

Patrick: Apostle to Ireland

In the 2005 biographical movie, *Walk the Line*, there's a scene in which the famous singer, Johnny Cash, keeps insisting to his beloved June Carter that he discovered his unique style of music by dumb luck; as if by chance, he just stumbled into his "new sound". Of course he was being overly modest because if you're a Johnny Cash fan like I am you know he was (and is!) a musical genius. There's a comparison to be made here between the singer and the saint. St. Patrick presented himself in much the same way. He was overly modest about his talents and contribution to the Kingdom of God. "I, Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible." This is how Patrick begins his *Confession*, his autobiographical account of his life and mission amongst the Irish people. And the whole work is full of such self-deprecating remarks; he is constantly discounting and downplaying his own talent, nerve and courage. But Patrick was far from being simple. In fact, he was a complicated genius in his own right.

The great Irish legend was not born in Ireland at all. He was born in Britain around the year 386AD. Not much is known of Patrick's early years, but what we do know is that around the age of 16, he was taken captive by Irish raiders and forced to live in servitude amongst them for 6 years. During his years of captivity in Ireland, he worked as a shepherd. But this life of isolation proved beneficial to him. For it was during these uncertain years that Patrick kept company with God and communed with Him during his long periods of seclusion. Eventually, he would escape his captors and make his way home to his family. But the happy homecoming did not last. Not too long after, God appeared to Him in a vision and instructed him to return to the Irish people. This time not as a prisoner, though, but as a missionary. Patrick felt himself unworthy for such a holy assignment. Instead of going directly to Ireland, Patrick decided on a detour and spent the next 15 years training to be a priest. Upon completion of his training, Patrick was ordained a bishop and was commissioned to be an apostle to Ireland.

The Ireland that greeted Patrick upon his arrival in March of 433AD was wild and untamed. The emerald countryside was ruled primarily by the Druid class. The Druids were more than just a priestly class. They functioned as the mediators between the gods and men. As such, they fulfilled a variety of societal roles. They were philosophers, judges, teachers, doctors, scientists and astronomers. The Druids were the collective wisdom of the land functioning as the learned of society. Most of our earliest impressions of Druid culture comes from

Julius Caesar, who encountered them on his military tours through Gaul. He described two groups in Gaul: the Druids and the Nobles. The Druids were in charge of all public and private sacrifice, which at times included the dreadful practice of human sacrifice. As a sidebar, for many years scholars believed Stonehenge to be an ancient religious site of the Druids. In regards to religion, the Druids can be likened to Hinduism, their Eastern counterpart. The two religions share a great deal in common, and many religious scholars believe there existed a common ancestry from which they both mutually sprung. The word Druid is derived from the Celtic word meaning “Knower of the Oak Tree”. The oak tree was held in high regard by the Druids. Anything, which grew upon the oak tree was considered sacred and thought to have been sent by God. This accounts for their almost mystical interpretation of the mistletoe.

As to be expected, it was the Druid class that put up the most resistance to Patrick’s missionary efforts. They constantly ran interference on his work and more than once tried to put him to death. But Patrick was determined if he was anything. With very little regard for his own life and safety, he challenged the status quo of Celtic polytheism. His persistence paid off. He converted thousands to the Christian religion. He singlehandedly brought an end to the stranglehold of Druidic mysticism and established a stronghold for the Christian faith. But he did more than just baptize and convert. Too often it is assumed that this is where mission work ends. As if once the locals are baptized the job is all but complete. But as history has proven, this type of missionary model leaves the native people with nothing to fall back on, nothing to turn to when local customs and old ways of thought begin to ply their influence once more. Patrick did more than just convert. He planted numerous churches throughout the country, which provided ongoing training and instruction in the Christian religion. This ensured that the message of Christ would survive long after he was gone. One of the strategies Patrick used to teach the Christian message was to incorporate local imagery and traditions. This continues to be an effective strategy even today. Find the common ground. Find the strand of truth running through every world religion. This strand of course might be mired by years of superstition and misconception, but if you can identify it, bring it to the surface, you can effectively communicate how all religion is a yearning for the true God. And then proceed from there to show how in Christianity the true God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is exactly what Patrick did. For example, he used local flora and fauna as conduits of truth as he did with the three leaf clover in teaching

the Trinity. The hard to find three-leaf clover became an image of the hidden nature of the Triune God. God hides Himself in plain sight. The hidden God revealed Himself in a simple Galilean carpenter who was crucified for all mankind. Patrick also adopted the shape of the wheel, which was an ancient symbol of their gods and goddesses, and Christianized the pagan symbol by incorporating it into what became known as the Celtic cross. You can see an image of the Celtic cross on your bulletin.

All told, Patrick labored for 40 years in Ireland and died on March 17th 461AD. For someone who thought himself a simpleton, he proved to be a giant amongst men. A legend, which only God can dream up and fashion. If you were to read Patrick's autobiography, one message stands out on every page: everything he was, everything he did, everything he accomplished, was all by God's prompting. Patrick gave all the praise to God. In this way, his view of himself was John the Baptist in character and style: "Christ must increase, but I must decrease." This is his abiding legacy. And it is enshrined in "The Breastplate," a poem Patrick wrote about his faith and trust in God: "Christ be within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ inquired, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger". Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills

