

Saint Patrick

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Patricius (Patrick was not his original name) was born somewhere in Wales, the part of Britain which was under the control of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 5th century. His father worked for the Roman Government and was a deacon. His grandfather was a priest and highly respected in the community.

Patricius' life changed forever when he was 15 years old. Irish pirates attacked Patricius' village and dragged him to Ireland where he was sold into slavery. The man who owned Patricius put him to work attending the farm animals. The life of Patricius could have not been a happy one. Deprived of interaction with other humans and that he did not know the customs or language of his exile must have held a special terror. He had never paid attention to the teachings of his religion; he tells us that he did not believe in God, and he found priests foolish. But now, there was no one else to turn to but the God of his parents. Patricius states that "tending flocks was my daily work, and I would pray constantly the love of God and the fear of him surrounded me more and more -- and faith grew and the Spirit was roused, so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and after dark nearly as many again, even while I remained in the woods or on the mountain. I would wake and pray before daybreak --- through snow, frost, rain --- nor was there any sluggishness in me because then the spirit within me was ardent."

Patricius prayed night and day. After 6 years of miserable isolation, the "holy boy" would become a holy man and a visionary for the spread of Christianity in Ireland. On his last night as a slave, he received in sleep his first unworldly experience. A mysterious voice said to him: "Your hungers are rewarded: you are going home." Patricius sat up startled and the voice continued: "Look, your ship is ready." So, around the age of 22, Patricius escaped from his master, walked about 200 miles and escapes to a ship. He was now a free man.

Finally, after a few more years, Patricius makes it home to Britain where he enjoys home and seeing his family again. His parents beg him not to go off anywhere and leave them again. But now Patricius is no longer a carefree Roman teenager. Hardened physically and psychologically by unsharable experiences, hopelessly behind his peers in education, he cannot settle down. One night in his parents' house, a man he knew in Ireland visits him in a vision: Victorinus is holding 'countless letters' one of which he hands to Patricius, who reads its heading --- The Voice of the Irish. Then he hears a voice crying: "We beg you to come and walk among us once more." He is unable to read anymore so he wakes up. He tries but he can not put the Irish out of his mind. The visions increase, and Christ begins to speak within him: "He who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks within you." Patricius, the escaped slave and shepherd boy, is about to be drafted once more --- now as Saint Patrick, apostle to the Irish nation. (Patrick is not the first Bishop to Ireland. Palladius preceded him but his mission failed and is replaced by Patrick.)

Patrick will never make up for the formal education he missed while herding sheep. His whole life will be shadowed by his ignorance of Latin style, and consequently the inability to communicate with distinguished men on their own level.

The event came leading up to Easter. A raiding party from Britain attacked Patrick's newly baptized Christians on their way home. Most of the men had been killed. The women and children, some still wearing their baptismal robes with sweet anointing oil still on their foreheads, had been kidnapped. Patrick sends a delegation of priests to the court of Coroticus in the hopes of ransoming the captives, but when they get there they are laughed at and ridiculed. Having failed to get a hearing from the king, Patrick writes an open letter to British Christians in an attempt to put pressure on Coroticus. The remarkable *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* is a decree of excommunication. Patrick hopes British bishops will exert effort to excommunicate Coroticus. It's also a heartfelt plea, a carefully argued sermon, a word of comfort to his Irish followers, and a powerful prayer to God for divine justice. It's Patrick's wail of mourning for his lost people:

“Patricide, fratricide! ravening wolves eating up the people of the Lord as it were bread!...I beseech you earnestly, it is not right to pay court to such men nor take food and drink in their company, nor is it right to accept charity from them, until they by doing strict penance with shedding of tears make amends before God and free the servants of God and the baptized handmaids of Christ for whom he was crucified and died.”

The British Christians did not recognize the Irish Christians either as full-fledged Christians or as human beings --- because they were not Roman. Patrick encountered this snobbery by the British and educated Roman during his encounters and found them to be an impediment to his ministry in Ireland. He exclaims “Is it a shameful thing in their eyes that *we* have been born in Ireland?”

