

St Patrick  
(Jeremiah 1:4-9 / Mark 16:15-20)  
17.03.2018

The icon of St Patrick displayed in this church today, to mark the feast of our national patron, depicts Patrick standing with the Book of the Gospels in his hand. To his left-hand side stands St Colman of Dromore: the saint who brought the gospel to this region and baptised the first believers of this geographical area. St Colman is portrayed holding in his arms the cathedral church of St Patrick and St Colman, Newry – our diocesan mother-church. Given the context in which we find ourselves at present in the Diocese of Dromore, there is something really poignant about the icon's depiction of these saints. This year, as we celebrate the Solemnity of St Patrick, we are acutely aware of the suffering and pain caused by the crisis we are living through, and, if we are honest, we would have to say the very real scandal being caused to so many by the sad realities of the past which have been brought into the light of the present day. I'm thinking of the hurt and distress caused to innocent victims by the Finnegan and Reid abuses of which the media has spoken abundantly in recent weeks – and again just yesterday. I'm thinking of the fall-out from this for the whole Christian community.

Yesterday I asked myself: If St Patrick were to come to Ireland right now, if he were to turn up in Hill Street in Newry and stand beside the cathedral church there in the company of St Colman, what would he have to say to us?

I think that before speaking any words of his own what Patrick would do would be to speak to us words taken from the Living Word of God, the Sacred Scriptures. I am confident that anything Patrick would have to say to us would be fashioned by God's prophetic word and by the message of life which we find in the Book of the Gospels, which our icon shows him to be holding close to his heart.

Then, wondering what I might say to you this morning, it struck me that it befalls me to take my cue from the same source from which Patrick would take his words to us: from the writings of the prophets and from the Book of the Gospels.

Let me suggest then that we ponder the words heard through the reading from chapter 1 of Jeremiah taken in today's first reading. I will then conclude my remarks this morning by alluding to the relevance of that short passage from Mark 16 taken for today's gospel. I do this in our bid to try to understand what Patrick's message to us might be today.

In regard to the Jeremiah text perhaps the first thing that could be said is that there are parallels that can be drawn between the figure of the young Jeremiah and the youth Patrick.

The opening words of the prophecy of Jeremiah – or, at least, the attitude expressed therein – seem to have fashioned in some way the opening words of Patrick's own famous text, the *Confessio*.

Patrick's Confessions open with the line: *I, Patrick, a sinner, the most awkward of country bumpkins, the least of all the faithful, and the most contemptible amongst very many.*

We also hear the opening of the prophecy of Isaiah echoed in those words, do we not?

Let's not forget who is speaking here. These are the words of *the Apostle to the Irish*, the one whom many regard as the first bishop of our island. In what some might consider to be his exalted position, this man, Patrick, saw himself to be *a sinner* and *the least of all*; he considered himself to be – as others would also seem to have considered him – *most contemptible: the most contemptible amongst very many.*

Now, there's stark honesty for you. There's real humility and unadorned truth.

In the very first lines of his *Confession* Patrick don't hide the fact that he was not perfect; he owned up to his poverty, he admitted his weakness. He gave the reasons why he could be considered of lowly estate, the least of all. Later on he will speak of his failures along life's way. Without in any manner seeking to justify or excuse his past errors, he will say that he got things wrong. With hands up, as it were, Patrick will come out saying: *I didn't always do the right thing.*

Saying that, I cannot help but think of Bishop John McAreavey's honest recognition of the mistakes or errors of judgement he made along the way. These are on public record in the interviews he gave in recent weeks. With my mind's eye I can see the first page of a local newspaper with his photograph and the caption which read: *I'm sorry.*

It strikes me as I read the words of introduction to Patrick's Confession – and think of other people's honest admission of their mistakes – that if only we all had the same lucidity and a humility equal to that displayed by Patrick, then how more healthy the Church of today would be. We would be part of a much healthier Church, if only we all were gifted to have the same *honest to God* and *honest with ourselves* and *honest to each other* approach that we see so evidently manifested in Patrick's own self-assessment. Patrick could say: *I am a sinner.* Are we as ready as we should be to echo those words? It is too easy just to lament about the sins of others. We must also recognise our own.

The first step to healing is always to recognise that we are sick and therefore stand in need of God's life-restoring grace in our lives. The way to reconciliation is to admit to our need to be pardoned. Without the honest recognition of our ill and the true admission of our guilt, we cannot experience either healing or forgiveness.

I think it is important that we understand that Patrick's words were not just a pretended admission of weakness. His words were more than just a *formule de politesse*. When the saint dared to call himself *a sinner*, he well and truly recognised his sinfulness; without any ambivalence, Patrick admitted to the fact that his life was sin-tainted. I believe that the saint's words actually expressed how he truly felt: vulnerable and weak, poor and needy. Patrick genuinely saw himself to be in a wretched state; he considered himself to be someone of little consequence, someone of small worth.

It is clear that Jeremiah before him also assessed himself in something of the same way. Jeremiah saw himself to be an ignorant youth. We read the prophet's words which say: *Ah Lord look. I don't know how to speak. I am a child.* One modern translation renders Jeremiah's words this way: *Hold it, Master. Look at me. I don't know anything!* How many of us are ready to say that? I suspect we all think that we know an awful lot more than we actually do!

