

St Patrick's Day Homily 2026 St Eunan's Cathedral, Letterkenny

Bishop Niall Coll, Bishop of Raphoe

St Patrick's Day is traditionally marked by Mass, shamrocks, parades and for many a good bit of celebration including a break from Lenten rigour permitting a drink or two. In more recent times we have even added the American practice of wearing green leprechaun hats! Many of us will enjoy the local parade later today here in Letterkenny - but whether we wear the hat or not, the real meaning of this day goes much deeper.

Because today we remember Saint Patrick, the man whose faith helped shape the Christian story of Ireland. Patrick's mission was not just for his own time - it is also for ours. His journey from slavery to sainthood still speaks to us today. His faith in Christ and his courage in difficult circumstances invite us to renew our own faith and to share the Gospel in the world around us.

Patrick's story began in suffering. Taken as a slave to Ireland, he spent years alone on the hills tending sheep - traditionally believed to be on Slemish Mountain in Co Antrim. It was in that quiet, lonely place that he turned to prayer. In his *Confessio*, his testimony, he tells us that the love of God grew stronger in him during that time.

Like Patrick, we often meet God not in easy moments, but in difficult ones. As Pope Leo XIV recently reminded us, God comes to meet us in the ordinary and even painful parts of our lives. Patrick discovered that truth for himself.

After he escaped slavery and Ireland, Patrick could have stayed at home in safety. But instead, after preparing for mission, he returned to the very place where he had suffered. He came back to Ireland not with anger, but with faith and love. Today's Gospel helps us understand Patrick's mission even more clearly.

Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples ahead of him. He sends them simply, without many possessions, depending on God and on the goodness of others. He tells them to bring peace, to heal and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near.

This message of peace is especially important for us today. We live in a world that is deeply wounded by conflict. We think of the suffering in Palestine, Iran, Lebanon and Sudan, where so many people are suffering because of war and violence.

In the face of such suffering, the words of Jesus in today's Gospel - "Peace be to this house" - are not just a greeting. They are a mission. And that mission is given not only to the seventy-two disciples, but to us.

To quote Pope Leo XIV again, peace begins in the human heart, and it grows through small acts of goodness, forgiveness and compassion. Even from Ireland, we are called to be people of peace - in our homes, our communities and in our prayers and advocacy for the world.

This is exactly what Patrick did. He came to Ireland not with power or force, but with faith. He preached the Gospel simply. Tradition tells us he even used the shamrock to help explain the Trinity, the belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Gospel also reminds us that the mission is not always easy. Jesus tells the disciples that not everyone will welcome them. Patrick knew this too. He faced opposition and hardship - but he did not give up. And yet, the disciples returned full of joy. Not because everything was easy, but because they saw God at work. That is the same joy we are called to discover.

In our own time, faith in Ireland faces challenges. And that raises a question for us today ... What is our mission as Christians in Ireland now? Ireland of the twenty-first century is very different from the Ireland of the past. A cultural framework that once supported faith is no longer assured. Religious language is foreign to many people. Trust in the Church has been deeply wounded. For a growing number of people, God simply seems irrelevant. And yet the spiritual hunger has not disappeared. You see it in the fascination some people have with ancient myths, Celtic spirituality, pre-Christian gods and goddesses. People are still searching. It's just that some are looking somewhere else.

But there are also real signs of Christian hope. Many people are searching for something more - for meaning, for truth, for God. The human heart is always searching for something greater, even if it does

not yet realise it is searching for God. This means that Patrick's mission is not finished. It continues in us.

Like the seventy-two disciples, we are sent - not to faraway lands, but into our own daily lives. We are called to bring peace, kindness and faith into our homes, our workplaces and our communities. We do not need to do great things. We are simply asked to be faithful.

Patrick trusted deeply in God. His prayer reminds us: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me." As we honour Saint Patrick today, let us not only celebrate him but follow his example. Let us trust God in our struggles. Let us be people of peace in a troubled world. And let us share our faith in simple ways.

So, as we enjoy the celebrations of this day, let us also listen for Christ's call in our own lives. He sends each one of us out with a simple mission: to bring his peace, to live our faith and to trust that he is with us. *Lá Fhéile Pádraig sona daoibh.*