will be swept to shore somewhere,

and he can begin a new life, albeit one without home or status. If God wills, and the curricule is swept right out to sea and he drowns, then justice has been seen to be done by the hand of God. Maybe Bishop Patrick did not know how our justice system works?

Bishop Patrick does not appear, from all that I have heard to be a man of peace. The Holy Spirit fills him with such energy to fight for the souls of the people of Ireland that he does not rest, nor speak softly, nor compromise. But he is charismatic and learned and can take people with him on the journey he is taking for God. I hope when I see him I will be swept into something glorious.

Footnote

In a church yard in Ireland there is a rough hewn gravestone. It lies horizontally, and on its surface is carved the word Patricius with a Celtic cross above it. This is claimed to be the burial place of St Patrick. Around it people from all around the world stand heads bowed in prayer to ask for this man to intercede with God on their behalf. Downpatrick Cathedral where the grave is situated is built on a drumlin, an elongated hill near to the former royal dun or fort of the Dal Fiatach the main ruling dynasty of Ulster. The Cathedral is on the site of Dun Patrick – the Fort of Patrick, a nearby drumlin, where there has long been a religious settlement. Along with the rest of England, the religious community founded by Patrick at Downpatrick was dissolved at the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII. The current cathedral is built on the old monastic site and has parts dating from the 13th century up to its last restoration in 1985.

There is always a difficulty in sifting out truth from fantasy when you are hearing stories that have been told and retold for over fifteen hundred years. It is difficult to sift information when there are vested interests making sure that the best stories are kept alive and are backing up a particular narrative about not only the church that he served, but the country who adopted him as their patron saint. There are two works known to have been written by Patrick himself, the 'Confessions of St Patrick' and the 'Letter to Coroticus', which allow a degree of knowledge about Patrick, but as with all biography written and rewritten over centuries it can occasionally be difficult to pin down the details of his life that he writes about.

There are many legends about Patrick. The most famous are his use of a clover leaf to teach about the Trinity. There is no evidence to either prove or disprove this legend. The other legend is that he banished all the snakes from Ireland. It is now suggested that there are no snakes in Ireland because there have never been any snakes in Ireland, i.e. that they never arrived. There is

absolutely nothing in the fossil record of Ireland to suggest a presence of snakes, so Patrick cannot have banished them.

Although we talk about Saint Patrick, he has never actually been canonised, as he lived before the current laws were established. He is credited as being the first Bishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland, but over the centuries there has been a lot of issues around the assertions that he was the first person to Christianise Ireland and therefore the first Bishop and therefore his See should be the primary See of Ireland. Patrick never claimed to have Christianised all of Ireland and primarily worked in the north and west of the country. There is much to suggest that the evangelistic works of Patrick and Palladius have been conflated into the one figure, although there are definite records of both men.

It is difficult to date Patrick, but dates from the late 4th century to the fifth century are usually accepted. The dates are mostly taken from his use of both the old Latin version of the Bible and the new Vulgate version which came in in the 5th century, although it is possible that some of the quotations were altered as copies were made over the centuries.

There are some elements of scandal in his life with regard to his accepting gifts of money from wealthy kings and rules, and for conducting Baptisms and Ordinations, with suggestions that he only became a Bishop in Ireland for financial gain. These surfaced during his lifetime and Patrick vehemently denied any such impropriety.

It would seem that even in his lifetime St Patrick was a difficult, divisive and controversial figure. He was a former slave returning in triumph to convert his former masters to Christianity. He did not allow himself to become part of society, and took the risk that God would protect him, come what may, rather than the laws by which Irish society was governed. Undoubtedly he had a huge influence on the Christianisation of Ireland, which continues to this day. Patrick returned to Ireland led by a vision of the work God wanted him to do. This he carried out influencing Irish society at home and in the diaspora for over fifteen hundred years.