If we were to be true to ourselves, before God and with others today, then we would align ourselves with Jeremiah and with Patrick. Do we do that? Are we as ready to say what these men said when they stood before the Lord and considered His call addressed to them: *Lord, you see what I am like. How could You ever dream of confiding a mission to me?*

I'm afraid many of us are blind to our true self. I'm afraid that many of us over-estimate ourselves.

That being said, it is so important for us to grasp that it is precisely in our poverty and weakness, with our imperfections, not ignorant of our faults, flaws and failings, that the Lord still dares to confide His mission to us... just as He confided their respective missions to His prophet Jeremiah and His servant Patrick.

In response to Jeremiah's protestation of how inept he was for what was asked of him, the Lord's reply was simple: *Do not be afraid. I know who you are and just what you are like. I am aware of your weakness. I will be there for you. I will be right there with you to look after you.*

As it was for Jeremiah, so it was for Patrick... and so it is for us. The Lord is there with us and for us in our weakness.

To illustrate the Lord's presence to us in our weakness I would like to hone in on some lines found further on in Patrick's *Confessio*. After setting the scene for us, Patrick concludes the opening paragraphs of his Confession with the following words: *With all this* (that is, his misery, poverty, vulnerability, the trials and difficulties of all sorts which he already referred to)... *Even with all this, I cannot keep quiet – nor should I – I cannot keep quiet about the tremendous blessing and grace that the Lord poured on me in the land of my captivity.*

I suggest that we would all benefit from concentrating some attention to those lines at this time when the Church in this Diocese is brought to her knees – or, at least, is being called to get down on her knees.

Patrick spoke of his *captivity*. Do we not all feel ourselves to be held captive to a certain degree right now, gripped by the ghosts of the past which have been resurrected and have come to haunt us? The Church of Dromore has been cornered, as it were. We are hemmed in, battered and bruised, held in the grips of humiliation.

What we are experiencing right now is in some way comparable to what Patrick experienced when he was held captive on the Mountain of Slemish, just above the coast of the Irish Sea. Anyone who has ever stood there on a windy day will understand what I am saying.

The Church of Dromore is wind-tossed and shaken by the storms raging against her. She is feeling an onslaught, similar to that which Patrick must have felt when he was faced with gale-force winds on that exposed mountain-top in Co. Antrim, perched above the roaring of the waves below.

In the midst of the storm, the mission confided to the Church remains that which was confided to Patrick on Slemish: it is to care for and tend to the flock which cannot but feel so terribly vulnerable and exposed, overcome with panic and fear, not knowing quite who or what can be trusted any more.

Patrick's mention of *captivity* heard during this our Lenten pilgrimage might have us think of the great exodus event – the freeing of God's People who had been so long oppressed, held in the chains of slavery in Egypt. It should lead us to recall how God's grace brought His Chosen People Israel into being as a newly constituted nation after many years of ill-treatment endured at the hands of their cruel taskmasters, the ruthless Egyptians.

Just as *Israel was led forth into freedom*, so too, later on in his story, the prophet Jeremiah who was held captive will be freed and the same was true for Patrick, of course. Patrick tells us in his *Confessio* how the time came when he escaped his captivity by the help of God's grace.

At this low-ebb moment for the local Church we must nonetheless – and, indeed, all the more – trust in God's plan for us which is that we come to know new life and walk in fresh freedom of heart. It is to dare to believe, in the very heart of our present trial, difficulties and the utter mess that we are in, that the Lord has a plan for us and that He is working it out... if only we cooperate with His grace.

Later on in Jeremiah's prophecy we read these words which I think we would do well to reflect on wherever we stand today: *It is the Lord who speaks: 'I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good and not for evil; to give you a future and a hope'.*

It may be a real challenge to our faith to hear those words spoken to us right now, but that is the message the prophet was given to relay. It is the message God's prophetic word speaks to us – even in this hour of darkness and gloom.

Even when – or rather, especially when – the Lord our God confronts us with our sin and shortcomings and so makes us aware of our misery and failures, He does this always holding in view our well-being; the restoration of our lives. The Lord's desire for us is always our good. His message is ultimately one of hope and recovery. The Gospel message is always one of resurrection and new life.

Fittingly, today's gospel passage is a resurrection gospel. The instructions given to the disciples are given to them after Jesus has risen from the dead.

What today's gospel promises us here in the Diocese of Dromore at this time is hope of a fresh start and new life. Today's gospel speaks to us of the Lord's power to dispel demons – all spirits of dissension, everything that divides and destroys. It speaks to us of finding the words needed to bring new life – the *gift of tongues* referred to speak to us of finding language that all can understand. Today's gospel speaks to us of being able to handle the snakes that have bitten and smitten us: all that has infiltrated, poisoned and debilitated us – everything that has spoilt the quality of our life. The Risen Lord speaks to us of overcoming the deadly poison that has taken hold of the life of the Church. He promises us healing grace for ourselves – and more than that, He promises to make us of each one of us channels of His healing grace for our brothers and sisters, all who are afflicted and deeply wounded.

The present crisis in our Church must be seen by all of us as every crisis should be seen: as an opportunity... an opportunity to respond more wholeheartedly to the basic call of the Gospel and what true commitment to our baptism requires of us – complete conversion to Christ!