

*Today is St Patrick's Day, and as this is a rare occasion the diocese of Oxford has granted churches the freedom to replace the communion wine with Guinness. (joke!)

Who was St Patrick – shamrocks and Guinness apart, he was a real person and a remarkable figure and this morning I'd like to tell his story for I don't think it's as widely known as it should be. And I think his life may actually have something to say to us today.

*For a start, Patrick wasn't Irish he was British. His name means 'noble' in Latin. He was born into a British family, perhaps around the year 400 in the northwest, maybe near Carlisle. His childhood was a period when the western Roman empire was slowly collapsing in on itself as rival generals fought to become the next Roman emperor. Several of these were stationed in Britain, and each time they made a bid for the emperor heading for Rome, they took their soldiers with them. All of this slowly weakened Roman control of Britain and gradually forced British civilians to take over the reins of local government.

*One such civilian was Patrick's father, a man called Calpurnius. Patrick tells us and that his father was both a deacon and a senior local civil servant. This is odd – for the church normally forbade ordained Christians to work as civil servants because it represented a potential conflict of interest (as you might know, until very recently clergy couldn't do jury duty for the same reason). Because of this bar, however, it was not unknown for local wealthy men to choose to be ordained and thereby evade their local responsibilities. But if you did this, you were supposed to pass on your property and civil service responsibilities to your heir. In Calpurnius' case he seems to have held on to his property. There are hints then, that Patrick's father was a Christian deacon in a somewhat convenient way. Certainly, Patrick himself says that he and his fellows paid little attention to the sermons he heard as he was growing up.

Patrick describes his home, perhaps modestly, as 'a little villa', but his family were rich enough to own both male and female slaves. So much so comfortable (for him at least) until when he was fifteen, calamity struck. His home was attacked by an Irish raiding party who killed many of the villa's workers and carried off Patrick as a slave.

*In many ways we might recognise this sort of raiding and capture of working age people as like the raids today in northern Nigeria where militias kidnap school children as brides and domestic workers, or for ransom.

*Patrick was taken, probably in chains, back to Ireland. Presumably he was sold on for he says he ended up being transported to the far western Atlantic coast of Ireland. Tradition says a place called Killala in County Mayo. Here for the next six years until the age of 21, he was cut off from his family and he became a forced farm labourer.

*Again, we might be reminded of the fate of migrant workers today who find themselves lured to Britain and then forced to work on farms, car washes, or in the sex industry, their passports stolen, and threatened with violence to discourage escape.

*It was this crisis though that Patrick says caused him to engage with his Christian heritage for the first time as a living thing. He writes: 'My faith grew strong and my zeal so intense that in the course of a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night. This I did even when I was in the woods or on the mountains. Even in times of snow or frost or rain I would rise before dawn to pray. I never felt the worse for it nor was I in anyway lazy because, as I now realise, I was full of enthusiasm'. So, the teenage Patrick found God.

After six years, aged 21, he says he started to have dreams. In them he says he heard a voice telling him that he was going to go home to Britain and indeed that there was a boat waiting for him. So, Patrick ran away and, he says, walked 200 miles to the east coast, perhaps to Dublin or Belfast.

Eventually, he made it back home. I think we can imagine the shock and the joy that his family must have felt, and also how protective they must have been of him.

*Again, to bring things up to date, we might think of the Israeli hostages held by Hamas, and how their families might feel on receiving them home. Patrick writes, ‘my relatives ... earnestly begged me that I should never leave them, especially in view of all the hardships I had endured’.

The timescale is a bit difficult to gauge, but over the next decade Patrick seems to have been ordained first as deacon and then, probably around the age of 30, he became a priest. And then the dreams started again. It is clear that something of this formative experience in Ireland seems to have remained in him.

*‘One night’, he writes, ‘I saw a vision of a man called Victor, who appeared to have come from Ireland with an unlimited number of letters. He gave one to me and I read the opening words which were: ‘The voice of the Irish’. As I read the beginning of the letter I seemed at the same moment to hear the voice of those who were by the woods by the western sea [where I had been held captive]. They shouted with one voice, ‘we ask you boy, come and walk once more with us’. I was cut to the very heart and could read no more, and so I woke up. ... Another night ... I was called very clearly with words that I heard but could not understand, except for the following statement. “He who has given up his life for you, he it is who speaks in you’. At this I awoke full of joy.”

Patrick was experiencing a vocation – and despite it calling him back to the place of captivity – to the people he would have known were still captive in Ireland – this vocation seems to have flowed from deep inside him: it wasn’t some oppressive thing. On another occasion he describes something like a mystical experience, ‘I saw a person praying in me ... I wondered greatly who could possibly be praying inside me. He spoke, however, at the end of the prayer, saying that he was [the Holy] Spirit’. Patrick had felt God in him. And so he returned to Ireland.

