

St Patrick (A)  
(Sirach 39:6-10 / Matthew 13: 24-32)  
17.03.2017

On Monday morning's *Thought For The Day* which was broadcast by BBC Radio Ulster, I heard an invitation to re-read Patrick's *Confessio*. I had not yet taken up this call when Bro. Benoit pointed out to me on Tuesday morning that a new set of Scripture readings is proposed for *Year A* in the revised Irish lectionary for today's liturgy. I just glanced at those readings – literally, glanced at them for half a minute – without taking the time to actually read them through, but immediately one word struck me: the word was humility. While this key word is not actually used in the texts in question (in fact the word pride, which is its opposite, is found in our first reading), nonetheless, humility is a notion which clearly underlies both Scripture readings taken today. The notion of humility is also what I retained from all my previous readings of Patrick's *Confessio*. And so, it was with this key in hand that I set about re-reading the story of Patrick's life as told in his own words in the *Confessio*.

This leads me to want to share with you this morning a few reflections around what someone has called *the rare virtue of humility* in the life of the Church and perhaps especially in her mission to preach the gospel.

A greater dose of humility would surely help us proclaim the Christian message in a way that is meaningful – and, I believe, will be more acceptable – in today's world.

There is something in today's first reading – the Ecclesiasticus text – which speaks of the humility of the true man of God's wisdom. It is implied by the sage who penned these lines that humility will be characteristic, a hallmark, of such a person. For Sirach, the author of Ecclesiasticus, a scholar of God's wisdom (a godly sage) is not so much someone who is filled with book knowledge, a person of academic brilliance, as he or she is a person filled with the Holy Spirit's gift of knowledge. A godly scholar is one who knows the Living God in a personal way. A godly Christian scholar is one who has encountered the Lord Jesus and contemplated the light of His face in prayer.

The word humility is not far away from and underlies today's gospel parables as well, given that they speak to us about seed taking root in the earth. The earth/the soil is what is called in Latin, *humus* – from whence comes our English word humility.

In the second of the two gospel parables, it is emphasised that it is small seed which is sown in the earth: *the mustard seed which is the smallest of all*.

The tininess of this seed also speaks to us of the humility of our God... the humility of His ways of working, the humility of the means He chooses, the humility of the persons He calls and missions to accomplish His work.

The opening words of the *Confessio* come to mind at this point: *Ego Patricius*. What a simple opening message to the story of Patrick's Life! There is something so unadorned, so vulnerable, so exposed about that opening statement: *I Patrick*. God's servant does not evoke titles or honours or impressive qualifications for himself. He simply calls himself by his name. Patrick appears here for what he is: a humble man.

The only qualification the saint dares to claim for himself is that which we can all claim for ourselves too, for it is common to all of us: *I Patrick, a sinner*. From the very outset of his *Confessio* Patrick stands before his readers and presents himself to them for what he sees himself to be: a poor and sinful man.

I read the *Confessio* in Fr Jim McCormack's translation this year and I found to be a particularly refreshing rendering of the Latin text. Let me share his translation with you:  
*Patrick's my name.*

*I'll say it straight: I'm a very plain man;  
a sinner if it comes to that.*

*A lot of people don't think much of me.*

There are no puffed up airs or graces in those words! Patrick's story is presented as the honest story of a humble man. The saint knows that he is a sinner. He has no pretensions of learning. He is honest and frank; he is ready to admit to his weaknesses and failings before all.

If only we had have had more Christian leaders like Patrick in subsequent generations and if only we had more Christian leaders like him today!

Sadly, all too often, at certain periods in time, pride has been a hallmark of the Church – all the Churches. When haughtiness has tainted us, the gospel proclamation, evangelisation, has suffered as a result.

How often those in positions of leadership have pretended to be more *on top of things* than they really were – acting as if they were smart, foolishly imagining that it befell them to be *top dog* when the real call addressed to those called to be Christ for their brothers and sisters is to be at the last place, to hold themselves below others, rather than to lord it over them.

Patrick's simplicity is so disarming. He admits to the fact that he is not *on top of everything*. The wise man, the truly humble servant of the Lord, Patrick has no qualms about saying of himself: *The Lord made me see some sense ... He could see for Himself how totally mixed up I was and took pity on me in my immaturity.*

The saint goes on to explain himself. Note what I said: he goes on to explain himself, not to justify, himself.

