

Lá Fhéile Pádraig 2020

Intro:

Ego Patricius Peccator, Mise Pádraig Peacach, I Patrick a sinner.

A sinner is someone who knows that they have turned away from a loving God and they also know that God wants to welcome them back. In that spirit we confess our sins.

Seanmóir:

It's St Patrick's Day and there's no parade, the pubs are closed, we can't go to cinema, there's no football on the television. What are we going to do?

What would St Patrick do? Let's think about it. There was no Coronavirus that we know of in his lifetime, but there was a plague of Irishmen who came across the sea, attacked his village and the places round about. They capture a few thousand young people, including Patrick and they sold him into slavery in Ireland. Patrick spent years on Slemish Mountain herding somebody else's animals. That was a bit of social isolation. How did that work out for him? By his account now that he was cut off from the frivolities of the life that he had known as a carefree, ungodly child of privilege, he was drawn inside himself and learned to live his life in a new and deep way. After a while, even though he bore great hardships and was often exposed to the cold and damp of the Co Antrim weather he realised that the life he had lived before was shallow and that God had plans for him; from now on he would live at depth.

More and more the love of God increased, and my sense of awe before God. Faith grew, and my spirit was moved...

Patrick started and gave time to prayer; during the day when he was tending to sheep he prayed often; even during the night he rose to pray sometimes in the snow and the rain. Something radical changed in him that took him by surprise:

I even remained in the woods and on the mountain, and I would rise to pray before dawn in snow and ice and rain. I never felt the worse for it, and I never felt lazy – as I realise now, the spirit was burning in me at that time.

One of the results of living in a softer age where there are so many comforts and distractions is that we lose the sense of wonder and awe. We enjoy the buzz that pleasure gives but because it doesn't really satisfy us we go back for more and more; we become addicted to food, drink, pornography, screentime, shopping, fashion, looking good or whatever it might be.

I won't go on about all that but it's important to say that when Patrick had the experience of losing all his comforts it was turned from being a disaster into a liberation. He has this amazingly simple image in his Confessions that shouts down the centuries with its homespun authenticity:

*So I am first of all a simple country person, a refugee, and unlearned. ... But this I know for certain, that before I was brought low, I was like a stone lying deep in the mud. Then he who is powerful came and in his mercy pulled me out, **and lifted me up and placed me on the very top of the wall.** That is why I must shout aloud in return to the Lord for such great good deeds of his, here and now and forever, which the human mind cannot measure.*

Every year at this time I come back to St Patrick I get moved by his experience of friendship and above all by betrayal. This has to speak to so many people. It is clear that as Patrick's mission to Ireland was going forward that there were people back in the home church, either in Britain or in Gaul who became resentful and jealous of him. There were rumours put out against him. It was suggested that there were financial irregularities. Terrible stuff. This wounded him badly. But there was one thing more than any other. He had one great friend from his times of preparing for priesthood. This man early on had advised Patrick that he was a good candidate to be a bishop. But then, in a meeting of superiors who were assessing Patrick's fitness to continue in his mission, this man revealed to others a sin that Patrick had confessed to him many years previously, some sin of his youth which he had needed to get off his chest.

How could he then afterwards come to disgrace me in public before all, both good and bad, about a matter for which he had already freely and joyfully forgiven me, as indeed had God, who is greater than all?

Patrick was so wounded by it that he almost went out of his mind. But the Spirit of God who was with him in the depth that he had learned to cultivate was with him and rescued him. He realised that his worth did not come from anything outside him, not even the faithfulness of his good friend. His worth came from within in the place where he met the living God. He says:

So I'll never stop giving thanks to my God, who kept me faithful in the time of my temptation. I can today with confidence offer my soul to Christ my Lord as a living victim¹. He is the one who defended me in all my difficulties.

As you listen to me this morning Patrick speaks to you; rather the Lord speaks to you through Patrick. You may have come here to Ireland as an exile from your homeplace. You may be an Irish person who feels threatened by all the talk of social isolation; it may feel much too close to the bone. In some way you may feel that you are a captive, physically or metaphorically.

These days that we are now moving into can, conceivable be our Slemish mountain where the deprivation and the loss of a certain kind of outer freedom could become the moment to go deeper into ourselves and meet the living God. It may be a time to go deeper and to

give more consideration to the people around us; we can learn again to enjoy time with family members. If we're spending more time in the house with them, let them teach us how to be patient; we can even learn that they have to be patient with us! This is a time when we can be thinking about our friends and neighbours who live alone, keeping an eye out for each other. If it turns out that there is a lot of 'down time' we might be reading the good book that we promised ourselves we would read some day. There will be time for prayer and meditation.

This time into which we are moving brings its challenges and fears but it could also be a time of great blessing. Let the teenage slave on Slemish Mountain speak to us of that possibility. He saw great hardship all through his life but he was on fire at the end with his conviction that God had done great things for him and through him for us. The last words of his Confession are addressed to us:

“But I want you to know and sincerely believe that anything I achieved was not through my effort, it was the gift of God and this is my confession before I die.”