*We only know hints of what may have been a ministry of forty years or more back, probably, in the northeast of Ireland during which time he became a bishop. The major churches which later claimed that he’d founded them were all in the Ulster area, the chief one being Armagh.

*Here we might guess that at first his ministry was among other British Christian slaves – a sort of chaplain to the expat community we might say. And I think his sponsors back in Britain were probably quite pleased that someone was doing this dangerous work. But then the wheels seem to have begun to come off for Patrick appears to have begun to convert Irish people too. He tells us about the sons and daughters of Irish chieftains converting; in particular, he mentions elite Irish women handing over their jewellery and becoming nuns – probably, I’d imagine, because they found in the church a freedom from forced marriage. Again, we might note modern parallels of converts from cultures in the middle east, Korea, or China, where conversion promises an escape from some confining social roles. It can’t have been easy: Patrick writes, ‘their fathers disapprove of them, so they often suffer persecution and unfair abuse from their parents; yet the number goes on increasing ... of them all, the women who live in slavery suffer the most. They have to endure terror and threats all the time. But the Lord gives grace to many of his handmaids and, although they are forbidden, they follow him courageously.’

And then one day, after about 20 years of ministry, another cataclysm strikes – as significant for him as his own enslavement.

*Patrick says he had been conducting a baptism – which would have taken place around Easter time – when a band of (this time) British slave-raiders landed in his part of Ireland and seized a group of his recent converts, murdering some of them, and taking the rest back to Britain.

Patrick was scandalised that fellow British Christians would behave like this. The leader of the warband was a local British king named Coroticus, probably based at Dumbarton (near Glasgow). At first Patrick sent a priest back to Britain demanding the return of the captives and compensation, and when this didn't work Patrick then wrote a public letter, naming and shaming Coroticus as a hypocrite, as a murderer and a slave-trader, and excommunicating him: no British Christian is to eat or drink with Coroticus and his men until they repent. This letter seems to have inflamed the British church back home: but not against Coroticus, against Patrick himself – perhaps because he was ministering to the hated Irish and criticising his own people.

*Again, I think we might recognise this sort of reaction in recent claims that churches here are conspiring in illegal asylum claims by baptising migrants and that really the church shouldn't be doing this.

*Or in other criticism that the Church of England, in setting up a reparations fund in response to its past involvement in slavery, is in fact a distraction from what the church should be doing.

In Patrick's case, his fellow British bishops launched an investigation into his activities fuelled by allegations that he was personally benefitting from the mission through Irish bribes. And even more personally, someone disclosed a sin that Patrick committed when he was 15, and which he had confessed when he was ordained (probably under the seal of the confessional). This bit of personal dirt was also thrown at him to question his ministry.

*Patrick responded by writing what he called his 'Confession' – and it's from this confession which survives to this day, that virtually everything I've told you so far comes from.

What happened next? Were his converts returned? Did Coroticus repent? What we might guess by the survival of Patrick's letter of excommunication and his Confession is that Patrick must surely have been exonerated and in Ireland, at least, held up as a hero. But then, we hear nothing and he disappears from history.

*Except, except: Patrick's vision of ministering to pagans seems to have become something of a legacy and a skill within the Irish church – because over the next two hundred years, it was Irish-trained missionaries who returned to Scotland and Northumbria and who began evangelising the Picts and the Saxons, some of them even travelling to meet non-Christian Saxons in France. And so it's from St Patrick that the lineage of St Columba of Iona, and St Aidan and St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne stems.

What was our Gospel reading about? 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

*In some ways, I think Patrick would be utterly baffled by his legacy: by the flowing pints of Guinness, the leprechaun outfits, or the parades in New York and the rivers being dyed green. Irish Catholicism has become an astonishing world-wide phenomenon, of significance even in the election of the President of the USA.

*But in other respects, I think Patrick would recognise the same issues we still face: the trade in human lives, forced migration, the conflict between Christianity as a mere national identity and faith as a deeper thing that leads to the questioning of authorities, the question of justice, the question of how we should treat the foreigner.

*Patrick responded to his sense of love for God and from God, dying to a sort of self-enclosed, self-concerned life and instead moving outwards, out of joy, to serve others. In him a seed was sown whose fruitfulness he would never have imagined. We do not know the impact of our lives in the great

struggles of our time or in the smaller impacts we have on others; but we, too, are called, just the same to allow ourselves to be drawn closer to the pattern of Jesus' life, to die to forms of self-centred, folded-in lives, and to live in such ways that God's glory is made known, and much fruit is born. Amen.

For those who wish to read Patrick's story in his own words: see <https://confessio.ie/>