Again I quote from the *Confessio* in Fr Jim McCormack's rendering of the Latin text: *The fact is, I didn't get the schooling that others (of the clergy) got. They drank their fill of knowledge from the very best that was going, in both Law and Sacred Scripture (...) You don't have to look too far to see how poorly instructed I am, with no great skill in putting my thoughts together.*

Patrick says of himself with such clear self-awareness: *I am, then, first of all, countryfied (...) evidently unlearned.* That being said, it is apparent (and this is, I believe, worth remarking) the saint's self-awareness, his conscience of his own limitations, did not paralyse his action in God's name; it did not hold him back from speaking God's word and from accomplishing fearlessly the work the Lord confided to him.

Only a truly humble man will still dare to speak and act in God's name when he is as self-aware as Patrick clearly was.

Patrick did not give into self-absorption, as some of us do when we become aware of our own limitations – allowing them to trip us up and hold us back from doing what God asks of us. Instead, Patrick dared to allow himself to be all the more propelled by God to do whatever was asked of him.

Reluctant though the saint was to speak and to write, he did so, because this is what he believed God asked of him. In his preaching and writing Patrick dared to expose himself, make himself vulnerable, set himself up for scrutiny and leave himself wide open to criticism.

We can only suppose that the saint drew inspiration, consolation and strength from the apostle Paul's teaching about what he calls *the foolishness of God*. Like the apostle Paul,

Patrick – the one we have come to call *the apostle to the Irish* – drew his courage from that insight of the New Testament writer. He recognised how *God chooses the weak of this world to shame the wise, the simple to show up the powerful, those who are unsure of their words to silence the eloquent.*

Patrick knew that any success he had was not his, but God's work in and through him.

The saint could write in all simplicity: *So, here goes. Despite the fact that I'm far from perfect, I am going to write this, because I would like my fellow Christians, as well as all my relatives, to know the sort of man I am: and to be in no doubt as to what I have vowed my soul to.* He states a little further on: *What's the point of making excuses, even if there's some truth in them? (...) Even to this day, the prospect of having my limitations put on show for all to see, really mortifies me – brings me out in a cold sweat. For in dealing with well-spoken people, I'm not able to put into words precisely what's going on deep inside me, in the way my whole being longs to do.*

We might ask: where did Patrick find the courage and confidence he needed to do what was asked of him? And, more pertinently: where can we find ours?

In his *Confessio* tells us from whence he drew strength and thereby encourages us to follow the same path he took: the way of fervent prayer. He tells us that *he prayed a lot* and he explains that thereby the Holy Spirit took complete control of him. He writes: *I believe it was Christ my Lord who came to my assistance, and that it was His Spirit, not myself, who was already, calling out on my behalf (...)* A little further on he unpacks things even more for us when he writes: *As the gospel puts it: 'On that day it is not you who will be speaking, the Lord assures, but the Spirit of my Father speaking in you'.* The whole of the *Confessio* is punctuated by Patrick's testimony about his constant recourse to prayer – humble prayer.

In his prayer Patrick expressed his hope and trust in God. He doesn't blow his own trumpet at any point. He writes: *I owe everything to the Lord. It was by His grace working through me that many people were born again to God, and soon after that they were confirmed.*

Elsewhere he writes: *People can laugh and sneer at me if they like.* And yet again he comes back on his own littleness and weakness, speaking about how God overlooked his foolishness and negligence. He tells us: *Even though I was hand-picked as His helper, I was slow enough on the uptake about what was being revealed to me by the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Time out of number the Lord had pity on me, for he saw that my heart was in the right place. (...) I have to admit I was slow to grasp how much grace was in me.*

There is no sense of Patrick exaggerating his importance, or making himself great here. His whole posture is that of an obedient servant – one who listened to the Master and did only what he was told to do, speaking only the words that were given to him to pronounce – as is the case with every true prophet, every genuine witness, who is God's spokesperson.

Patrick's whole purpose in sharing his experience is to encourage others – to encourage us. It is to turn us in the right direction: in the direction of God's grace and power which shines forth in weakness, His love and mercy which are for every age and generation.

Let's leave the last word to Patrick himself. He concludes his *Confessio* thus: *As regards these pages that have been written down in Ireland by Patrick, an uneducated sinner, my request to any believers and god-fearing persons who come across them, and are kind enough to read them, is this: If what I have accomplished in life has been pleasing to God, in even a slight way, then let no one attribute this to me in my ignorance. On the contrary, let them be in no doubt that it was all simply due to the grace of God.*

If only we could all situate ourselves thus in life – and not least as we prepare to breathe our last breath, then, like Patrick, we too might hear the words he surely heard: *Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into your Master's happiness.*