

Lessons from the Life of Saint Patrick, pt. 1

Psalm 77:11-14 - 11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. 12 I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. 13 Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? 14 You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.

Early Life

- Lived: 385 - 461 AD
- Real name = Maewyn Succat
- Patrick = from Latin *patricius* = “father”
- Born in Roman province of Britannia (modern England)
- Family was upper middle-class
 - Grandfather was a Roman Catholic priest
 - Father was a Roman tax collector (*curialis*)
- Scandal
 - At some point in his youth, he committed some terrible sin which tormented him years later
 - It is thought that perhaps he murdered a servant

Enslaved

- 401 AD: Irish slave traders led a massive raid on England, taking Patrick and thousands of other children
 - Patrick was 16 years old at the time
- Patrick was enslaved for 6 years, taking care of sheep in the Irish wilderness, far from people

Patrick Found God

- While a slave, he grew incredibly lonely
- During that time of watching sheep, he gave his life to God
- Quote: Patrick, in his *Confession* – “...I was like a stone lying in deep mire, and he that is mighty came and in his mercy raised me up and, indeed, lifted me high up and placed me on top of the wall. And from there I ought to shout out in gratitude to the Lord for his great favors, in this world and forever, that the mind of man cannot measure.”

Escape from Slavery

- 407 AD: At about 22 years old, Patrick escaped from slavery
- Dream: He had a dream in which he heard a voice say, “Your hungers are rewarded; you are going home.” He woke up, sat up in bed, then heard another voice say, “Look, your ship is ready.”
- Patrick walked 200 miles through dangerous territory to get to the coast
- At an Irish port, he offered to pay a captain to give him passage to the continent
 - Captain originally declined out of fear of harboring an escaped slave, then came back and said they would take him

The Long Journey in Continental Europe

- In 3 days, the ship arrived on Continental Europe
- They were met with devastation and destruction
 - Probably from one of the many Germanic barbarian hordes that rampaged through the Empire at this time
 - They wandered through Europe for 2-4 weeks
 - Their provisions ran out and they had no food, no fruit trees, crops, plants, or even animals to live on, and no people to buy from
- The Miracle Pigs

- The ship's captain taunted Patrick, "How about it, Christian? You say your god is great and all-powerful, so why can't you pray for us? We're starving to death, and there's little chance of our ever seeing a living soul!"
- Patrick responded, "From the bottom of your heart, turn trustingly to the Lord my God, for nothing is impossible to Him. And today He will send you food for your journey until you are filled, for He has an abundance everywhere."
- The group all bowed their heads in prayer
- Suddenly a herd of pigs came charging down the road toward them
- Filled with the Spirit?
 - The night of the Miracle Pigs, Patrick had an intense experience of a demonic force pushing him down in the night. He cried out to God for deliverance.
 - Quote: Patrick in his *Confessions* – "...suddenly the splendor of [the] sun fell on me and immediately freed me of all misery. And I believe that I was sustained by Christ my Lord, and that His Spirit was even then crying out in my behalf..."
- Captured Again?
 - It appears another slave trading party may have captured Patrick again while they were in Europe
 - God spoke to him that he would be released in 60 days... which is what happened.
- Attended Seminary in France?
 - It was another few years before Patrick returned home
 - Some believe at this point he attended seminary in France
 - Others say he did not attend seminary but did become a priest
- Miracles on the Way Home
 - Finally going home, Patrick wrote that he and his traveling companions miraculously had good weather, fire to cook on, and plenty of food... until the 10th day.
 - 10th day – They ran out of food... but came across people who helped them
- Home – Finally, after so many years, Patrick arrived home!

Called as a Missionary to Ireland

- People expected Patrick to stay home, but God called him as a missionary.
- Dream: He had another dream, in which an Irish man approached with letters. Patrick opened one of the letters, which read "The Voice of the Irish." Then he heard the letter speak as a voice of a multitude, "We beg you to come and walk among us once more."
 - Patrick writes that he was "stabbed in the heart" in the dream, unable to read further
 - He woke up and knew what he must do – return to Ireland, now as a missionary

The Situation in the Roman Empire, the Church, and Ireland Itself

- **Roman Empire**
 - Roman Empire had expanded to its furthest reaches
 - Controlled the world around the Mediterranean Sea
 - Vast Barbarian tribes dominated Europe in the North
 - Roman Empire was in decline
- **The Church**
 - By this time, Christianity was the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, but it was not the dynamic faith it used to be
 - The Church had grown exponentially by this time
 - Christianity had been legal for almost a century
 - Christianity was the dominant religion (percentage-wise)
 - The cities in particular were hugely dominated by Christians
 - Every major Roman city had at least one church
 - There were churches from E to W (Turkey to Britain)
 - Church holidays replaced pagan holidays

- Christians held high government offices
 - But the Church was largely lukewarm and corrupt
 - There had been no concentrated missions effort in Europe since the time of the Apostle Paul (over 300 years)
 - No one was going to the countryside to reach the non-Christians
 - Cities were dominated by Christians, but the countryside remained largely unreached
 - Few missionaries went to the countryside
 - Most ministers never went to the countryside
 - Countryside became associated with non-Christians (“pagan” = from Latin *paganus* = someone who lives in the countryside)
 - No one was going to the Barbarian tribes outside the Roman Empire
 - And no one was interested in going to them
 - Some Bishops and Priests even said they were beyond saving... it would be pointless to go
 - The Church was powerful, economically and politically
 - Christianity became linked with Roman political power
 - Priests and Bishops were official Roman government positions
 - Wealthy individuals bought positions in the church
 - People sought to become priests and bishops for a comfortable lifestyle, not out of calling
 - The Church was organized along Roman political lines: bishoprics (the area of jurisdiction for a Bishop) mimicked Roman urban administrative units (which were known as *diocesis* in Latin... which is where our word “diocese” comes from)
 - The church stayed where Roman political power was strong, where Roman law prevailed.
 - The Latin word for this geographical area where Roman law had jurisdiction is *ecumene* (where we get our word “ecumenical,” meaning all sorts of churches together)
 - It was politically, socially, and economically advantageous to be Christian... so the Church became filled with lukewarm Believers, Christians in name only
 - There was plenty of false teaching in the Church
 - Mixing Paganism with Christianity
 - Catholic confession became popular in early 400s
 - Overall, there were a lot of Christians (especially in the cities), but they were lukewarm, corrupt, and intertwined with Paganism and Politics.

- **Ireland**

- Ireland was outside the Roman *ecumene* (where Roman law had jurisdiction)
 - Ireland was a rough, wild, and barbaric place
 - No rule of law (especially not Roman Law) – might makes right
 - No cities or population centers (just scattered family settlements and farms spread throughout the hills)
 - Ruled by warlords
 - Thomas Cahill (*How the Irish Saved Civilization*) calls their kings “petty chieftains [or] local strongmen”
- Irish culture
 - Dark and violent
 - Irish were an illiterate, oral society
 - They told dark, disturbing epic poems of violence / immorality
- Irish Warfare

- They worshiped gods of war and violence
- Warfare was constant and intense
- They went to battle naked, carrying nothing but a shield and 2-handed broadswords
- Quote: Thomas Cahill – “The Romans, in their first encounters with these exposed, insane warriors, were shocked and frightened. Not only were the men naked, they were howling and, it seemed, possessed by demons, so outrageous were their strength and verve. Urged on by the infernal skirl of pipers, they presented to the unaccustomed [Romans]... a multimedia event featuring all the terrors of hell itself.”
- Slavery
 - Irish were feared throughout Europe because of their fierce slave trade
 - Came at night by boat, slipped into villages, and snatched children from their beds as they slept
- Sexual Immorality
 - Few restrictions or inhibitions
 - They held 1-year trial marriages to test your spouse out
 - All marriages could be ended every Feb 1
 - Multiple partners, homosexuality between soldiers...
 - Perverse and disturbing public rituals
- Religion
 - Christianity was nonexistent
 - Religion led by powerful Druid sorcerers
 - Worshiped shape-shifting gods of war, violence, nature
 - Nemain and Badb: war goddesses who visited soldiers at night and terrified them
 - One story has it that they visited some Irish soldiers one night and “called out to the men of Ireland near the field at Gairech and Irgairech... and 100 warriors died of fright. It was a bad night for them.”
- Intense Fear
 - Their poems (passed down through the centuries) talk of intense fear...
 - Fear of death (life was cheap)
 - Fear of sleeping (many stories tell of people fearing falling asleep, the only way they could sleep was by getting drunk)
 - Fear of the world (especially because they believed gods and druids could shape-shift)
 - Fear of the gods
 - Quote: Thomas Cahill – “[They viewed] the world... as if it were a forest filled with concealed pitfalls by which hunter-gods catch small animals.”
- Human Sacrifice
 - An important part of their religious practice was human sacrifice
 - Sacrificed prisoners-of-war, fellow clansmen, newborn babies
 - Displayed victims' heads in temples, on the walls of forts, hung from belts as ornaments... used their heads as soccer balls, drank from scull tops in ceremonies

Patrick’s Decision to go to Ireland was a Radical Move...

