

Homily for the Feast of St Patrick

Patrick was no 'plaster saint' He tells us most about himself in his writings known as 'his confessions' which he wrote towards the end of his life.

He comes across as the humblest of men. In his confessions he describes himself as the lowliest of all the faithful. His father was a deacon and his grandfather was a priest. From his confessions we know that he was a citizen of the Roman Empire.

Patrick talks about his youth. He was only 16 when taken, as a slave, to Ireland with many thousands of others. He said that he deserved this fate because he had turned away from God;

He goes on: "we neither kept His commandments nor obeyed our pastors who used to warn us about our salvation. While in captivity the Lord made me aware of my unbelief that I might at last advert to my sins and turn wholeheartedly back to Him again. However, God was very patient with me because of my youth and ignorance and he looked after me like a father. Great benefits of grace were bestowed on me in my captivity."

It was during his time in exile in Ireland that he learned how to pray. He goes on: *"in the course of a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and indeed as many at night. Even in times of snow or frost or rain I would rise before dawn to pray."*

Patrick was a slave for about six years in Ireland until he escaped back to his own country. One night while he was with his relatives in Britain he had a dream. *"I saw a man called Victor who appeared to have come from Ireland with an unlimited number of letters. Opening one of them I read the words ' the voice of the Irish - we ask you boy to come and walk once more among us'. Then I woke up"*. In the year 432 his

dream was realized. He was sent by the Pope Celestine back to Ireland, not as a slave anymore but as a missionary bishop.

Patrick goes on: *"I came to the Irish heathen to preach the gospel and put up with insults from unbelievers. I had my mission abused; I endured many persecutions even to the extent of chains. However, I am ready to gladly and willingly give my life for these people and if God spares me, I want to spend the rest of my life with them"*.

Patrick writes, "The Irish people, in their ignorance, used to worship idols in the past. But now they are children of God". Patrick was full of missionary zeal and enthusiasm despite setbacks of all sorts.

Even his fellow clergy spread rumours about him. They seem to be jealous of his success and always looked down on him for his lack of education. But Patrick did not hold this sin against them and put it down to their lack of understanding.

Towards the end of his life he wrote: *"This is my confession before I die. My success in Ireland is due to God's gift. I feel very protective towards these people and pray for perseverance in my mission. I will willingly and gladly lay down my life for the Irish if the Lord wishes it. I look forward to resurrection and Eternal life and am not concerned about the manner of my death"*.

We salute him today and pray that the faith which he brought to Ireland with such enthusiasm centuries ago will not be lost on its present generation and indeed all who inhabit these islands. The spreading of the gospel is as relevant today as it was when Patrick first set foot in Ireland all those centuries ago.

St Patrick, Patron of Ireland: pray for us.