

St. Patrick - A Reflection

St. Patrick is known and admired all over the world as the young slave who became an unlikely hero, the shy boy transformed into a courageous missionary. Patrick came to an alien land that soon became his adopted home, and a foreign people became his friends. He was no brilliant scholar but a man of deep faith tried and tested in the fires of slavery and exile. At first a reluctant preacher until filled with the strength of the Trinity he overcame his fears and limitations to establish one of the strongest Churches in the Christian world.

Man of God

Patrick was a towering figure. He had a strong biblical faith centred on the Trinity. He was deeply familiar with the Word of God and pondered it day and night. He lived in intimate union with Christ who was always before, behind, above, within him. Every step he took was in the company of Jesus, every word he spoke was inspired by Jesus, every breath was full of the spirit of Jesus.

Legacy

The legacy he left is most clear in the distinctive Gaelic spirituality that combined Celtic love of nature and monastic closeness to God. The pre-Christian Celts looked for signs of God in the beauty and power of nature. The earliest written Gaelic poem is the Song of Amergin which celebrates the presence of God in nature,



I am wind on sea
I am wave in storm
And seven horned stag.
I am hawk of cliff
A boar of valour
I am a salmon in a pool.

Echoes of this early Celtic sensitivity to nature are found in Patrick's prayers.

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun
Radiance of moon
Splendour of fire
Speed of lightning
Swiftness of wind
Depth of sea
Stability of earth
Firmness of rock.

Monastic

From the very beginning the Irish found the simple beauty of the monastic life very attractive and in a few short years many monasteries were founded. The monastic life resounds with the sense of God's presence and the constant singing of his praises. The monks learned to pray at all times and to find God in all things. These are the characteristics that shaped the distinctive Christian faith of the Irish.

Home Spun

Later in darker and harder times, when priests were few and parish structures didn't exist, the distinctive faith of the Irish continued to flourish. For centuries the faith of the people was a kind of home-spun, knit together out of the bits and pieces of their simple lives. It was lived and celebrated around the kitchen hearth and in the fields, along the roads and in the meeting of neighbours. From morning to night their days were filled with the sense of God.

An Te a thug saor on oiche sinn

go dtuga se saor sabhailte on la sinn,
le toil losa Criost agus
na Maighdaine Muire.

Every simple activity in the home began with prayer and concluded with prayer. The first greeting to any person along the road was to invoke God's blessing. Go mbeannai Dia dhuit, Dia is Muire dhuit. When there were no church buildings the whole of creation became a huge cathedral. The songs of the birds were hymns of praise, the sweet scents of nature were incense, the changing of the seasons the signs of God's presence close to the people and providing generously for them at all times. The God of glory shone down on this people giving soil and rain and the little sun they needed to plant the seed and grow their crops. Everything spoke to them of the greatness and goodness of God. God was not confined to the Church building. The whole of creation was his dwelling place. He was always close at hand. Is gaire cabhair De na an doras.

Hospitality to the stranger was strong among these people who knew what it was to be shut out in the dark and cold of night. Travellers, people on the run, the poor of the road were welcomed in the name of Christ who was refused lodgings, locked out and had nowhere to lay his head. And Christ still comes in the form of a stranger.

Then when the shiuler comes
Be neither hard nor cold
The share that goes for Christ
Comes back a hundred fold.
If there be a guest in your house
And you conceal aught from him
Tis not the guest that will be without
But Jesus, Mary's Son.

Big change

Nowadays we lament the fall off in practise. But for centuries there were no Church buildings. The practise of the faith was something much more simple. The old faith that endured for centuries was lived in the simple details of every day. It was a faith that burned brightly in their hearts and transformed their spirits. A faith that filled their days and flowed into their lyrical speech. It was a faith that grows on the branches of everyday things, that touches hearts and changes lives.

Traces

Many traces of that ancient faith can be found all around us still. The ancient language of our forefathers is one continuous prayer. It's hardly possible to utter a sentence in Irish without mentioning Dia, losa or Muire. Our version of English still holds some of those touches as we say Thanks be to God, and God bless you again and again every day. In the writings of the poets and singers we find echoes of the rich spirituality. Patrick Kavanagh, my neighbour from Monaghan spoke of fording God in ordinary every-day things. Nature spoke to him of God and nothing seemed beyond the touch and the smile of a good and merciful God. In the midst of hardship God is never far away.

God is in the bits and pieces of everyday
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears
A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.

The faith of Patrick worked its way into every fibre of life. The true Irish faith of which we can be so proud made our forefathers a people of saints and mystics, of poets and scholars. Saint Patrick was a great saint. May he be our guide and inspiration.

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