

Homily for Wednesday March 17, 2021

Fourth Wednesday of Lent and Feast of St. Patrick

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

Lenten Texts: Is 49:8-15 and Jn 5:17-30

St. Patrick Texts: 1 Pt 4:7b-11 and Lk 5:1-11

Ah! Such a dilemma we have this morning: the fourth Wednesday of Lent and the Feast of St. Patrick! And I suspect that you are wondering what choice I am going to make! Well, in my family life growing up, there was no quandary here at all! In early morning, we all went to Mass, as it was called in pre-Vatican II days, to give thanks for the faith of our ancestors and for the courage of so many of our relatives who boarded ships and left their impoverished homes forever for new and promised lands, some glad to get away from it all and others lamenting the loss of family they would never see again.

After Mass, for breakfast we had homemade Irish soda bread and then, at school lunchtime, I remember opening my brown bag for my usual pb&j sandwich and ALSO to discover a huge chocolate candy bar! Yes, complete exemption from Lenten fasting that special day! We didn't even have to give our dime to the missionary collection bank on our IHM teachers' desks! And for dinner that evening, the extended family and immigrant friends, including some from other cultures, came over for "a feed," as my mother would put it. We had lamb stew and colcannon which is mashed potatoes with some brown sugared squashed turnips mixed in and plenty of real butter and cream! Yes, not corned beef and cabbage but rather the food our colonized peasant ancestors raised in the green hills and fields and in their back gardens. And blackberry pie for dessert to remember the berries that grew in the nearby bushes of their Irish homes.

So, let's celebrate Patrick a bit this morning. He was in fact *not* Irish but rather a Romanized Briton from the patrician class. Conchessa, scholars propose, was his mother's name and his father Calpornius was a deacon of the Church and also a judge in their town, located most likely on the southwest coast of present-day England. His grandfather Potitus was a priest – long before the days that the Church required priests to be unmarried – and so Patrick was raised Christian. But in his teen years, he rebelled and moved away entirely from his faith, as he tells us in his *Confessions*, a kind of memoir that he wrote toward the end of his life.

Patrick was captured at 16, most likely by Irish Celtic raiders, and swooped off to tend sheep in the hills of Ireland. After some time there, like Paul and David, he experienced a *conversion* and a *calling* in the long winter nights of being only with the sheep in those hills. In his sixth year there, he responded to a dream telling him to escape and that a ship was ready for him on the coast. He found it and after some wandering around he landed back to his Briton home. We can imagine the joy of his parents at finding him, a *lost sheep* or even a kind of *Prodigal Son*, they might have thought.

Patrick soon left them though to return to the people of Ireland he had come to know and love and who were without the Christian faith since the Irish Celts were never Romanized. Caesar even feared them a bit, calling them *warriors* and *passionate* and *excitable* people who kept their traditions to themselves and communicated them only *orally*. Patrick, however, responded to his call. After some study in Christian Gaul, ordination and then becoming a bishop, he returned to Ireland to be with them for the rest of his life.

Patrick was not highly educated and certainly did not have the rhetorical skills or knowledge of Hebrew and Greek and Latin that Augustine of North Africa, his contemporary, had. But he did have Augustine's love of the Scriptures, and especially of Paul's epistles and John's Gospel that proclaim so profoundly our identity and full union in Christ and through him with the Trinitarian mystery of our faith. He absorbed this so deeply that he "became it," so to speak, to which today's Lenten Isaiah and Johannine texts invite all of us.

Patrick had another gift, too. He worked *with* the Celtic social structures and practices and not *against* them, gradually helping the chieftains, druids or priests and the specially chosen bards or poets and storytellers to let go of some beliefs and practices and then connect many others with the Christian message of living *in* our one-in-three God and *seeing* our ever-creating, healing and inspiring God in the grandeur of nature. An example of this is adding the circle to the Celtic Cross, symbolizing the Sun which the Celts worshipped as deliverance from darkness into light just as the suffering Jesus led us, too, to the fullness of Light, and Life, and Love. (Illustrated with my Celtic Cross.)

In sum, I think of Patrick as a *deeply grounded-in Christ* mystic and a *gentle and approachable* prophet – not that he didn't get angry now and then – who did indeed speak truth to power, but with *invitation*, not condemnation; with *love*, not fear. God knows we need such people in our world today to welcome scientific and cultural adaptations that mean certain outdated Church teachings must be let go but also to discern when our culture needs the prophetic Christian critique as it extols *profit* over people, exclusion over inclusion, and *consumerism* over care for our earth. So maybe we can read again the Lenten texts for today – there is a lot of Patrick in them – and welcome a bit more of that mystic-prophetic combination into ourselves.

As Patrick might proclaim to us today for encouragement, "I arise today ..." (We then played Patrick's "The Deers Cry" from the CD, *The Pilgrim*, by Shaun Davey.) The words are as follows:

*I arise today
Through the strength of Heaven,
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftiness of wind,*

*Depth of the sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock.*

I arise today

*Through Gods strength to pilot me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
From all who shall wish me ill,
Afar and anear,
Alone or in a multitude,
Against every cruel merciless power
That may oppose my body and soul.*

*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 to shield me.
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me.*

I arise today.