- No one wanted to go to Ireland
 - Ireland was a crazy, dangerous place
 - Ireland was uncivilized and uneducated, unlike Roman Empire
 - Ireland was not Roman, not even like Britannia (on the fringes)
 - Ireland was outside the Roman *ecumene* (where Roman law and jurisdiction applied)
 - Therefore, the church would not have political support
 - The church had become so tied to Roman political power, that no one thought you should preach without it
 - Ireland had no cities... and Christianity had always focused on the cities

- Romans considered the Irish backwards and inferior
- Most Christians considered Ireland a waste of time
- The church had no missions movement
 - No one was going to the Germanic tribes
 - No one was going to pagans in the countryside
 - There had been no European missionaries (as far as we know) since the time of Paul
- The church in Europe had not really been doing evangelism
 - Christianity was the legal religion, so didn't that mean everyone was saved?
 - It was treated as if everyone who could get saved had already gotten saved, so why bother?
 - The European Church was filled with mediocre, lukewarm cultural Christians who mixed Christianity with Paganism and saw no reason to share the Gospel
- Patrick himself was not very educated
 - He may or may not have gone to seminary...
 - He never went to school as a young man (kidnapped early on)
 - He never learned Greek (language of NT)
 - He never learned Latin (language of the church)
 - He struggled with his own English language (after 6 years by himself in the hills of Ireland, he forgot how to speak and write English)
 - He spoke Irish poorly
- Patrick's past scandalous sin came up to haunt him
 - People said he was unfit for ministry because of his past sin (murdering a servant perhaps?)
 - They called him a "filthy little pig-keeper"
- And... Ireland was where he had been forced into slavery!
 - Most people would run away from their captors and never return. Not Patrick.

Patrick Goes to Ireland as a Missionary

- Quote: Patrick in his *Confession* – “We ought to fish well and diligently, as the Lord exhorts... Hence it was most necessary to spread our nets so that a great multitude and throng might be caught for God, and that there be clerics everywhere to baptize and exhort a people in need...”
- Paschal Fire on the Hill of Slane
 - Patrick landed on Holy Saturday (day before Easter)
 - One of his first acts was to light the Paschal Fire
 - Paschal Fire = lighting a fire that signifies Jesus coming into the world as the Light
 - Patrick climbed the Hill of Slane and made a bonfire for the Paschal Fire
 - This fire was seen for miles in every direction
 - Problem: this time of year was the Equinox, a holy time according to the pagan Irish
 - No one but the local warlord could light fires
 - If you wanted fire, you had to go to him and get a flame from the “Sacred Fire,” use it, then extinguish it
 - Patrick just went and lit a fire, disregarding the rules
 - Irish Response: The pagan Irish freaked out
 - They assumed the gods would kill him for committing this offense
 - When that didn't happen, they gathered at the base of the hill to do the job themselves and spare their villages the wrath of the gods
 - First Convert
 - An emissary of the king climbed the hill to kill Patrick.
 - Instead, he received the Gospel and became Patrick's first convert... and later the first Bishop of Ireland.
- Dichu Accepted Jesus
 - A local warlord named Dichu welcomed Patrick, accepted Jesus, and was baptized. His whole clan followed suit.

- Dichu gave Patrick a barn to use... and Patrick turned it into Ireland's first church
- Patrick travelled the land preaching the Gospel, confronting pagan idolatry, and planting churches
 - Quote: Patrick in his *Confessions* - "I went to you and everywhere for your sake in many dangers, even to the farthest districts, beyond which there lived nobody and where nobody had ever come to baptize, or to ordain clergy, or to confirm the people."