Over many years his British counterparts find his conduct inexplicable, and they look for some ulterior motive to get rid of him. They say: He went to Ireland to con riches from the innocent Irish---haven’t you heard that he requests money for baptisms, aspiring priests and bishops? Did you know that he was a swine herder to begin with, a filthy little pigkeeper? Did you know about the scandal that almost cost him his ordination? Did you know that in his youth he....? Against such vicious whisperings, Patrick writes his second letter, the plainspoken *Confession*, defending his life of service in the face of the publicly expressed doubts of those he calls the classically trained priests of Britain, the clerical intelligentsia. Somehow, even his private confession he had made on the eve of his ordination has become grist for the mill, and the sin he had confessed then has become current gossip. The night of his ordination as a deacon, he confides to a friend a disturbing sin that he committed at fifteen and receives forgiveness. Patrick declared his soul to a friend who could then confirm God’s forgiveness. This private conversation is now haunting Patrick in his senior years.

Patrick’s second letter is traditionally called the *Confession*, but the original document has no title. It begins with “I am Patrick---a sinner---the most unsophisticated and unworthy among all the faithful of God. Indeed to many I am the most despised.” The opening of the letter immediately engages the reader with its brutal honesty. It’s an autobiography of some measure. Patrick writes without pretense or even forethought, from the perspective of his old age, from great pain he had experienced, and from his heart. He never hesitates to tell his readers his many faults and shortcomings, but he is forthright without being self-pitying. Patrick wants his readers, especially the British bishops, to know that he has nothing to hide. Patrick already confessed his sins before his ordination and firmly believes that his sin is no one’s business but God’s.

However blind his British contemporaries may have been to it, the greatness of Patrick is beyond dispute: the first human being in the history of the world to speak out unequivocally against slavery. The horror of slavery was never lost on him. In his own time, only the Irish appreciated him for who he was. With the Irish, even with the kings, he succeeded beyond measure. Within his lifetime or soon after his death, the Irish slave trade came to a halt, and other forms of violence, such a murder and intertribal warfare decreased. It was very rare that Patrick could convert a tribal king to Christianity, but we know from his letters that he made payments to the local kings to gain their favor, protection and to build small churches on their tribal lands to serve the nearby Christians. He placed his Bishops next door to kings, hoping to keep an eye on the most powerful pirates and marauders and limit their pillage. But it was the women that he concentrated on most. If he could win them over, the men would inevitably follow. If a household believed in his teaching and decided to convert, Patrick would return several times to instruct them in the faith. His love for his adopted people shines through his writings. He tells us of “a blessed woman, Irish by birth, noble, extraordinarily beautiful true adult --- whom I baptized.” Who could imagine such admiration of a woman from any previous saint or in the calendar of saints? Patrick worries constantly for his people, not just in the spiritual sense but for their physical wellbeing. He was not blind to the dangers coming with his ministry, even in his last years. He says “everyday I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved --- whatever may come my way. But I am not afraid of

these things, because of the promises of heaven; for I have put myself in the hands of God Almighty.”

This is how we know so much or some might say so little about Patrick. We can no longer read the original letters of Patrick. Somehow among Viking raids, gnawing rodents, fires, floods, and general carelessness, the two letters written in Patrick’s own hand were lost or destroyed. We can figure out that he committed a grave sin around 400 AD and was kidnapped within that year, escaped around 407 but was not ordained until about 430 and returned to Ireland in 432 (which would have made him forty-seven when he began his ministry in Ireland).

Everyone has heard of St. Patrick, but the man most people know is an icon who did not drive the snakes out of Ireland. Nor is there any way of knowing whether he used the shamrock to explain the Trinity. He probably did have a confrontation with a king, possibly the high king at Tara, and it may have been over his right to commemorate Christ’s resurrection by lighting a bonfire – the same fire that has become a permanent feature of all Easter liturgies. He is not even the author of the great prayer in Irish, sometimes called “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate.” Characteristics of the writing place it sometime in the seventh or eighth century. However, if Patrick did not write it, the prayer takes its inspiration from him. This lack of knowledge about the real Patrick is truly regrettable, because he is such an amazing story to tell: a tale of slavery and brutality, pain and self-doubt, sorrow and constant struggle, but ultimately of perseverance, hope and faith. His letters tell us about a humble man who deflected any glory away from himself. His two letters remain as a remarkable gift from an extraordinary man.