Danger, Opposition, and Persecution

- Everywhere Patrick preached, he faced danger, opposition, and persecution.
- Quote: Patrick in his *Confessions* - "For daily I expect to be murdered or betrayed or reduced to slavery if the occasion arises. But I fear nothing, because of the promises of Heaven; for I have cast myself into the hands of Almighty God, who reigns everywhere. As the prophet says: 'Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.'"
- What were some of the dangers he faced?
 - All the normal violence, warfare, and slave raids between tribes
 - Druid priests and shamans plotted against him for "stealing" their people
 - He was robbed, beaten, imprisoned by local warlords, and tortured
 - He was almost killed 12 times
- Surprisingly, there were no Irish martyrs...
 - Despite the persecution and dangers, there are no records of anyone being martyred for their faith
 - This is unique in the history of Christianity!
 - In every other place where Christianity spread, when it was first introduced, there were martyrs. Not in Ireland.

Despite Opposition... Patrick Gave His All for the Irish

- Quote: Patrick in his *Confessions* - "If I have ever done anything worthwhile for the God I love, I ask that I might be allowed to die here for his name with these converts and slaves - even if it means that I won't have a marked grave or that my body is torn apart piece by piece by dogs or wild animals or that I serve as a meal for the birds of the air."

Jesus Transformed Ireland through Patrick

- The results of Patrick's ministry were incredible!
- He was in Ireland ministering for 29 years
- Baptized over 120,000 Irishmen and planted 300 churches
- Violence, murder, and intertribal warfare declined
- Paganism almost vanished... human sacrifice stopped
- Education and literacy increased
- Slave trade in Ireland was entirely terminated, if not during his lifetime, then shortly afterward
 - Thomas Cahill called him "The first human being in the history of the world to speak out unequivocally against slavery." (There had been other opponents of slavery before him, but none so fierce as Patrick.)
 - Coroticus Attacked a Village - Patrick had preached to a number of villages, where many had received Jesus and become baptized. In celebration, they held a community feast. During the festival, Coroticus (an infamous slave-trading chieftan) attacked, killed men, women, and children, and hauled off many into slavery. Patrick intervened, rebuking Coroticus - "You sons of the Devil, dripping with blood, you will perish with all the wicked at the judgment day of the Lord. I testify before God and His angels that it will be so unless you repent of this heinous deed and set free the captives." So they set the captives free.
 - He denounced Coroticus and his men as "dogs, sorcerers, murderers, and liars"
- He was so effective that they say he drove all the snakes from Ireland... Not true, but certainly, he crushed the Serpent's head.

- Quote: Thomas Cahill – “Ireland... had been received into Christianity, which transformed Ireland into Something New, something never seen before - a Christian culture, where slavery and human sacrifice became unthinkable, and warfare, though impossible for humans to eradicate, diminished markedly.”
- Quote: Thomas Cahill - “...these transformed warrior children of Patrick's heart lay down the swords of battle, flung away the knives of sacrifice, and cast aside the chains of slavery...”

Poem: St. Patrick's Breastplate

I arise today
 Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
 Through belief in the Threeness,
 Through confession of the Oneness
 of the Creator of creation.

I arise today
 Through the strength of Christ's birth with His baptism,
 Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,
 Through the strength of His resurrection with His ascension,
 Through the strength of His descent for the judgment of doom.

I arise today
 Through the strength of the love of cherubim,
 In the obedience of angels,
 In the service of archangels,
 In the hope of resurrection to meet with reward,
 In the prayers of patriarchs,
 In the predictions of prophets,
 In the preaching of apostles,
 In the faith of confessors,
 In the innocence of holy virgins,
 In the deeds of righteous men.

I arise today, through
 The strength of heaven,
 The light of the sun,
 The radiance of the moon,
 The splendor of fire,
 The speed of lightning,
 The swiftness of wind,
 The depth of the sea,
 The stability of the earth,
 The firmness of rock.

I arise today, through
 God's strength to pilot me,
 God's might to uphold me,
 God's wisdom to guide me,
 God's eye to look before me,
 God's ear to hear me,
 God's word to speak for me,

God's hand to guard me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me
From snares of devils,
From temptation of vices,
From everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and near.

I summon today
All these powers between me and those evils,
Against every cruel and merciless power
that may oppose my body and soul,
Against incantations of false prophets,
Against black laws of pagandom,
Against false laws of heretics,
Against craft of idolatry,
Against spells of witches and smiths and wizards,
Against every knowledge that corrupts man's body and soul;
Christ to shield me today
Against poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against wounding,
So that there may come to me an abundance of reward.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
of the Creator of creation.